

Chapter 1

Unfolding the global travel of Danish television drama series

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In the early 2010s, it became clear that the Danish public broadcaster DR (Danmarks Radio) was becoming a true global exporter of audiovisual television drama. This was completely unprecedented in the history of Danish television. By 2013, the three series *Forbrydelsen* [*The Killing*] (DR1, 2007–2012)¹, *Borgen* (DR1, 2010–2013), and *Bron/Broen* [*The Bridge*] (SVT1/DR1, 2011–2018) – a co-production with Swedish public broadcaster SVT (Sveriges Television) and two independent production companies – had been exported to as many as 120 countries. To the surprise of both industry professionals and academics, it appeared that a public broadcaster from a relatively small nation with a language spoken by only 5.6 million people had succeeded in creating what could indeed be termed “a *peripheral counter-flow*” of television content (Jensen, 2016). The counter-flow was peripheral in many senses. First, in terms of the existing centre-periphery structure of the global television industry, Denmark has traditionally played a minor role as an exporter of television content. Second, Danish is far from a significant world language such as Arabic, French, English, Mandarin, Spanish, or Portuguese, which allow and explain the possibilities of wider export and circulation of content between territories; the export of productions in a smaller language such as Danish was thus notable. Third, the counter-flow was driven by a public broadcaster in a market characterised by a strong public broadcasting sector; this challenged existing media economics theories that emphasise competitive and commercial media market structures as more fertile contexts for successful exports. Finally, the counter-flow was creative; Danish television series – together with other Nordic television dramas and films that came to be branded under the popular label of Nordic Noir – had created an idea-based counter-flow. This impacted the forms of production, the narrative themes, and the aesthetic characteristics of series produced in other countries around the world. The successful global export of the three Danish television series appeared to remarkably challenge established theories on transnational content flows of television, which centralise the proximities of geography, culture, ethnicity, nationality, and language as key explanations for why television content flows the way it does.

Jacobsen, U. C., & Jensen, P. M. (2020). Unfolding the global travel of Danish television drama series. In P. M. Jensen, & U. C. Jacobsen (Eds.), *The Global Audiences of Danish Television Drama* (pp. 9–19). Gothenburg: Nordicom.

This surprising and unprecedented situation prompted a consortium of scholars from three universities in Denmark to ask the question: “What makes Danish television drama series travel?” It was a simple question that became the title of an ambitious large-scale collaborative research project, funded by *The Danish Council for Independent Research* in the period 2014–2018, with additional grants from *Aarhus University Research Fund* (2014) and *The Carlsberg Foundation* (2015–2016)². The ambition of the project concerned a broad investigation of the heterogeneous inter-relationships between diverse actors and practices involved in the production, circulation, and reception of Danish audiovisual drama in domestic and international markets (see Waade et al., 2020). It focused on three main areas related to the international success of Danish television drama: production forms and practices; textual characteristics; and reception by global audiences. This anthology presents the insights and findings of the third area concerned with the reception of Danish television drama by global audiences. The contributing authors were either part of the consortium (Eichner, Jacobsen, Jensen) or international consortium affiliates (Esser, Kaptan, McCutcheon, Meleiro) and directly involved in studying audiences of Danish drama series in seven countries around the world: Australia, Brazil, Denmark, Germany, Japan, Turkey, and the UK. A smaller online survey conducted in Argentina by research project affiliate Yamila Heram from The University of Buenos Aires is not included in the anthology but published elsewhere (see Heram, 2020).

The aim of this anthology is to present the plethora of interesting findings that emerged from the audience study. These findings are multifaceted not only in terms of showing the particularities of television landscapes in different countries, but also in showing the different theoretical, conceptual, and methodological angles used by individual researchers. We believe this anthology – with its extensive focus on global audiences – presents a novel addition to the increasing body of scholarly work on the success of Danish television series, to the field of audience studies focusing on the reception of non-Anglophone and non-domestically produced television content, and to the large body of research on Nordic Noir.

Why audiovisual content travels – proximities and the transnational imperative

The investigation of global audiences takes its theoretical starting point from existing theories of proximities that account for the distribution, acquisition, and viewing of television content in places other than their production origin. These theories have commonly focused on how national, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic sameness or differences between audiences affect circulation (Rinnawi, 2006; Sinclair, 2009; Sinclair et al., 1996). Joseph Straubhaar’s notion of “cultural proximity”, which describes the “seemingly common attraction that audiences feel for cultural products [...] close in

cultural content and style to the audiences' own culture(s)" (2007: 26), is particularly interesting given the export of Danish television drama to distant markets.

