

## Chapter 3

# The appeal of “authenticity”

## *Danish television series and their British audiences*

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### Abstract

This chapter critically reflects on the transnational reception of Danish television series through findings from explorative audience research in the UK. The multi-modal concept of “authenticity”, which emerged strongly from the analysis of the interview transcripts, is used to explore and argue for how “emotional realism” (or the phenomenological process of identification) and “external realism” were major contributory factors in viewers’ enjoyment of Danish series in the 2010s. Aiming to advance our understanding of viewers’ perception and appreciation of realism and authenticity, I conceptualise the terms in relation to globalisation, the (mediated) tourist gaze, and the cognitive and affective processes that determine viewers’ screen experience. I draw on cognitive and affective psychology, neuroscience, and screen theory, as well as theories from anthropology, sociology, and television and tourism studies concerned with globalisation, place, and authenticity. Authenticity is intricately linked with a range of diverse aspects that all contribute to the transnational appeal of Danish television drama.

**Keywords:** Danish TV series, audience research, authenticity/realism, local specificity and place, cognition and affect

### Introduction

In the UK, *Forbrydelsen* [*The Killing*] (DR1, 2007–2012)<sup>1</sup> was launched in January 2011 on public service channel BBC Four to great critical and popular acclaim. Average viewing figures of 534 thousand per episode – already a remarkable success for the digital niche channel – doubled to over 1.1 million for the second season, broadcast at the end of the year. Since then, a notable audience for subtitled television series of around 1 million has formed on BBC Four (Esser, 2017). In addition, other players began offering non-English-language drama. Most notably, “Walter Presents” was launched in 2016 to curate subtitled series from around the world on the digital plat-

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form All4, and Netflix and Amazon Prime Video began to increase their investment in “local drama” for transnational consumption. From both a theoretical and industry perspective, the unexpected popularity of non-English-language series that exude place-based specificity is highly interesting. It calls for a revision of theorisations of international television programme flows that for decades have dominated academic and industry discourse alike. According to these theories, local specificity diminishes international appeal (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988) and, consequently, “de-localized” programmes (Straubhaar, 2007) have the best chance of selling internationally.

This chapter attempts to advance our understanding of the unexpected appeal of subtitled, place-specific television series by using findings from audience research to critically reflect on the role “authenticity” plays in the transnational appeal of Danish and other subtitled television drama series in the UK. Various dimensions of this complex yet apparently significant notion emerged from the interview transcripts. The resulting multi-disciplinary framework includes various perspectives and theories. Cognitive and affective psychology and neuroscience (Batson, 2011; Frith, 2007; Shamay-Tsoory, 2011; Watson & Greenberg, 2011) and cognitive screen theory (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Grodal, 2009; Plantinga, 2013; Smith, 1995) illuminate the biological and psychological underpinnings of viewers’ screen experience and how this creates the pleasure of immersion and perceptions of authenticity. Further theories are included from tourism (MacCannell, 1973; Urry, 1990; Urry & Larsen, 2011) and television studies (Ang, 1982; Fuqua, 2012; Hansen & Waade, 2017; Hsu, 2010; Kilborn, 2003) concerning authenticity and place. Globalization theories are taken from the 1990s – a time when seminal anthropologists and sociologists (Appadurai, 1993; Bauman, 1998; Harvey, 1996; Massey, 1994; Robertson, 1994) reflected on the rise of nationalism and people’s growing desire for authenticity and rootedness. These scholars’ astute arguments are still pertinent today and can help us understand the current popularity of subtitled and place-based television drama in its wider socio-cultural context. The audience research, it should be noted, was exploratory in nature. There were neither direct nor hidden questions about authenticity or realism. I use the terms “authenticity” and “realism” interchangeably in this chapter, and they emerged as a key theme only during the analysis of the transcripts.

The audience research, carried out late 2014–2016, encompassed focus group interviews and individual interviews including twenty-eight television viewers who had watched and enjoyed watching subtitled television series<sup>2</sup> and three industry executives responsible for bringing Danish and other subtitled television drama into the British market<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the research included observation of Nordic Noir inspired events and communications from two Facebook fan groups, particularly “Fans of Scandinavian/ Nordic Crime/Fiction and Drama Genre” (FoSCFG). By the end of 2016, this closed, non-commercial group launched in October 2013 had 8,000 members and daily postings by the dozen. Finally, two polls on age and access were posted on the FoSCFG page (8 November 2016), and a comprehensive ratings analysis was conducted of the primetime schedules of seven television channels between 2006–2016 (for the latter see Esser, 2017).

