Chapter 2

"Othering the Self and same-ing the Other"
Australians watching Nordic Noir

Pia Majbritt Jensen & Marion McCutcheon

Abstract

In this chapter we explore the international response to Danish television drama. Some of our study respondents perceived a lifeworld and society in Danish series closer to their own than they recognised in their domestic series, of which they were highly critical. We understand this as a dialectic process of "othering the Self and same-ing the Other". Though present to varying degrees in other countries, this process was particularly salient in Australia, where Danish series have enjoyed relatively impressive ratings on the Special Broadcasting Service over the past 15 years. We explain the dialectic process through 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 so-called "cultural cringe" that viewers instinctively feel towards products from their own culture.

Keywords: transnational television, Nordic Noir, Danish TV, international television market, international television audiences, media policy and practice

Introduction

This chapter is an exploration of how some international viewers of Danish (and other Nordic) television drama recognise a lifeworld and society closer to their own than that depicted in domestic drama series. We term this phenomenon "othering the Self and same-ing the Other". This was particularly salient in Australia, where many respondents were highly critical of Australian (and American) television drama, which they thought did not realistically portray emotions, relationships, politics, or gender equality, and lagged behind the reality of what they experience in their day-to-day lives. Contrary to this, they felt Danish series better reflected current societal issues, resonating strongly with their own emotional and societal lifeworlds. This resonance seemed to stem from a perception that characters of Danish television

drama were authentic representations of Danish society, in terms of the characters' questionable actions, range of emotions, faulty personalities, and their "ordinary" physical appearances. Many respondents also resonated with the portrayal of gender roles, particularly those of women. Primarily based on empirical quantitative and qualitative data and findings from Australia, this chapter also refers to data from other countries where similar findings emerged: Brazil, Germany, Japan, Turkey, and the UK. We use data and findings from Denmark to contrast and highlight the international data and findings.

The chapter is structured in seven parts. First, we account for the chapter's methodological underpinnings, and second, the theoretical ones. Third, we situate Danish television drama series in the Australian market where, since the turn of the millennium, Danish series have been quite successful on the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), the country's second (and multicultural) public broadcaster. This is achieved through an historical ratings analysis of all Danish series broadcast on SBS during the period 2001–2016. In the fourth and fifth parts of the chapter, we examine how Australian (and other international) audiences perceive Danish television drama as depicting a lifeworld and society reflecting themselves and their own experiences to a significantly higher degree than American series and, surprisingly, domestic series. This leads to the sixth part of the chapter, where we discuss various explanations for this dialectic process of othering the Self and same-ing the Other, including: the "hyper realism" of the aesthetics and character performances seen 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, not least, the conditions and traditions of the domestic Australian television market. Finally, in the concluding part, we sum up the findings and theoretical lessons of the chapter.

Methodology

Methodologically, we follow the three-leaf clover model of audiences outlined in this anthology's introduction (see also Jensen & Jacobsen, 2017 for a detailed account of the model). This means that our understanding of "audiences" is not only comprised of regular viewers but also embraces two other audience groups considered crucial to explaining the wide export of Danish drama series. These audiences include: distributors and buyers acting as gatekeepers to foreign markets; and journalists, critics, bloggers, and other cultural intermediaries disseminating knowledge and promoting viewership of the series. In the case of Australia, we implemented the three-leaf clover methodology using three data sources.

We analysed regular audiences quantitatively and qualitatively, using two sets of data. First, we purchased and analysed television ratings data for Danish drama series, similar-genre Australian series, and other foreign-language drama series broadcast in Australia between 2001–2016 (OzTAM, 2016). We also purchased audience and

ratings data by gender, age, and educational attainment and calculated mean audience and share per episode for each series – then we tested for differences between demographic groups.[1] In addition to providing a demographic profile of the audiences of Danish series, the ratings provided important historical background to the increasing success of Danish television drama in Australia, not least when compared with other foreign-language drama.

Second, we held five focus groups with Australians living in the Greater Sydney metropolitan area. A professional agency recruited the 26 respondents in order to secure a wide representation of professions, educational levels, gender, ethnicities, and linguistic backgrounds. This resulted in a sample of respondents aged 25–63, with professions including acupuncturist, lawyer, university lecturer, music teacher, manager, and concierge. Some were bilingual, and some monolingual. Some were recent migrants to Australia (from Serbia, Iraq, and New Zealand), and some could trace their Australian ancestry back several generations. The interviews generated valuable data for exploring the reception of Danish drama from a wide variety of perspectives. Among other things, we explored whether Danish series were perceived as different or similar to series originating elsewhere, and how cultural, social, and political differences between Australia and Denmark were perceived by the audiences.