Straubhaar's (2007) theory of proximities also includes other proximities such as genre, value, and thematic proximities: "genre proximity" refers to a shared familiarity with certain genres and their structure of storytelling, like the police procedural or melodrama; "value proximity" refers to shared values, such as work ethics or moral codes; and "thematic proximity" relates to issues of, for example, gender inequality or immigration. Although these proximities were valuable explanatory devices in understanding the travel of Danish television drama, cultural proximity had to be especially scrutinised. Considering the recent work of scholars within the field of film and television studies, it is argued that the attraction of cultural products originating from elsewhere is not necessarily motivated by perceived similarities in content and style. Instead, the sensation of experiencing *difference*, or experiencing the "aesthetics of the exotic" strongly motivate acquisition and watching (e.g., Athique, 2014; Khorana, 2013).

The studies in this anthology provide insight into the transnational and transcultural nature of the contemporary media environment surrounding the travel of Danish television drama. Contemporary broadcasting and viewing practices continue to be nationally located and regulated, but they co-exist with complex transnational systems that support them (Athique, 2014). Many scholars agree that corporations, peoples, and practices are entangled in the processes of cosmopolitanisation and transnationalisation (Beck & Sznaider, 2006; Esser et al., 2016) supported by intensified global mobility and the extensive impact of global media. These macro-processes imply the creation of transcultural social spaces that foster interactions, knowledge sharing, and a greater awareness of cultural differences and similarities among people. Transnational and transcultural spaces permit the construction of a multitude of identities and hybrids of social practices that can no longer be overlooked. The contributions in this anthology describe the various ways the transnational imperative influences audience behaviour in routine, banal, and everyday ways.

Much work in media reception and media distribution engages with the transnational imperative in different ways. Ulf Hannerz (1996), Marwan Kraïdy (2005), and Giseline Kuipers (2012) have all discussed the existence of transnational, highly globalised cosmopolitan elites, who share cultural preferences and practices not necessarily associated with their own localities. Athique (2014) critically points out that transnational viewing practices including audience engagement with audiovisual content removed from their own cultural, ethnic, or national context – as would be the case with non-Nordic audiences engaging with Danish series – are very common around the world. Explanations for the travel of Danish television drama series would then fit comfortably within the current transnationally mediated context. It appears that the notion of *transcultural* proximities is helpful in making sense of how television series produced in a distant and peripheral place such as Denmark might enable audiences in faraway countries to experience them in similar ways.

Studying the global audiences of Danish drama – the three-leaf clover methodology

The investigation of Danish drama's global audiences embraces a concern for the transnational interconnectivities between people as well as their feelings and perspectives of national, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural senses of belonging. In other words, the audience studies attempt to strike a balance between methodological nationalism (Beck & Sznaider, 2006), that treats the nation state as the point of departure for any explanation, and the awareness that the nation state can no longer serve as the only reference point in light of the transnational imperative of the distribution and reception of audiovisual content.

The research project investigating what makes Danish television drama series travel is considered global as it included seven countries, covering many of the world's largest television markets, on four continents, as well as Denmark itself. Furthermore, the investigations covered English, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, and Turkish speaking contexts. In addition to representing a global sample of markets, with different degrees of cultural and geo-linguistic proximity to Denmark, the countries were also chosen because of the extraordinary success of Danish television drama (e.g., Australia, Germany, and the UK); their significant social, cultural, and linguistic differences from Denmark (e.g., Brazil, Japan, and Turkey); their differences in audiovisual translation practices (i.e., dubbing in Germany and Japan contrasted to subtitling in Australia and the UK); and importantly, their differing traditions for the import and export of foreign audiovisual content (i.e., Germany as an import-based market and the UK as an export-based market).

Methodologically, and in order to engage with the transnational and transcultural imperative, our understanding of "audiences" in this anthology is notably extensive. The global audience of Danish television drama is framed within a methodology described as a three-leaf clover (see Jensen & Jacobsen, 2017). The first "leaf" – or grouping – comprises distributors and buyers who act as critical gatekeepers to the importing market (Kraidy, 2005; Kuipers, 2012). Their decisions to acquire and programme Danish television drama are based on personal taste, interests, and dispositions as well as knowledge of the preferences and demands of their viewers and customers. The second leaf comprises professionals acting as cultural intermediaries, characterised by their claims of professional expertise in taste and value as well as being agenda-setters that define good taste and "cool" content (Maguire & Matthews, 2014; Rixon, 2011). Including journalists, television critics, and bloggers, these actors perform important communicative work to disseminate information about Danish television drama that promotes wider viewership. The third leaf comprises regular viewers who decided to watch the series through traditional or digital platforms. Their perceptions and practices are integral to the research inquiry as their decision to watch Danish television drama influences the decisions of distributors, buyers, and cultural intermediaries. The three-leaf clover of interacting actors, all of whom are audiences capable of making

decisions and exerting influence in different capacities, thus privileges an assessment of the interactions and interconnectivities between the three groupings; each of which fuels the circulation of Danish television drama in new markets.