Following Robertson's (1994) contention that the local and the global (two theoretical place-holders) are defined by simultaneity and reciprocity, the overarching argument of this chapter is that globalisation – and with it the television sector's advancing transnationalisation – goes hand in hand with the quest for authenticity and the appeal of local specificity. In other words, I argue that for transnational viewers of Danish series, it might be precisely the local specificity contributing to the appeal, rather than diminishing it. The notion of place, which implies authenticity, appeals most strongly in a globalising world. At the same time, representations of unfamiliar yet highly specific places, in spatial as well as temporal terms, appear particularly authentic. Moreover, I propose that the effects of "seriality" and of how our brains process what we see on screen generate immersion, and with this, feelings of familiarity and perceptions of authenticity. In short, local specificity, seriality, and the cognitive and affective processes that determine our television experience are all intricately linked to notions of authenticity; and authenticity is an important contributory factor in the transnational appeal of recent Danish television series.

I will begin by outlining the key theorisations the chapter draws on and then introduce the UK-based research participants and their immersion in Danish television drama, which they perceived as highly authentic. I will then explore two dimensions of authenticity that emerged from the discussions among participants: "emotional realism", caused by the phenomenological processes of identification and transportation, and "external realism".

### Television programme flows, transnational audience appeal, and globalisation

Scholarship concerned with television programme flows has long been dominated by de Sola Pool's "preference for the local" thesis (1979), prominently supported by Hoskins and Mirus' (1988) "cultural discount" and Straubhaar's (1991, 2007) "cultural proximity" theses. Together, these theories have led the majority of television scholars to contend that audiences prefer media that are "most proximate or most directly relevant to them in cultural and linguistic terms" (Adriaens & Biltereyst, 2012: 554). And further, by implication, that the "nation-based sense of distinctiveness" that viewers are said to recognise in language, humour, people, and culture not only attracts domestic audiences but conversely diminishes foreign viewers' experience, engagement, and interpretation (Tan, 2011: 347). Two assumptions were inferred from this line of thinking: 1) the international television programme trade would remain restricted to mostly "culturally proximate", "geo-linguistic", and "geo-cultural" markets (Sinclair et al., 1996); and 2) content sells most widely if it is "culturally odourless" (Iwabuchi, 2002), or if it can be "de-culturalized" (Bielby & Harrington, 2008) or "de-localized" (Straubhaar, 2007) during production, distribution, and reception.

This hegemonic paradigm left some phenomena, like the global appeal of Japanese anime and manga, unaccounted for. Iwabuchi (2002) attempted to explain such “exceptions” by alleging that international circulation and reception blur the boundaries of the foreign and the local, leading to gradual familiarisation and the loss of cultural specificity. Whilst this may be true in some ways, this contention omits that cultural specificity, too, could be a possible factor for the transnational appeal of screen content that differs from the domestic norm (Lee, 2018; Napier, 2007; Smith, 2016). This is what I want to address in this chapter.

The concept of “familiarity” is worth exploring and expanding. Iwabuchi is clearly right when arguing that some form of familiarity helps in opening up audiences to non-domestic content, and that familiarity is achieved gradually through international circulation and reception. To this we can add the familiarity that is created through the ongoing transnationalisation of screen narratives, aesthetics, and production values, as has been recently argued in relation to Danish television drama (Agger, 2016; Hansen & Waade, 2017; Nielsen, 2016). Additionally, Straubhaar’s (2007) influential conceptualisations of cultural and genre proximity address important aspects of familiarity. But there is more. Familiarity also develops through the effects of seriality and through how our brain processes what we see on screen.

Finally, I attempt to show that familiarity and local specificity are intricately linked to authenticity. Notions of authenticity, it should be pointed out, are based on subjective judgements, constructed on the basis of viewers’ experiences, aspirations, social milieu, and the wider context in which viewing takes place. Notions of authenticity refer to perceptions of accuracy of representation (“true-to-life”) or of something being true to its essence. Hence, it is futile to ask how authentic something is. Instead, we should ask *who* considers something authentic and why (Leeuwen, 2001; Scannell, 2001).

A range of globalisation and tourism theories can help us understand how the present sociocultural, economic, and political context might contribute to the appeal of foreign drama with explicit place-based details. During the 1990s, anthropologists and sociologists engaged in a heated debate about whether or not the nation state was in decline. Appadurai (1993) and Bauman (1998) argued that migration and the proliferation of international and transnational organisations had weakened nation states. Paradoxically, Bauman added, the demise of state sovereignty popularised the idea of statehood. Opposing common opinion, he asserted that there is no contradiction between the global flows of capital and the proliferation of feeble and impotent sovereign states. On the contrary, the globalisation of all aspects of the economy and the renewed emphasis on the territorial principle, he asserted, seem to be mutually reinforcing. Following Robertson (1994), he suggested that we discard binary thinking based on a tug-of-war between the local and the global, which, Robertson maintains, go hand in hand. One of the consequences of a globalising world, he astutely remarked, is that local specificity gains visibility and traction.

