Howling together alone: Scandi-noir

by HANNAH BRADBY Feb 24, 2016

The Flogsta Roar

The Flogsta Roar is a Scandi-noir miniature: a snapshot of existential anxiety in a snow-scattered landscape; loneliness and solidarity in an ordered society, treated with subtlety and wit and all in 18 minutes. Every night, at 10pm, the windows of student accommodation blocks are flung open and the residents howl wordlessly into the night air. Footage of the eponymous collective roar opens the film. Quite why this happens is never fully explained in the film.

Instead of offering explanations, glimpses of the everyday dilemmas of the roaring residents of the accommodation blocks present a bizarre and sweet spectacle. A Darth Vader cyclist (protecting delicate mucus membranes against the chill of winter cycling with a gas mask and gas cape); a police officer investigating fridge food thefts; the dilemma of an undeclared love; a mother visiting from Bogota and a big band rehearsal disrupting a tenant’s studies. One group of students discuss the roar and its putative link to historical student suicides: none of them know for sure, but speculate jokingly. Elsewhere a pale young woman describes the haunting of her room by a restless spirit and how the lad in the neighbouring room was found dead, three days after having taken his own life. The closing sequence shows her walking away from the building to the sound of the communal shout.

While the film looks like an urban fable, the nightly roar really does occur. And the roar offers a strange contrast with the consensus-seeking calm norms of Scandi-land. I first heard it described by a visiting Ethiopian scholar during the departmental coffee break. As a native of Addis Ababa, he had adjusted to the well-ordered calm quiet of a Swedish city, so knew that the nightly roar was odd. This well ordered calm is evidenced in the dimensions of personal space considered normal at a Swedish bus stop on the quiet morning commute:
Waiting for a bus like a Swede – via 9gag.com

Small talk about the weather at the bus stop is neither necessary, nor desirable, with politeness emphasizing not only personal space, but also calm hush: city life is quiet. It is not considered rude for acquaintances to pass each other on the street without greeting, let alone eye contact, being exchanged. Any interaction in public can be an intrusion too far and others’ noisy interaction can be an affront: being too animated in a restaurant risks attracting a reprimand from other diners.

So having adjusted to the calm silence of his morning commute, this Ethiopian colleague described his surprise at the regular 10pm howling at the moon of his neighbours in the student block. A month later, walking past the student flats, I too heard the haunting howl echoing across quiet residential suburbs – an eerie, werewolf roar. It could be existential agony railing against the lack of light.

The 10pm roar gained internet notoriety when a recording was put online, subsequently picked up by the Huffington Post. A 2006 attempt to break a world howling record, organised by student DJs, may have revived an earlier tradition and similar evening shouts happen in other Swedish Universities cities. But no one knows how the tradition emerged: some say it offers stress-relief for students who are studying hard, while others say the roar commemorates student suicides of the 1970s.

An elevated suicide rate is certainly an enduring myth about Sweden, allegedly initiated by Eisenhower’s attempt to undermine the joys of a tax-funded welfare state. Although international comparison of suicide rates is problematic, Sweden is consistently outside the top 40 countries in world tables. This may in part be due to the fact that Sweden followed Finland’s 1992 lead, as an early adopter of a national suicide prevention programme.

The film offers the spectacle of an intensely indoor-focussed Scandinavian winter existence, punctuated by the regular release of the nightly roar. The roar offers an atavistic pleasure counteracting the frustrations suffered by locals and foreigners alike. The friction and annoyance of sharing living space with strangers – band rehearsals, stolen food and abused cooking pots – are shouted at or shouted away. In the film it is only the girl haunted by her neighbour’s suicide who turns her back on the shouting building, whether in disgust, horror or despair, or to escape the anxiety of a haunted bedroom.

The Flogsta Roar is a wordless assertion of existence, which offers the potential pleasure of fulfilling a deep-seated urge; it is a collective expression of something. But the collectivity is neither harnessed nor directed, so cannot amount to an act of solidarity. The roaring of hundreds of students elsewhere might mark an escalation from disaffection to revolution. But here the nightly shouters remain individuals, despite their shared demonstration and the roar re-asserts an uneasy equilibrium of individuals. An equilibrium that is shown to exclude as well as include. Together alone. Again.

1 COMMENT

Scadi Noir can be a bit repetitive. If you want something unusual, plus themes that are a bit closer to home, why not try 'Scanti Noir', that is, crime fiction from a writer based in the North West of
England, Mike Scantlebury. He's not as dark, (and there's less snow).