This methodological design has the advantage of allowing a detailed understanding of the transnational distribution and reception of the series as well as the influence exerted by each audience grouping. Another equally important advantage lies in the openness and tolerance of generating rich and diverse forms of data that are crucial to respecting the differences of audiences in various countries on four continents, with different language and cultural fabrics and varying media regulations, systems, and practices. As should be evident from this anthology, the collaborative production of an asymmetric empirical aggregate – thick in some places and thin in others – made by diverse scholars, each with their own distinctive academic, cultural, national, linguistic, ethnic, and geographical background, has been valuable in providing a wide array of critical explanations to assess precisely what makes Danish television drama series travel. For example, empirical work conducted in Australia, Germany, and UK generated interviews with relevant industry people; media coverage collection; audience ratings of Danish series; and extensive interview data. In the work conducted in smaller and peripheral markets, such as Brazil and Japan, where the identification of regular viewers was difficult and where ratings were unaccessible, data gathering was subject to bricolage in the sense of what Lévi-Strauss describes as “making do” with “whatever is at hand” (2004: 7). Whatever was at hand in these cases included formal and informal interactions with all three types of audiences, programme brochures, blog posts, online comments, and an online survey distributed through social media platforms.

Cross-cutting themes

Each contribution in this anthology is contextualised within the framework of a specific country study and uses different conceptual resources to unfold the travel of Danish television drama. There are, however, four cross-cutting themes that contribute to the general understanding of contemporary television audiences and to a more specific understanding of the global audiences of Danish television drama series.

Different historical trajectories and varying intensities

Danish series gained global exposure following different trajectories and with differing intensities. We found, for example, that Australia is a special case in many ways as their Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) imported Danish series long before other non-Nordic markets. This deviates from the general understanding of how Danish drama series travelled to other territories via the crucial “shop window” of the British market, the relative success on BBC Four of *The Killing*, and into markets (Jensen, 2016) such as Brazil, Japan, and Turkey. The series were also received with uneven

interest around the world. In countries such as Australia, Germany, and the UK, the series could be safely characterised as successful among all three types of audiences and generated a large amount of press coverage (Eichner, 2017; Sparre & From, 2017). The interest for Danish television drama series in Brazil and Japan offers a sharp contrast; for example, although the initial broadcasting of *The Killing* on the Japanese pay channel “Super! Drama” in 2012 was an outcome of following international trends and inspired by the decisions made by the BBC, their popularity in Japan was decidedly limited. Furthermore, Japanese and Brazilian press coverage of the series had been scarce (see, for example, Jacobsen & Meleiro in this anthology).

Making the varying intensities of entry and interest explicit allows a nuanced and realistic understanding that resists the generalised and grandiose claims of popularity of Danish television drama at the global level. The intense focus on and recent success of Nordic Noir and Danish television drama in the UK, Germany, and Australia, and the ensuing academic interest in the phenomenon, should not prompt us to hastily conclude that Denmark is following in the footsteps of big exporting markets such as the US and the UK. The story of the global success of Danish television drama is much more nuanced, and perhaps serendipitous.

A global continuum from mainstream to art-house television

Our tracking of the distribution, acquisition, and viewing of *The Killing*, *Borgen*, and *The Bridge* show that the series underwent a transformation from a highly mainstream and ultra-popular primetime entertainment phenomenon in their native country of Denmark (see also Degn & Krogager, 2017) to an increasingly art-house phenomenon for niche audiences the further they travelled. The series attracted audience shares of between 40–60 per cent in Denmark. They occupied popular primetime slots on the public broadcaster channels with audience shares between 7–15 per cent in Germany. Although audience ratings were more modest in Australia and the UK, they were nevertheless impressive for the respective channels broadcasting the series (see Esser; Jensen & McCutcheon in this anthology). Finally, they became an ultra-niche phenomenon in Brazil, Japan, and Turkey (see Kaptan; Jacobsen; Jacobsen & Meleiro in this anthology). In this light, Danish television drama series have impacted the global few. In effect, when the series left the geo-linguistic region of the Nordic countries and Germanic neighbours, they were transformed to what could be termed “art-house television”. Like art-house cinema, art-house television can be mainstream in one or several countries but considered artsy, edgy, and niche in others. Furthermore, similar to art-house films, art-house television series win awards at prestigious festivals and become the darlings of critics who articulate good taste in the public domain. And their broadcast on smaller channels watched by niche audiences with certain types of cultural and intellectual capital texture their art-house characteristics. They win critical acclaim; they are considered innovative, and they become related to the evasive term “quality TV” (Jensen, 2016; McCabe & Akass, 2007).