Two other key contributors to this debate, Massey (1994) and Harvey (1996), postulated that globalisation appeared to threaten the uniqueness of places. Massey

noted that "place" seemed to be endangered by homogenising tendencies (for instance, the global spread of McDonalds) as well as heterogenising tendencies caused by the rise in global flows. Similar to Bauman, Harvey contended that in some respects "the effects of mobile capital and ubiquitous mass communications have made place more rather than less important" (1996: 297). Both he and Massey concluded that the perceived threat to place resulted in people's search for authenticity and rootedness. This could be observed, they said, in increasing efforts to make places more distinctive and visible and exhibiting a sense of pride and belonging. The socio-cultural value of place and heritage was noted moreover in relation to tourism. In the 1970s, MacCannell (1973) reflected on the quest for place-based authenticity, remarking that tourists have a desire for "authentic experiences" and participating in cultural "back regions" – physical and imaginative spaces where local cultures are preserved and practiced in their authentic forms. With the growing commodification of culture, Urry (1990) subsequently developed the notion of the "tourist gaze", emerging from the set of expectations tourists place on localities and their inhabitants in their search for authentic experiences. A decade later, Urry and Larsen (2011) added the "mediated tourist gaze" to acknowledge how our increasingly mediated lives produce a new menu of gaze objects, including those offered by television.

In television and film scholarship, textual place-based authenticity and its perception gained traction only in the 2010s (Fuqua, 2012; Hansen & Waade, 2017; Hsu, 2010; Thomas 2012). It is still a marginal – though growing – field of enquiry. For much longer, though, film and television scholars have argued that the perception of "realism" is an important factor for audiences' experiential engagement with fictional stories. Realism, like authenticity, is a multi-modal concept (Busselle & Greenberg, 2000). For fictional stories, it includes "the extent to which stories or their components are similar to the actual world ('external realism') and secondly, plausibility and coherence within the narrative ('narrative realism')" (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008: 256). Even more important, in my view, is Ang's (1982) seminal conceptualisation of "emotional realism", which she developed from her research into the transnational appeal of *Dallas*. Ang's interviews revealed that despite viewers' perception that the series' external world was not very realistic, they felt that the series was "true-to-life". This, Ang argued, was because viewers attributed realness to the characters' subjective experiences and feelings. They could relate to them. In light of subsequent findings from cognitive and affective psychology and neuroscience, today this relatedness is more commonly understood as a phenomenological process, whereby "identification" is defined as "the increasing loss of self-awareness and its temporary replacement with heightened emotional and cognitive connections with a character" (Cohen quoted in Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008: 263). The next section summarises key insights from cognitive and affective psychology and neuroscience to illuminate how our brains process what we observe and, as a result, how we engage with on-screen fictional characters. Ang's label of "emotional realism" is useful in highlighting the "authenticity effect" that comes with such identification.

## Authenticity and identification

With the advancement of neuroimaging technology during the past 25 years, functional brain scans have revealed that our experience of screen content is processed by the same brain circuits as those used for real-world experiences. From this, neuroscientists have concluded that screen content offers “a sensory experience that is similar to natural viewing” (Schimamura, 2013: 16). In real life as in film, our consciousness is not based on direct experience but on representations of the world: mental models, comprised of schemata and scripts, that our brain makes of the world and constantly updates, enabling it to quickly process new complex input. Also, as with real-life experience, our aesthetic response to screen content is guided by the highly interdependent dimensions of perception, cognition, and emotion (and action), which work in a feedback loop. For instance, perception begins inside with a prior belief: “My perception is a prediction of what ought to be out there in the world. And this prediction is constantly tested by action” (Frith, 2007: 132). Emotion, on the other hand, is both caused by what we perceive and influences perception. As far as our understanding of other humans is concerned, cognitive scientists propose that we develop, constantly test, and update so-called “theories of mind” (ToM). ToM, which some refer to as “perspective taking”, is also deemed necessary for interpreting and understanding other people’s emotions; it is believed to account for our emotional engagement with fictional characters and our immersion in fictional narratives (Grodal, 2009; Oatley, 2013; Zacks, 2013).