Interviews with two key gatekeepers at SBS provided a third set of data. One interviewee was former Channel Head Jane Roscoe, who was responsible for SBS's first acquisition of a Danish series in the 2000s: *Rejseholdet* [*Unit One*] (DR1, 2000–2004)[2], plus many of the subsequent series including *Livvagterne* [*The Protectors*] (DR1, 2009–2010) and *Forbrydelsen* [*The Killing*] (DR1, 2007–2012). SBS Channel Manager Ben Nguyen was the other interviewee. At the time of the interview in 2016, he was responsible for the overall programming strategy and green-lighting of foreign acquisitions. As gatekeepers to the Australian market, these SBS executives relied on their own and their audiences' tastes and preferences. With these tastes and preferences in mind, they determined SBS's interest in content on the international market, particularly content from unknown territories, producers, and broadcasters, as has been the case with Danish television drama.

Theoretical underpinnings – homophily, universality, and exoticism

We take our theoretical point of departure in existing theoretical explanations of the global flows of audiovisual content, explanations that have largely been grounded in notions of national, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and geographic proximity *or* distance. In other words, the closer territory A is to territory B in cultural, ethnic, geographic, or linguistic terms, the more likely it becomes for territory A to export audiovisual content to territory B. If the cultural, ethnic, geographic, or linguistic differences are significant, it becomes less likely that territory B will buy and broadcast culturally distant audiovisual content. Joseph Straubhaar articulates this as "the

seemingly common attraction that audiences feel for cultural products […] close in cultural content and style to the audiences' own culture(s)" (2007: 26). The general idea is that trading foreign audiovisual content in local markets inevitably involves a certain degree of "cultural discount" (McFadyen et al., 2000). Cultural discount implies that a foreign programme loses some of its value when it does not translate as well into the local culture of the new market as it did in its home market because audiences do not fully understand the settings, institutions, cultural values, and everyday life portrayed. Taken together, this causes the audience to identify less with a foreign programme. Elaborations, discussions, and similar arguments about the cultural proximity thesis have come in many guises, and there is a general tendency to consider the movement and viewing of audiovisual content as limited to specific "geo-linguistic regions" (Sinclair et al., 1996) that share similar cultural and linguistic features. Geo-linguistic regions are often geographically close as well; for example, Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden), where audiovisual content is frequently exchanged. When transnational viewing and export flows are theorised, often explanations are found in the degree of shared ethnic, linguistic, or cultural similarities among territories and the audiences populating them (cf., Bore, 2011; Iwabuchi, 2002; Moran & Keane, 2004; Sinclair, 2009). This perspective resonates with the assumptions of homophily, which refer to the spontaneous attraction and trust that individuals experience towards people, places, and ideas that appear similar to their own (Mark, 2003; McPherson et al., 2001).

Rather than pointing to the devaluing effects of difference, other media scholars (e.g., Bielby & Harrington, 2008; Frau-Meigs, 2006; Oba, 2009; Olson, 1999) have embraced the universal as an approach to understanding the transnational distribution of audiovisual content. According to these scholars, we must consider that viewers may share – and audiovisual content may contain – universal or general themes and topics that transcend cultural particularities, and thus appeal broadly to worldwide audiences.

In contrast to explanations found in different types of proximities – or, the opposite, universalities – among cultures, geographies, languages, and ethnicities, another strand of theorisation points to the "otherness" and "exoticism" in foreign audiovisual content as a factor augmenting its appeal outside its territory of origin. Here, it is precisely the distance, or non-proximity, in cultural, geographic, linguistic, aesthetic, stylistic, and thematic elements – or the "aesthetics of the exotic" – that motivates transnational audiences to watch (Athique, 2014). This is exemplified by the "crossover audiences" for world cinema, such as Western audiences watching non-Western movies (Khorana, 2013), or when foreign films or television series gain cult status in another country (Rajadhyaksha, 2003).