A paradoxical counter-flow to art-house transformation can also be detected, however. Although Danish television drama underwent transformation from mainstream to art-house the further they travelled, they also became highly influential (with other Nordic drama, particularly from Sweden) for setting a Noir trend for television drama produced elsewhere (Creeber, 2015; Hansen & Waade, 2017). In 2015, for example, an Australian delegation led by Screen Producers Australia, in association with main Australian public broadcaster ABC, liaised with the Danish television industry (White, 2015). In the same year at the international content market MIPCOM in Cannes, one of the most influential international trends within scripted drama content was labelled “worldwide noir” because of the success of Nordic Noir, spearheaded by *The Killing* and *The Bridge* (Jensen, 2016).

Permeating audience groupings and bypassing gatekeepers

Two other interrelated themes that emerge are 1) permeating audience groupings and 2) the bypassing of national gatekeepers. Permeating audience groupings refers to the porous lines between the three types of audiences – for example, how buyers and journalists can also be categorised as regular viewers. The buyer who originally bought *Rejseholdet* [*Unit One*] (DR1, 2000–2004) for SBS Australia did so because she herself got “hooked” on it (Jensen & Jacobsen, 2020; Jensen & McCutcheon in this anthology). Another example is how journalists who reviewed the Danish series in the British press seem to have been watching the series as regular viewers to begin with and then later related them to their reports of domestic politics or fashion (see Sparre & From, 2017).

Related to the permeability of audience groupings is the fact that, in many countries, regular audiences and cultural intermediaries often bypass national gatekeepers and watch the Danish series on various semi-legal or illegal torrenting sites. This was normal practice among audiences in Argentina, Brazil, and Turkey, where the Danish series are not as readily available as in other countries, and often only through subscription video-on-demand services or pay-television (Jacobsen & Meleiro; Kaptan in this anthology; Heram, 2020). However, even in Australia and Germany, some audiences expressed that impatience with waiting for broadcasters to release newer seasons of the series led them to stream the series via unofficial channels. This is interesting in two ways: first, because it indicates the waning power of international distributors, national broadcasters, and other content providers in the face of new digital technologies that make illegal distribution easily accessible; and second, it raises the possibility of a substantial number of global “shadow” viewers of Danish television drama that are not accounted for in the official ratings.

The permeability of audience groupings and the bypassing of national gatekeepers – supported by developments in digital technology – show that no single group of actors is identifiable as overwhelmingly crucial to the global travel of Danish television drama. Instead, individual preferences made explicit through grapevine proximities –

which connect individuals in meshes of media industry and personal networks through practices of *viva voce* [word-of-mouth] (Jensen & Jacobsen, 2020) – circumvent the traditional linear stages of introducing new television content in new markets.

Authenticity, emotional realism, and cosmopolitan sensibilities

Although the study of global audiences was locally rooted in different parts of the world, and in contexts with varying degrees of geo-cultural and linguistic proximity to both Denmark and between each other, two overwhelmingly similar perspectives emerged regarding the reasons for watching the series. These reasons centre on the perceived authenticity and emotional realism present in their textual and narrative characteristics, and on what could be termed a cosmopolitan sensibility that the series evoked in their global audiences. First, a perception of authenticity and emotional realism are recurrent themes and discussed in all contributions in this anthology. Audiences strongly identify with what was perceived as authentic narratives portraying real and important societal and political issues, and authentic characters who appeared to behave, feel, and even look like themselves. Second, all the contributions directly or indirectly suggest that Danish television drama speak to the cosmopolitan sensibilities of close and distant audiences and their interest and desire for being part of a world larger than their own localities. Cosmopolitan sensibility ranges from a “stylistic sensibility” (where audiences clearly want to embrace and become familiar with diverse cultural influences), to a “psychological sensibility” (where they appreciate and value the cultural and social differences), to a more “political-ethical sensibility” (where audiences critique existing societal structures such as gender inequality and the power of the media over politics, against the backdrop of the series) (see also Jensen & Jacobsen, 2020).