Empathy, which is a highly complex, multi-dimensional psychological state, can be evoked by ToM when we try to imagine how another human or a fictional character feels based on what they say and do, and what we know about them. Or alternatively, when we imagine how we would feel in their place. In addition to these cognitive processes, empathy involves affective processing in the form of simulation and mimicry. Simulation refers to unconscious efforts to match the mental state of another person with resonant states of one’s own. Mimicry occurs when we unconsciously adopt other people’s facial, vocal, and postural expressions. Affective empathy results in “emotional contagion”, where we feel the same – or, more accurately, similar (influenced by our own experiences and beliefs) – emotions to those of the people we watch (Batson, 2011; Shamay-Tsoory, 2011; Tan, 2013; Watson & Greenberg, 2011).<sup>4</sup>

Cognitive and affective empathy both run on mirror neuron circuits, and the pivotal insight gained from the discovery and study of mirror neurons is that they fire not only when we perform an action but also when we observe another person perform an action, whether in real life or on screen (Frith, 2007; Grodal, 2009; Watson & Greenberg, 2001). This is important for our understanding of audience engagement because it means that watching something is, in a sense, “like doing it, at least psychologically” (Plantinga, 2013: 101). This explains the paradoxical phenomenon that Plantinga calls the “twofoldedness” of viewing (2013: 98): the viewer knows that characters are not real but responds to them as though they are. A second important

consequence is that viewers' immersion in a fictional story might not be caused by perceptions of realism, as previously believed, but that the reverse could also be true: that it is immersion which in fact causes viewers to feel that stories are realistic (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Suckfull, 2013). In any case, the perception of realism, or authenticity, remains a major factor in the enjoyment of fictional narratives. Also, there is nothing to suggest that both cannot be true, and in fact, immersion and perceptions of realism might work in a feedback loop. This idea is further developed below, supported by the empirical data emerging from the focus group discussions among British viewers.

## British audiences of Danish television series – immersion and perceptions of realism

The multi-method audience research that is the basis of the following reflections revealed that most viewers in the UK watched subtitled series on television when broadcast, recorded with a time-lag or via catch-up on BBC i-player. Most viewers had watched several European series recently, and several noted they had watched subtitled films and television series when they were young. For the 2010s, after decades of almost no subtitled content on British television, it became evident that the critical and popular acclaim of *The Killing* played a seminal role in the development of BBC Four's now renowned Saturday-night subtitled television series slot, and hence in opening the door for further Danish and other foreign-language series.<sup>5</sup>

The twenty-eight participants fitted the overall BBC Four audience profile and the profile of those watching subtitled television drama, as identified through the data of the UK's official ratings agency, BARB. The profile was somewhat older, slightly skewed towards females (as for television drama in general), well-educated, and comparatively well-off (Esser, 2017). The youngest participant was a 30-year-old female librarian and the oldest a 71-year-old male psychoanalyst; most were in their late 40s to mid 60s. Several female participants had worked, or were still working, as school teachers, librarians, university lecturers, and/or were involved in the arts in some way. Male participants included, amongst others, a stand-up poet, an acoustic surveyor, a market researcher, and a television sports producer. Most participants had knowledge of at least one other language, either through school, a non-British parent, or because they had lived and worked in another country. Only two had knowledge of a Scandinavian language: a Norwegian singer living in London and an Australian who had lived in the UK for a long time and knew some Danish from exchange studies in Denmark. The vast majority of participants were British passport holders and most, although well travelled and with a cosmopolitan outlook, were firmly anchored in their British localities and lives.

All focus group (FG) participants said they did not mind subtitles, with many pointing out that they forget they are reading. Some stated that watching with subtitles feels like a different kind of watching, "unusual, quite unique". The effort of reading, they mused, requires them to "give it your full attention", with the consequence that

“it draws you in” (Grace & Lorraine, FG 1). This impression was also discussed and corroborated by FoSCFG members:

*The Killing* was our first subtitled show. We weren't sure because of the subtitles, but after one episode we were hooked. Since then we've watched most foreign shows. There is something about having to concentrate on the subtitles and putting down all distractions that immerses you in the plot much more. (personal communication via Facebook, Jan Huddleston, 1 September 2016)

In academia, the concept of “immersion” derives from literary theory and denotes “deep and joyful engagement” with a text and the reader forgetting the world around them (Eichner, 2014: 14). According to cognitive screen theorists, immersion is essential for viewers' enjoyment of fictional narratives. In particular, it is facilitated by two factors: “transportation” and “character identification” (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Transportation involves viewers shifting the centre of their experience from the actual world to the story world. Serialised television fiction, we could argue, supports this process particularly well. It cues viewers for entry through a combination of continuity announcements, snappy credits sequences, catchy signature tunes, and a series of conventional establishing shots of the place they are about to transport into (Kilborn, 2003). The above comments suggest that subtitles, too, assist transportation. Identification as a phenomenological process, on the other hand, is bound to one, or more likely, multiple characters. Smith (1995), in his attempt to construct a comprehensive theory of identification, usefully divides identification into “recognition” (viewers' mental construction of characters), “alignment” (viewers' access to the actions, thoughts, and feelings of characters through ToM), and “allegiance”. The latter has an evaluative component and refers to the sympathies viewers develop for or against various characters. These three cognitive processes, together with the affective phenomena of simulation and mimicry, Smith suggests, are the constituent parts of identification.