Danish television drama in Australia – a growing quantitative success

Since the turn of the millennium, Danish drama programming occupies increasing amounts of screen time on SBS and attracts a growing audience, making Danish drama a vibrant option in the mainstream television schedule in Australia. Australia was the only country – and SBS the only broadcaster – outside of Denmark's wider geo-linguistic region of Nordic and Central European markets to acquire Danish series prior to the success of *The Killing* in the UK. The Danish series *Unit One*, *Ørnen* [*The Eagle*] (DR1, 2004–2006), *Nynne* (TV3, 2006) and *Anna Pihl* (TV2, 2006–2008) were all broadcast on SBS prior to *The Killing* (which was scheduled on SBS one year prior to its broadcast on British BBC Four). The explanation for Danish drama content finding a ready market in Australia is partly found in the remit of SBS, which was established by the Australian federal government in 1975. Its television service commenced in 1980 and is now available across Australia through a free-to-air service and on-demand streaming website and applications. More than half of its programming is in languages other than English, and its multi-lingual programming is made accessible to all Australians through the use of English subtitles (SBS, 2015a). SBS thus provides a cultural link for migrant communities in Australia as well as a window to the world for all Australians. With its mandate to reflect and service multicultural Australia, there is no other broadcaster quite like SBS (Ang et al., 2008). However, with only a tiny 0.3 per cent of the Australian population claiming Danish ancestry (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016), the most important reason Danish series occupy increasing amounts of screen time is the simple fact that SBS's viewers seem to *like* them. According to the heads of acquisitions and programming at SBS, Danish drama is highly engaging for SBS audiences and boosts viewer loyalty (personal communication with Ben Nguyen, 28 January 2016; personal communication with Jane Roscoe, 15 April 2015).

The evident attraction of Danish drama has resulted in continuous growth in the hours of Danish content programmed by SBS throughout the 2000s, as shown in Figure 1. Total hours of Danish language programming broadcast by SBS, for example, has increased from 20 hours per year in 2001–2002 to a high of 157 hours in 2009–2010, settling to around 100 hours per year from 2011–2012 (an overall average increase of 15 per cent per annum).

Figure 2 shows that as the number of hours of Danish-language programming broadcast by SBS grew, so did the number of people watching it. Between 2005 and 2016, both the average audience per episode for the first run of a Danish drama series and its average share grew by an average of 3.3 per cent per annum. This growth rate is more than eight times that of the growth in SBS's total annual share for people aged 16 years and over (which increased at an annual average of 0.4% over the same period). Danish drama also tended to attract larger audiences than other foreign-language drama on SBS, though they did not come close to surpassing English-language drama of a similar genre, either on SBS or the more frequently watched public broadcaster ABC.