The chapters

In chapter 2, “‘Othering the Self and same-ing the Other’: Australians watching Nordic Noir”, Pia Majbritt Jensen and Marion McCutcheon explore how some international viewers of Danish television drama saw a lifeworld and society closer to their own than that depicted in domestic drama series – what they call a dialectic process of “othering the Self and same-ing the Other”. This was a particularly salient theme in Australia, but also in Germany and Turkey, for example. Jensen and McCutcheon explain how the dialectic process resulted from a combination of factors, including the “hyper realism” of the aesthetics and character performances in the Danish series; the fairly limited knowledge that Australian audiences have of Denmark; Denmark’s reputation as a progressive society worth aspiring to; and the “cultural cringe” viewers instinctively feel toward their own cultural products, such as television series.

Andrea Esser critically reflects on the role that the complex notion of “authenticity” played in the appeal of Danish drama series in the UK in chapter 3, “The appeal

of ‘authenticity’: Danish television series and their British audiences”. Esser frames authenticity in a multi-disciplinary context using cognitive and affective psychology, neuroscience, and screen theory; tourism and television studies concerned with place and authenticity; and early globalisation theories. In the chapter, she argues how the series instilled a feeling of authenticity in global viewers in several ways – most importantly, through the emotional realism of seriality, character complexity, and subjectivity, as well as the external realism of the foreign language, people, landscapes, and places.

In chapter 4, “Brazilian encounters: Buyers and bloggers appropriating content”, Ushma Chauhan Jacobsen and Alessandra Meleiro discuss the achievements of the peripheral appearance of Danish television drama series in the Brazilian telescape. After outlining the non-proximities between the Danish and Brazilian contexts, the chapter addresses the motivations of buyers operating in competitive media environments and the activities of bloggers as cultural intermediaries subtly appropriating Danish television drama to promote different forms of conversations. These include critiquing socio-economic challenges rife in contemporary Brazil and spreading their own socio-cultural or political interests and concerns to like-minded individuals connected through online networks and social media platforms.

The meaningfulness and engagement of Japanese audiences with Danish television drama are explored by Ushma Chauhan Jacobsen in chapter 5, “A cosmopolitan tribe of viewers: Crime, women, and *akogare* in Japan”. Apart from accounting for the intercultural and linguistic challenges of conducting research in Japan, Jacobsen discusses how cosmopolitan sensibilities influence the experiences of Japanese audiences. She draws attention to the intricate and interdependent relationship between television content providers and their customers; discusses the practices of everyday cosmopolitanism and the *akogare* [desire] of the cosmopolitan housewife; and shows how Nordic Noir crime and mystery genres represented by *The Killing* and *The Bridge* resonate particularly well with Japanese audiences.

In chapter 6, “Sensing authenticity, seeing aura: Turkish audiences’ reception of Danish drama”, Yeşim Kaptan analyses how Turkish viewers came to regard Danish drama series as authentic and original works of art surrounded by a particular *aura*. This aura is considered significantly distinctive when compared with television drama originating elsewhere, including from the US and Turkey itself. This aura is seen to be irreplaceable and impossible to reproduce, also in the international remakes of the Danish series such as *Cinayet* (Kanal D, 2014), the Turkish remake of *The Killing*. Kaptan thus shows the continued importance of artistic aura and authenticity for viewer experience in the age of digital reproduction.

In the final chapter, “Lifeworld relevance and practical sense-making: Audience engagement with Danish television drama series”, Susanne Eichner uses insights from the studies to examine audience engagement using the theoretical concepts of *lifeworld* and *action-guiding themes*. She argues that viewers across the globe valued Danish drama series and engaged with them for similar reasons, such as the authenticity of the stories and characters and the depiction of widely relatable topics like media and politics, female

empowerment, and tensions between family life and career. This, in turn, gave audiences stories with practical relevance to their lives at the specific time of consumption and offered important layers of connections across cultural and national boundaries.

Notes

1. The channel and years of broadcasting for the series in question are referenced at the first mention of a television series.
2. See <http://danishtvdrama.au.dk>

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This work was supported by the following funding bodies:

Danmarks Frie Forskningsråd (Independent Research Fund Denmark) [grant number DFF-4001-00298].

Aarhus Universitets Forskningsfond (Aarhus University Research Fund) [grant numbers AUFF-F-2018-4-8 and AUFF-F-2013-FLS-1-23].

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