### *Emotional realism – identification and authenticity*

Much of the free-flowing discussions in the five focus groups, which were guided only by a few general questions, related to the characters and corroborated arguments for the salience of characters and the affect invested in them for viewers' comprehension and enjoyment of screen narratives (Ang, 1982; Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Smith, 1995; Tan, 2013). Identification, in the sense of recognition, alignment, and importantly allegiance, strongly showed across all groups both in the quantity of corresponding statements and in the way participants talked about *The Killing*, *Bron/Broen* [*The Bridge*] (SVT1/DR1, 2011–2018), *Borgen* (DR1, 2010–2013) and, in one case, *Arvingerne* [*The Legacy*] (DR1, 2014–2017):

Richard: [*The Legacy*] was full of nuance, the characters are really developed, so you can see all their flaws, and then one minute you think: “You're an arse”. And then the next minute you think: “No, you're not, you're actually all right”. And then –



Marion: – and you really care!

Richard: Yeah, you do.

(FG 5)

Annabelle: I liked the second and third [season of *The Killing*] because you got to see more of Sarah Lund's personal life. And I really enjoyed that –

Marit: – I think that's why I like it as well.

Anna: Yeah. The child, the mother.

Annabelle: Boyfriends and stuff. Because, you kind of just wanted her to be happy –

Anna: – with the wonderful boyfriend she had. And I kept saying: "Go to Norway!" or wherever she was going to. Sweden? "Go, go, go!" you know. And then you think: "Who is going to solve this problem? Okay, she is not going to go. Oh, she's on the plane! Oh my God, she's gonna go. Okay, she's not gonna go." [laughter]. You sort of get involved in all this.

(FG 4)

Unfortunately, focus groups and interviews cannot establish whether simulation and mimicry occurred at the time of watching. But the animated nature and forcefulness of some comments, like Anna's, suggest that it is highly likely that affective empathy responses occurred at the time of watching.

Identification, and the pleasure it evidently gave many participants, might also explain why the crime aspect appeared to be a much weaker explanatory factor for the appeal of *The Killing* or, in fact, any other crime series alluded to. Not a single participant mentioned unprompted that they liked crime stories, and when finally asked about this omission, a notable number of women said they were not at all fans of the crime genre. Several said they were watching crime series because it is something they can watch with their partners, join in watercooler conversations about at work, or both. For some, their favourite Danish series was *Borgen*. Without crime, they said, this political drama gave them all the human relationships, people's day-to-day problems, as well as insights into the workings of the news media, political intrigues, and power relations. Others' favourite was the first season of *The Killing* because it was "a study of human grief, [...] the ripple effect of one action" (Richard, FG 5). Across focus groups it became clear that for most participants, the para-social aspect – which Ang (1982) argued soap operas afford and accounts for the highly positive evaluations of *Dallas* across the world – played a key role in the appeal of the Danish series. Richard Klein, Head of BBC Four at the time, had realised this quality. In his interview, he noted how he had wanted to remodel the Saturday night slot into one offering "posh soap for people who want to drink wine" (personal interview with Richard Klein, 24 February 2016) and how *The Killing* (the first Danish series he bought) suited his intention.

Whether it was the heightened identification that caused perceptions of realism, vice versa, or maybe a combination of both, we cannot know. But the significance of

emotional realism is indisputable. A plethora of comments referred to the characters' "realness" and clearly expressed viewers' appreciation to this effect: "It just felt like they were proper people. It felt... more real" (Annabelle, FG 4). When asked about the appeal of the "strong female characters" – frequently remarked on in academic and journalistic discourse – two participants from the same focus group instantly moved from "strong" to "believable": "Oh well, they are strong as characters. They are believable characters" (Anna, FG 4). "They are interesting and complex" (Marit, FG 4). Lorraine, a pensioner and member of a film club, explained why the first season of *The Killing* was her favourite with the following words:

Because of the characters' development. It was 24 hours of television that first series, wasn't it? It was three months, two hours a week. And that's unusual isn't it? And the way they developed the people. Because they were people you knew. They were totally real and it just developed at the right pace. I hate being rushed along with things. This was just dramatic, and her character [the grieving mother played by Ann Eleonora Jørgensen] was unique the way it was portrayed. The way she acted it. It was just very different to anything else. (Lorraine, FG 1)