Figure 1.   Danish drama on SBS: Total hours broadcast by SBS1 and SBS2
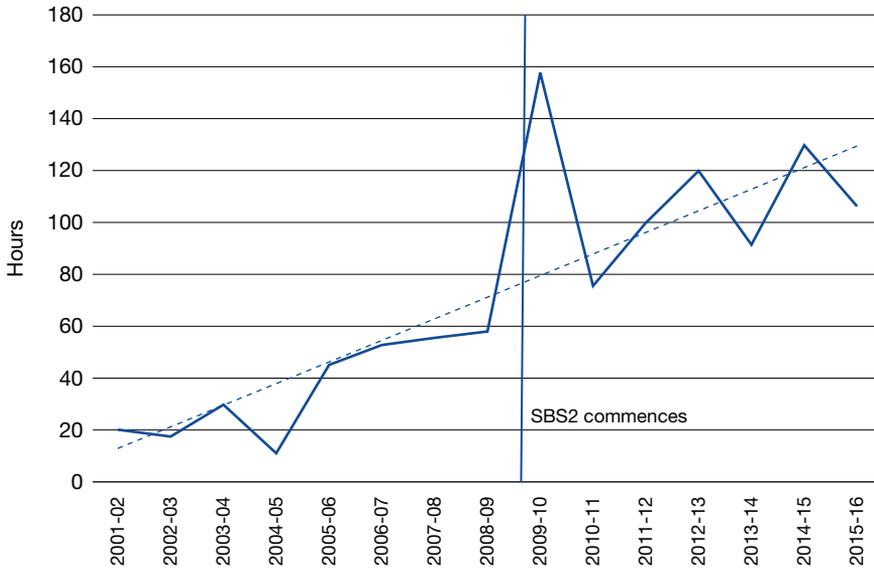
Figure 2.   Danish drama on SBS: Average audience per first-run episode
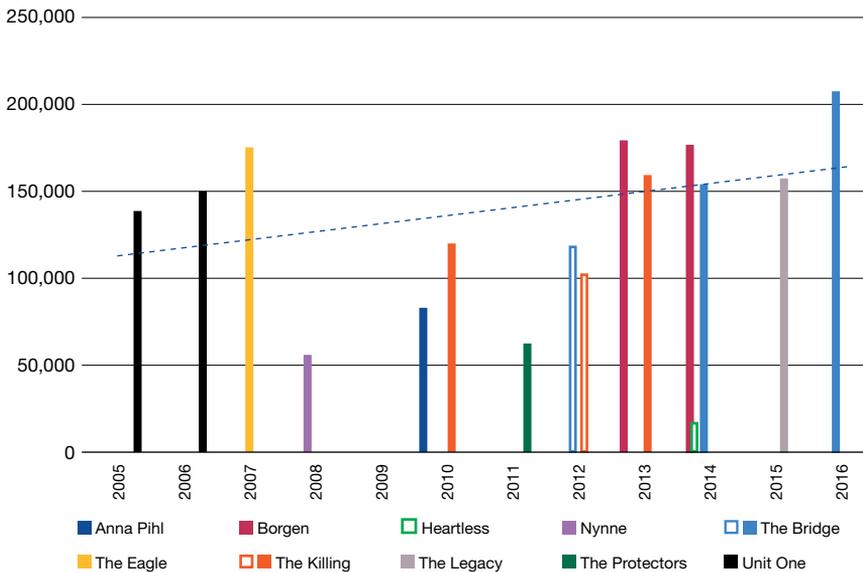
Note: Unfilled bars show audiences for programmes broadcast on the SBS 2 digital channel, which commenced service in 2009.

How does SBS perceive this observable success of Danish series? According to Jane Roscoe, former head of international content, viewers of Danish drama series started behaving differently in the early 2000s; they were less likely to watch series randomly, and would stay longer and watch seven–eight episodes instead of only one or two (personal communication with Jane Roscoe, 15 April 2015). Viewers simply seemed to connect with the content in a different way. Roscoe also spoke about the look and feel of the Danish series, which were different from other crime drama: challenging but engaging, with difficult issues handled sensitively, gritty and well written, and with a great range of characters, especially strong females (personal communication with Jane Roscoe, 15 April 2015). Overall, these series were obviously appealing to Australian viewers. SBS Channel Manager Ben Nguyen reiterated this when speaking about the performance of Danish drama compared with other non-English-language series:

> We think very deeply about who has been watching foreign-language drama on SBS. And the appeal of the Danish series has been very, very strong. We have tried to step out of that on a number of occasions. We have tried to acquire French series or Israeli series, and Belgian. And generally, the appeal has not been as strong. Something that I don't think we have been able to fully understand or articulate even is: "What is the attraction of Danish series in comparison [to other non-English-language series]?" I mean, obviously there are a lot of things that are attractive about them – the quality, the writing, the production, and the casting – but you know, often these are relatively strong in other national dramas as well.

The above quote illustrates how the specific appeal and popularity of Danish series was a bit of a conundrum; other countries also make great drama, but their programmes did not strike the same chord with SBS's audiences. However, if we delve into the qualitative data from the focus group interviews, during which we spoke specifically to audiences of the three series *The Killing*, *Borgen* (DR1, 2010–2013), and *Bron/Broen* [*The Bridge*] (SVT1/DR1, 2011–2018), a fairly clear picture emerges of their response to Danish television drama compared with series originating in other countries. This was particularly true of series from the US and Australia itself, although a few respondents used French series such as *Engrenages* [*Spiral*] (Canal+, 2005–present) as counter examples.