In addition to character complexity, Lorraine's comment highlights two further aspects that caused her and many other interviewees to perceive the characters as unusually realistic. One aspect was the impression that the acting was of high quality: unprompted, several participants noted the "superb" (Judith, FG 4) and "subtle" (Marit, FG 4) acting of Eleonora Jørgensen and Sophie Gråbøl in *The Killing*; another remarked that Pilou Asbæk was an "excellent actor" (Richard, FG 5). We will return to this later as discussions of the quality of acting took an interesting turn. The second, and in my view more important aspect that emerged as important for perceptions of authenticity was the gradual development of the characters and the time viewers spend with them. Reflecting on the appeal of *Dallas*, Ang (1982) highlighted the longwinded narrative structure of the soap opera genre and the focus on characters' subjective experiences and emotions, accentuated by the frequent use of close-ups. These features are also characteristic of *The Killing*, particularly the first season. Annabelle, a linguist, had in fact noticed the heavy use of close-ups and other (undefined) means of evoking affect: "A lot of the story is told without dialogue. A lot of it through... I mean, I don't know the terminology, but you know... What you were looking at rather than what you were hearing. Their faces and stuff" (FG 4). Neuroscience has shown that close-ups do not merely reveal emotions but can also *elicit* emotions in viewers through mimicry and facial feedback. As in real life, this can cause emotional contagion, and it makes the screen experience intense and life-like – in other words, authentic.

To sum up and conclude this section on emotional realism: viewers' engagement with fictional characters is supported by the cognitive and affective processes through which they come to identify. In the specific cases at hand, the prolonged co-experience afforded by seriality as well as character complexity appear to have intensified identification. Of course, individual viewers' personalities, beliefs, past experiences, and

current life situations also impact identification (Frith, 2007; Shamay-Tsoory, 2011; Suckfüll, 2013), particularly allegiance. To explore this in the required depth is beyond the scope of this chapter (please refer to Eichner in this anthology for this). The importance of the above for this chapter is that identification, seriality, and character complexity all support the perception that characters are authentic – true-to-life and true-to-self, or both. Moreover, identification, seriality, and character complexity also all create a sense of familiarity. The fact that viewers do not speak the characters' language does not impede this. On the contrary, reading subtitles seems to facilitate immersion, at least in those cases where the narrative is not heavily dependent on dialogue and reading subtitles does not become too cumbersome.

### *External realism and the appeal of authentic places*

Like emotional realism, external realism emerged from the interview transcripts as an appeal factor of Danish and other subtitled television series. To clarify, external realism refers to the extent to which television images and, we should add, diegetic sounds correspond to what viewers have experienced first-hand, and to what they believe to exist in real life (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Language is one important element in this. Several highly similar (unprompted) discussions spanning focus groups and postings on FoSCFG strongly suggest that participants' inability to understand the spoken dialogue contributed to their perception of the characters and the world they inhabit as "genuine" (Marion, FG 5), and that this contributed to the appeal of the series:

Richard: There is that worry sometimes [when] you're watching it – particularly when you're watching *Borgen*, because there were scenes in the second series, where she [Danish Prime Minister Birgitte Nyborg] has to talk in English. Suddenly they're going into English, because it's somebody from England, or wherever, talking – and I was thinking: Oh, it suddenly got a bit wooden –

Helen: It was terrible –

Richard: – it was really clunky. There was a scene where I thought this is awful actually. This is clunky.

Richard: Is the whole thing awful? [all start laughing, getting animated]

Helen: [interrupting Richard] Birgitte, Birgitte the prime minster –

Richard: – just because it's subtitled we are thinking: This is great. [more continued laughter]

(FG 5)

An almost identical and equally animated discussion took place in the first focus group:

Lorraine: When they speak in English, because especially in *Borgen*, they kept going into English, and you think, "is this as good as I thought it was?"

Grace: I know!

[several laughing]

Lorraine: It doesn't work.

(FG 1)

Interesting here is that the majority of research participants live in London, where multiple languages and foreign accents are the norm rather than the exception. Even so, viewers found the introduction of English highly disturbing. One plausible explanation is that we still think of countries as homogenous. As long as the representations on screen conform to our stereotypical schemata, we deem them authentic and accept them willingly. However, if they violate our rudimentary and possibly false schemata, we react with displeasure, laughter, or both.

There might be a second phenomenological explanation, though. It is possible that the abrupt use of a language or dialect familiar to viewers breaks their transportation.

Mike: [The performances] seemed to be good, and they seemed to sit well within the ways it was directed and filmed and edited, so all seemed good. *And then this guy pops up like...* [author's emphasis].

Lorraine: It's like *Friends*. I don't know if you ever... There was a British actor that went into *Friends* and it was horrendous, and I can't put my finger on why, but it doesn't work for some reason. It is false.

Greg: She was too British. She's too much. It didn't mix together at all.

(FG 1)

In both cases, the "sudden" introduction of a new language (or national dialect) breaks the spatial coherence of the fictional world and, as a result, leads the focus group participants to query its authenticity and with it various other qualities, like the originally applauded acting. The two explanations are not mutually exclusive.

Other important factors of external realism and its appreciation were the landscape, interior design elements, themes, and the appearance of characters. There was a plethora of positive evaluations of characters' "realistic looks": "I mean, [Sarah Lund] is good looking, but she is not *impossibly* beautiful" (Anna, FG 4). "And there was another character, who didn't have to look like a glamour puss, you know" (Alison, FG 3). Several women across focus groups favourably compared the characters' appearance to those "slick", "manicured", and "groomed" (Annabelle, FG 4) looks of the characters in the American crime series *CSI*.

Everybody [in *CSI*] is so beautiful and burnished and thin and elegant, and yet when you watch something like *The Killing*, you know, half of them are sort of greasy oiks, who've just fallen out of bed, you know, or not made up. That was one of the things I really liked about it. It felt a little bit more realistic. (Isobel, FG 1)

Of course, findings from cognitive sciences and the widespread appreciation of *Dallas* show that realistic looks are no prerequisite for character alignment and allegiance to

occur. Moreover, comments like the above may express little more than participants' often helpless attempts to describe and interpret their diffuse viewing experiences. Hence, we should not overrate these statements. But even so, the large number of statements made to this effect, unprompted and independent of each other, demonstrates that many female viewers noticed and appreciated the "realistic looks" of the female characters in the Danish series.

Finally, participants noted and positively evaluated the "freedom from clichés" (Roderick, FG 1), the realistic settings, and the contemporary real-life and transnationally relevant themes:

Min: *The Killing* was really about the far right and immigration problems and, you know, the undercurrent. I think that's what I liked about it as well, because it was so realistic. You know, it wasn't just like a fairyland.

(FG 3)

Robert: They claim to be realistic and yes, with the storylines in *The Bridge*. I mean, you can question this but they claim to be realistic in terms of, you know, what the office of a police department looks like, and I quite like this.

Helen: Yeah. That is interesting, to sort of see how different countries work and also when you get – you don't quite know how accurate it is but in terms of problems that come up, being European, and seeing other European countries. And they are discussing things like immigrants, and problems with immigrants being integrated with other communities and all that. It is interesting to see other people's take on it, because we only ever get the UKIP, British take on things. And yeah – it's interesting that other countries have similar problems.

(FG 5)

Isobel: The slightly, sort of sideways thing for me was the fact that I suddenly started to learn about countries – Scandinavian countries, Denmark, and others – that I haven't really thought about much. I had been to Denmark, I had been to Stockholm, but I didn't know much about the people, their way of life. [...] I find it interesting that there was sexism in the workplace, and I thought "uh, but it's Sweden", you know. And all of these things are the same. There is corruption in *Borgen*, there is corruption in *The Killing*, and that was kind of like, "oh". It's different, but it's the same. It's the same problems, but in a different setting, and it kind of opened up a whole new world of possibilities for me, that they weren't all as I thought, stereotypically living in this land where everything is fine.

(FG 1)

All three excerpts are reminiscent of the arguments Hsu puts forward in his textual analysis of American series *The Wire*. The explicit attention to place-based detail, including vernacular speech, images, and sounds from the city's "back regions" offers, he says, "a gritty, meticulous, and therefore more realistic alternative to traditional

televisional representations of police work and urban turmoil” (2010: 510). The show “rewards its most careful viewers with access to what they presume to be a trustworthy, unfiltered experience of life in Baltimore” (Hsu, 2010: 510). Both arguments have been corroborated by Fuqua (2012) in her analysis of HBO’s series *Treme*, set in New Orleans. Even though my interviewees expressed some reservations about the accuracy of representation, these were as quickly forgotten as they were stated. Min, Helen, Robert, and Isobel were not closely familiar with Denmark or Sweden, and overall each seemed perfectly happy to presume that the series’ portrayals of how people live and work, of sexism, immigration, and corruption problems, accurately reflect Danish and Swedish “reality”. The same “twofoldedness” that Plantinga (2013) remarked about viewers’ conduct towards characters thus seems to apply to these fictional places: viewers know they are fictional but they still engage with them as though they are real.

Regarding Hsu’s (2010) and Fuqua’s (2012) argument about the “reward” of gaining access to the back regions of unfamiliar places, we should note that like the above, all other comments pertaining to external realism contained positive evaluations. From what is known about the research participants and the profile of British audiences of BBC Four’s subtitled television drama, it is fairly safe to speculate that most, if not all, are the kind of people who seek authentic experiences when travelling. Contemporary Danish and other subtitled European series that exude place-based specificity provide these viewers with mediated gaze objects that appeal to their tourist gaze. For this audience, the “foreignness” of the places and their (fictional) inhabitants do not diminish the appeal, as the dominant programme flow paradigm purports – rather, it contributes to it.