Same-ing the Nordic Other

Our interviewees' views were grounded in the perception that the three Danish series – along with other Scandinavian series – offer realistic and authentic portrayals of current human and societal conditions. This realism and authenticity very much centre on the imperfectness and, hence, ordinariness of the characters' actions, emotions, and physical appearance, but also on the wider lifeworld and societal issues dealt with in the series. In this way, Australian audiences of Danish television

drama are in fact same-ing the Nordic Other (see also Jensen & Jacobsen, in press). To them, this Nordic Other – be it Nordic people (by proxy of the characters in the series) or Nordic society – is not necessarily alien or exotic. In many instances, it acts as a mirror in which they see themselves via realistic and authentic displays of emotions, actions, and physical appearance, at times assisted by the seeming societal representativeness of the series.

The "perfect imperfectness" of the characters

The perfect imperfectness of characters in Danish television drama was brought up repeatedly by regular audiences. The excerpts below illustrate how the characters' imperfections are strongly tied to feelings of authenticity and realism in our respondents (see also Esser, 2017; and the contributions of Esser, Kaptan, and Eichner in this anthology):

> I think it's why I like most of these things that we're talking about, actually. The characters are not all one-dimensional. They've got good [sides and] they've got flaws. And they're not all bad or all good. They're kind of […] more normal, more realistic. (53-year-old female music teacher)

> He [Martin Rohde, Danish police officer and main character in *The Bridge* seasons 1 and 2] is deeply flawed. He's cheating and it's all like, "you've got a kid and you're just a mess, man". […] It was a great character and […] really good acting, so you had a lot of empathy even though you're like, "man, you're horrible, really" [laughs]. (48-year-old unemployed male)

> [Sarah Lund] doesn't wear any makeup and […] that's appealing. (36-year-old female artist and designer)

The pertinence of the lifeworlds and societal issues depicted

Respondents also often touched upon the realism and authenticity of the societal issues dealt with in the series. For example, one respondent suggested that the series "deal with real issues in a realistic way", and another commented on the way LGBTQ issues are dealt with in the series:

> I find the series to be more real, more realistic, and more relevant to how people live now – say it's contemporary. […] They deal with real issues in a very realistic way, whether it's drugs or sex, or troubled youth. […] And that's what really resonates. […] It's realistic and it's relevant. (50-year-old male concierge)

> I also like in *The Bridge* [how] they are dealing with gay things and transgender things [that are] really relevant right now. They seem to get that better than we do. (38-year-old female working in sales)

The wider lifeworlds of the characters were also commented upon as being highly realistic and resonating with the respondents, especially when it comes to the treatment and representation of female characters. This is evident in the following excerpts:

> The position of power that [Prime Minister Birgitte Nyborg in *Borgen*] is in – and I love the fact that there doesn't seem to be any question [that she's a woman]. It's very, very rarely brought up in the three series. [Her strength] was never questioned […] because she's a woman. It's very rare. […] She was able to just get on with her job. (39-year-old male manager)

> It was just a good interplay between the different women roles [in *Borgen*] and then the husband relationship. (32-year-old female health care worker)

> One of the things I like about these shows is that I find them less sexist in a way. The women in them aren't as objectified as the women particularly in American TV shows. You've got a detective, but she's still hot and her femininity comes into it in a way that affects the character. Whereas often the way that women [in the Danish series are …] just a human being that's doing their job, and they're not necessarily having this weird gender stuff going on. I feel like European programmes are more progressive in that respect. (37-year-old female event organiser)

With the above excerpts in mind, and as already mentioned, we argue that despite the fact that on-screen characters are literally thousands of miles away, many viewers feel extremely close to them and see themselves mirrored in them. In actual fact, the perceived closeness makes Australian audiences enter into a process of same-ing the Nordic Other. The authenticity and realism of the characters, lifeworlds, and societal issues portrayed in the Danish series thus outweigh the distance that audiences, according to existing theories, may feel due to cultural, national, ethnic, or linguistic differences between Denmark and Australia.

Othering the Self

While our Australian respondents connected to a surprising degree with Danish series, they were highly critical of more mainstream English-language (especially American) and domestic series which, in their opinion, did not give a sufficiently realistic portrayal of, for example, emotions, relationships, politics, and gender equality. Some of the previous excerpts revealed this tendency, which will now be elaborated with respect to one theme salient throughout our research: namely gender, particularly the portrayal of women.

This theme was viewed in a black-and-white manner by our respondents, who considered it dealt with in a highly progressive way in Danish series as opposed to Australian and American series, which were seen as extremely reactionary in their treatment of women:

Gender equality, I would say, is a subject that I find interesting. Sometimes I'm not always in the mood to watch *SVU* [*Special Victims Unit*] or even something like *The Fall* because it's just so rape-y. I couldn't watch that series *Outlander* that everybody loved because it kept using this threat of rape as being a plot device. (37-year-old female event organiser)

It's funny just thinking that these women are all – especially in *The Bridge* – they're highly sexed. Versus Gillian Anderson in *The Fall* – she flaunts it, whereas [the women in the Nordic series] don't. There were parts of Gillian Anderson where I was like, "Oh God, give it a rest". (38-year-old female working in sales)

And it's also that sense of vulnerability that [Saga Noren] has, [which is] the same with a lot of the Scandinavian ones. It's strong women leads, as opposed to a lot of other shows that you watch. I think that's quite an attractive thing, because it's […] television written for women. (54-year-old male concierge)

Yeah, definitely, [Sarah Lund is …] obviously very troubled again, an anti-hero, [and] has a lot of issues. But [she] doesn't wear any makeup. It's like, no bullshit about everything and, you know, a strong female character. It's very appealing as a woman to watch something like that. (36-year-old female designer)

It may not be surprising that popular mainstream English-language series such as *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (NBC, 1999–present), *The Fall* (BBC2, 2013–2016), and *Outlander* (Starz, 2014–present), originating in large markets such as the UK and US, are being othered in this way by Australian audiences. What is maybe more surprising, or at least interesting, is the way in which Australian series seemed to alienate our respondents to a degree that they felt a *stronger* connection with the Danish series than the Australian ones. Australian series are perceived to have fallen behind Australian reality and to not give an authentic depiction of, for example, women's role in society:

I actually think Australian TV is behind reality in Australia. When Julia Gillard was Prime Minister – I think it was in Glebe, the suburb – every one of their leaders from the local mayor right up to the Queen […] was a woman. And that was the only place in the world where everyone in the hierarchy was a woman. So, I think women are probably a lot more equal in reality here than Australian TV would lead you to believe. (39-year-old male manager)

[Australian TV drama] is so illogically inauthentic. We just don't do it the same way. […] We don't have ethnic representation on TV series or appropriate gay and lesbian representation on Australian TV series. […] What's actually making it to the screen isn't representative of what our community is. (37-year-old female event organiser)

Whether or not respondents are right in their claims about Australian television drama is, of course, disputable; they are after all a minority audience who is choosing to watch foreign-language drama rather than nationally produced content. However, the alienation that they feel towards domestic television output, paired with the strong

connection they feel with the Danish series in question, leads them to enter into a process of othering their Australian Self. Many of the Australian respondents displayed an almost knee-jerk negative reaction towards domestic audiovisual content when discussing it in relation to the Danish series. We now explore the possible reasons for this.

Proximate Others and distant Selves – "hyper realism", "aspiration to modernity", and "cultural cringes"

We suggest that the reasons behind our respondents' perceptions of on-screen proximate Nordic Others and distant Australian Selves are found in a combination of three factors: what one may call the hyper realism of the Danish series; the limited knowledge of Denmark and its brand as a progressive society; and the so-called cultural cringe that audiences in Australia may feel towards products from their own culture. In doing so, we also draw on the empirical findings from other countries in order to compare what the Australian respondents shared or did not share with audiences elsewhere. These countries include Brazil, Germany, Japan, Turkey, and the UK. Findings from Denmark are used to contrast and highlight the international findings.

The hyper realism of Danish (and Nordic) television drama

As we have seen, our Australian respondents were drawn to the authenticity and realism of the Danish series, particularly in terms of characters' emotions, actions, and physical appearance. We argue that this attraction is partly caused by the hyper realism of the series, which is present on various textual levels of the Danish and many other Nordic series. This hyper realism can be seen, for example, in subdued and dark colour palettes, in bleak, cold landscapes, in understated acting styles, and in the development of the characters that incorporate many imperfections and ambiguities. Many scholars have already discussed the aesthetic and narrative qualities of Danish television (e.g., Creeber, 2015; Hansen & Waade, 2017; Nielsen, 2020; Turnbull, 2014; Waade & Jensen, 2013). With these scholars in mind, we use the prefix "hyper" to mean "excessive" or "beyond", being aware that the realism of the Danish series is highly stylised, as highlighted by Hansen and Waade (2017) and Nielsen (in press) in their work on the aesthetics of Nordic Noir series such as *The Bridge* and *The Killing*.