## Conclusion

It may be the political economy of today’s distribution landscape that pushes non-Anglo Saxon place-based drama into the global market (Esser, 2017; Jenner, 2018; Steemers, 2016); however, this push would not work was it not for viewers welcoming such content. As the above comments have shown, they clearly do welcome it in the UK, and they do so in substantial numbers. Phenomenological data of viewers’ experience must be treated with caution, of course. There is always the danger that important things remain unsaid or unrecognised whilst others are overstated. Phenomenological data does not constitute hard evidence; nonetheless, it serves as an invaluable exemplary aid to think through puzzling phenomena, like the unexpected transnational popularity of Danish drama series in the 2010s. In the UK, as my findings suggest, the series’ appeal owed a great deal to perceptions of authenticity, thus corroborating earlier arguments that realism positively correlates with judgements of programme quality (Ang, 1982; Busselle & Greenberg, 2000). In fact, as with *Dallas*, realism was the favourite criterion amongst participants for passing judgement. Differing from the responses Ang received about *Dallas*, their references suggested perceptions and positive evaluations of both emotional and external realism.

Emotional realism occupied the preeminent role, suggesting that the Danish series participants referred to – even the crime series – have similarities to soap operas and appeal for similar reasons. Through seriality, character complexity, and close attention to characters' subjective experiences and emotions, these series create perceptions of authenticity and opportunities for heightened identification. Identification is not dependent on cultural proximity, though, because "humans automatically respond with empathy upon observing others due to hard-wired, dedicated neural structures in the brain" (Tan, 2013: 351). There are some constraints that result from viewers' need to rely on schemas from previous experience to create models for the narrative; and this means that, as a rule, some form and degree of familiarity may be required for viewing to be pleasurable. Familiarity through knowledge of the heavily transnationalised crime genre, common themes and concerns, as well as the prolonged exposure to "foreign" characters and the (perceived) life-like places they inhabit, ensure that viewers' cognitive abilities are not overburdened, and they come to embrace the Other.

The foreign language, people, landscapes, buildings, and sounds, I argue, thus did not produce a cultural discount amongst this audience. Quite the reverse: the place-specificity and access to back regions that these series provide seemed to add to their appeal. It made them even more authentic and believable, and it added pleasure by appealing to the tourist gaze. Finally, in considering the wider political, economic, and socio-cultural context, I propose that the appeal of (presumed) authentic local places on screen can be linked to globalisation. Globalisation gives visibility to local specificity and, by increasing our yearning for place, gives it traction. In other words, it is precisely because we live in a globalising world that local places and narratives appeal to both national and transnational audiences. For national viewers, they represent the local and create feelings of belonging, community, and local or national identity. For transnational viewers, they embody Other nations. For both, they re-install the well-known ordering principles in a global world which, in Bauman's (1998) words, appears uncontrollable, unstable, and chaotic.

## Notes

1. The channel and years of broadcasting for the series in question are referenced at the first mention of a television series.
2. The twenty-eight participants were recruited in London and Dorset amongst work colleagues, friends, and neighbours, who in turn brought along interested friends, and at two events in London related to Danish television drama: 1) an interview with Sofia Helin organised by the *How to: Academy* in cooperation with the Swedish tourism board, *Scandi-Noir with Saga Norén* (11 September 2014); and 2) the *Nordicana* festival (6–7 June 2015). All participants reported to be quite avid television viewers in general and most considered themselves to be fans of Danish and other subtitled television drama. Only a few engaged with these series beyond watching them, though, which would include going to the above events or reading posts on social media.

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3. Richard Klein, Controller of BBC Four (2008–2013); Sue Deeks, BBC Head of Programme Acquisitions, Films & Series; and Jon Sadler, Head of Product Marketing, Arrow Films. The latter, a British distributor of world cinema and cult films, was an early investor in the British DVD distribution rights for Scandinavian TV drama series and instrumental in marketing and cementing the *Scandi-Noir* label through its website, newsletter, social media, and *Nordicana* events (2013–2015).
4. Emotions and automatic body responses in the form of mimicry are two aspects of *affect*; a third is mood, which is defined as a more diffuse experience and, unlike emotion, has no clear referent or cause.
5. *The Killing*, it should be noted, was aided by French procedural *Engrenages* [*The Spiral*] (Canal+, 2005–present) and Swedish crime series *Wallander* (TV4, 2005–2013). These two series were the first subtitled television series broadcast on BBC Four (between 2006–2010) and had begun to build an audience for subtitled television drama. With *The Killing*, this audience more than doubled (Esser, 2017).

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