We observed our international respondents interpreting and responding to the realism of Danish and Nordic content in different ways than the Danish audiences we interviewed (cf. Jensen & Jacobsen, in press). The Danish respondents appreciated and enjoyed Danish television series as a fairly mainstream entertainment phenomenon and Sunday evening ritual on DR1 (see also Astrupgaard & Lai, 2016; Degn & Krogager, 2017), but they did not feel a strong engagement with the content *because* it was Danish; they had a nuanced view of it and perceived it as unreal and inauthentic.

A 28-year-old female Danish respondent, for example, criticised the characterisation of women such as Sarah Lund, Birgitte Nyborg, and Saga Norén, saying "the women are always emotionally cold, fucked-up and really good at their work". She observed that they could not, apparently, be good at their work *and* emotionally warm at the same time, which was counter to both her progressive values and her lived reality in Denmark. Other Danish respondents described the characters as "too spacey", "caricatures", "exaggerated", and "stereotypical", and the stories as "unrealistic", "too dark", and depicting a "very bleak society".

The non-Danish audiences, on the other hand, appeared to believe that what they were seeing on-screen was realistic, as well as perceiving it as quality television – even high-brow (cf. Jensen, 2016). Transnational audiences, it seems, were more ready to suspend their disbelief and surrender to the narrative, opening themselves to a stronger connection with the Danish series than the domestic audiences for whom they were originally produced.

Aspiration to modernity
– the progressive brand of Denmark and other Nordic countries

A theme repeatedly discussed by respondents in all studied countries was the appeal of what they considered to be a more advanced and progressive society, particularly regarding gender equality. The desire for their own society to be more like what they saw on-screen resembles what Koichi Iwabuchi termed "an aspiration to modernity" (2002). The respondents' perceptions of a progressive Scandinavia surfaced as they spoke about their own experiences and the depiction of topics such as gender equality, nudity, sexism, and politics in the series:

> Scandinavian women are a lot more… they are different [than what they can be here. In Scandinavia] sometimes guys can stay at home and the women can go to work. They are a bit stronger. I've just noticed from going there, and being there, and also talking to others – they are a lot stronger anyway than here. (26-year-old acupuncturist)

> Well, [Scandinavians] don't have the ridiculous hang-ups about nudity. […] It's also funny to think we'd really struggle in an Australian series for that female lead [Saga Norén] – we wouldn't support it.
>
> [Interviewer: Why is that, do you think?]
>
> Sexist culture. (37-year-old female event organiser)

> I was more thinking when I was watching [*Borgen*] about some of the social issues – particularly to do with immigration and refugees, which seemed to be dealt with in a far more humane way. […] And that was definitely like a sort of wish-fulfilment fantasy, especially when we were going through some really brutal politics in Australia at the same time. (48-year-old female university lecturer)

The respondents appeared to feel closely and ideologically connected to the political and ethical "reality" they were perceiving on the screen, demonstrating what Jacobsen (chapter 5 in this anthology) and Jensen and Jacobsen (in press) call a "cosmopolitan proximity" to the Danish series. The Australian respondents identified strongly with what they perceived to be the enlightened politics of the series and regarded this as superior to not only what they saw in domestic television series but also their own lived experiences.

The Australian cultural cringe

In parallel to these reactions, many of our Australian respondents exhibited what is colloquially called the cultural cringe, a term coined in the 1950s by Australian literary critic and teacher Arthur Angell Phillips in an essay arguing that post-colonial Australia should have more confidence in its national culture (Phillips, 1950/2017). The cultural cringe is now more popularly interpreted as a lack of faith in Australian culture, particularly – as Australian artists, musicians, and screen producers routinely pursue recognition and careers overseas to overcome the economics of living and working in an isolated country – in popular culture made primarily for domestic consumption (Hesketh, 2013). Although Screen Australia (the federal government agency charged with supporting Australian screen development, production, and promotion) has expressed a strong belief in the increasing sophistication and diversity of Australian screen content (Screen Australia & Ipsos Australia, 2013), our respondents disagreed. To some extent, this underlines the particularity of our sample, limited to persons who consume foreign-language television.

> But I feel like generally Australian TV is a bit bad. […] I want to like Australian TV more, like if there's something on that someone says is good like *The Beautiful Lie*, I just commit to it, but it's often disappointing. (36-year-old female artist and designer)

> I think the problem with Australian TV is that […] it'll go through a phase. It'd be really good for a year or two, and they'll have a really good run. And then it's shocking for a couple of years, and then it's really good again. […] It really goes in phases and it goes in stages. (39-year-old male janitor)

> [Australian television producers are] copying too much and I think they're trying to use the same formula for success. But they're over-reacting and over-acting in a kind of sense, because they're trying too hard to please the audience, rather than to film naturally, connected to the audience like a more European sort of [style]. (34-year-old male environmental officer)

> I just think Australian characters for me aren't strong. Like, the story might be interesting or something – like the plot that I'll focus on – but I don't think the actor … I can't … I don't know, I just can't watch them act. I don't think the characters are *strong*. (31-year-old female case manager)

Both the perceived realism of Danish television and aspirations to an imagined Nordic society were present in equal measure in the interviews in all the studied countries. While the cultural cringe was at its most prominent in Australia where the expression is a conspicuous part of cultural discourse, our German, British, Brazilian, and Turkish audiences also communicated cringe when comparing their own television drama programmes with the Danish ones. A cultural cringe, or a worrying sense of the inferiority of one's own culture, seems therefore to be a fairly universal trait and not simply a characteristic of a post-colonial society – albeit in varying degrees. Here, we see evidence that cultural cringe may have more to do with the perceived relatability of the unknown Other, rather than any real flaw in the familiar Self, as the international audiences studied here are not compelled to criticise Danish television series as they do domestic programming. International audiences may be ready to suspend any potential disbelief in relation to foreign drama content, believing that it represents a more realistic and better aspiration to modernity than their own familiar domestic drama content.

Conclusion

Using both quantitative and qualitative audience data, this chapter has shown how Danish television series found increasing success through the 2000s with audiences of SBS, Australia's second and multicultural public broadcaster. Starting with *Unit One* in 2005, SBS became the home for Danish television drama in Australia, attracting a growing audience and level of attention that foreign-language series from no other country have been able to achieve. Based on our interviews with Australian viewers, we argue that this particular popularity is due to audiences entering into a dialectic process of same-ing the Nordic Other and othering their Australian Self, driving a powerful identification with Danish series that plays out in two reinforcing ways. On the one hand, Danish series were perceived to be more realistic and authentic in the portrayal of both current human and societal conditions. This resulted in the Nordic Other – be it Nordic people (the characters in the series serving as a proxy) or Nordic society – being not necessarily alien or exotic but rather representing a mirror to the audience. On the other hand, Australian audiences were highly critical of – and distanced themselves from – their own domestic television drama, which did not, in their opinion, realistically portray the emotions, relationships, politics, or gender equality they observe in their own society. This entailed an othering of their Australian Self. Our respondents' perceptions of on-screen proximate Nordic Others and distant Australian Selves are explained by a combination of three factors: the hyper realism of the Danish series; the audience's limited knowledge of Denmark and perception of the country as particularly progressive; and the cultural cringe that some Australians may feel towards domestic cultural products they believe to be inferior to those from elsewhere, traditionally from the UK and US. While the first two factors

were present in the responses of all the international audiences in our study in equal measure, the third was particularly strong in Australia and apparent in varying degrees in the other countries studied.

This combination of factors caused surprisingly strong identification with the Danish series by international audiences. This identification seemed stronger than that exhibited by Danish audiences, who – although generally positive about the series – had more nuanced, less black-and-white views. Our findings thus challenge the theoretical view that audiences identify more strongly with audiovisual content with more proximate cultural origins than with programming removed from them either culturally, geographically, ethnically, or linguistically. Drama series such as *The Killing, Borgen,* and *The Bridge* by no means feel disconcertingly strange or exotic to non-Nordic broadcasters and viewers. On the contrary, these are places where their most distanced audiences feel they might be at home.

Notes

1. OzTAM ratings data is provided pre-aggregated rather than at respondent level. As we did not have access to variance estimates, we used statistical inference tests for aggregated proportions to test the differences in estimated share across demographic groups: z tests for gender as it is binomial and the Marascuillo procedure for the multinomial categories age and education.
2. The channel and years of broadcasting for the series in question are referenced at the first mention of a television series.

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