

Chapter 7

Lifeworld relevance and practical sense-making

Audience engagement with Danish television drama series

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Abstract

Based on audience data from a global audience study, this chapter considers successful audience engagement with Danish television drama series around the globe through the theoretical concepts of *lifeworld* and *action-guiding themes*. By employing an interactionist perspective that considers media use in terms of social practices and meaningful consumption, the chapter demonstrates how viewers around the globe like Danish drama series and engage with them for very similar reasons: the authenticity of the stories and characters and the depiction of widely relatable topics such as the interconnectedness between media and politics, female empowerment, and tensions between family life and career. It also argues that audience engagement should be considered beyond the logic of cultural proximity/distance. By considering audience engagement within the logics of “practical sense”, the relevance to the audiences’ current lives, and lifeworlds, a more nuanced understanding of audience engagement can be achieved.

Keywords: transnational television research, lifeworld, Danish television drama, audience engagement

Introduction

In recent years there has been a considerable increase in television content travelling around the globe. The rapid and worldwide success and exploitation by streaming services such as Netflix, HBO, FobuTV, and YouTube has bridged distances and difficulties in accessing cultural products from distant places. The American-based content provider Netflix, for instance, not only enables its viewers to watch American productions, but also provides access to (and increasingly produces) cultural products from most other parts of the world; for example, 3% (Netflix, 2016–present)¹ from Brazil, *Fauda* (Yes Oh, 2015–present) from Israel, *Hibana* (Netflix, 2016) from Japan, *Dark* (Netflix, 2017–present) from Germany, *Cable Girls* (Netflix, 2017–present) from Spain, *Sacred Games* (Netflix, 2018–present) from India, *One More Time* (KBS2,

Eichner, S. (2020). Lifeworld relevance and practical sense-making: Audience engagement with Danish television drama series. In P. M. Jensen, & U. C. Jacobsen (Eds.), *The Global Audiences of Danish Television Drama* (pp. 107–123). Gothenburg: Nordicom.

2016) from South Korea, and *The Bridge* (SVT1/DR1, 2011–2018) from Denmark. Changing media landscapes, changing technologies, and changing dynamics with new players and constellations of the television ecosystem have led to a situation in which more and more content is needed to fill the multitude of different channels and platforms. At the same time, content providers and the current changes have advanced the accessibility of formerly inaccessible content. As a consequence, Danish television drama is accessible in almost every part of the world and has audiences ranging from the neighbouring country Germany to faraway Argentina or Japan. Danish television drama series are but one example of how series produced in and for a small nation have crossed their national and cultural borders and found audiences in every corner of the world. The phenomenon of travelling television content is not new, having been thoroughly explored in the past (e.g., Liebes & Katz, 1990; McCabe & Akass, 2012; Mikos & Perrotta, 2013; Straubhaar 1991, 2007). Scholars have identified differences in reception and meaning-making processes according to age, gender, or differing (national) cultural codings. Drawing on the worldwide audience data of the present study, this article considers the successful audience engagement with the Danish television drama series *Forbrydelsen* [*The Killing*] (DR1, 2007–2012), *Borgen* (DR1, 2010–2013) and *Bron/Broen* [*The Bridge*] around the globe and irrespective of national culture. It employs an interactionist perspective that considers media use in terms of social practices, pleasure, and meaningful consumption within the concept of “lifeworld” (Habermas, 1981/1984; Schutz & Luckmann, 1973).

From cultural proximity to lifeworld relevance

Previous research on factual (e.g., Galtung & Ruge, 1965) and fictional media (e.g., Hoskins et al., 1997; Straubhaar, 1991, 2007) has sought to explain the appeal of television series outside their country of origin within the logics of culture; models such as cultural proximity, homophily, or exoticism add to our understanding of why viewers experience meaningful pleasure when watching culturally distant products. However, the results of the present study indicate that television fiction provides meaning and pleasure beyond the logics of the framework of cultural closeness and distance. By presenting and incorporating specific topics, Danish drama series appeal to a potentially worldwide audience. The global appeal of pop cultural products is by no means a new discovery and has been examined before, for instance by Liebes and Katz (1990) in their fundamental work on the reception of *Dallas* (CBS, 1978–1991), or in connection with the worldwide success of the film trilogy *Lord of the Rings* (New Line Cinema, 2001–2003), which has been studied by Barker and Mathijs (2008) and by Mikos and colleagues (2007). Such studies teach us that while film and television products can successfully cross borders and cultures, the specific culture involved influences the ways in which such products are received and engaged with by audiences around the globe. For instance, different ethnic groups in Israel enjoyed *Dallas* in a similar fashion but

focused on different structural elements of the story (Liebes & Katz, 1990). Similarly, the large character ensemble in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy allows viewers around the world to relate to and appreciate the films in a similar manner while differing in their character alignment (for instance, viewers from China prefer Legolas, while viewers from the UK like Aragorn better) (Barker & Mathijs, 2008).

Gender, age, ethnicity, and national culture are doubtless influential factors with regard to audience engagement. However, they are also simplifying concepts, constructing sameness based on large categories that are sometimes difficult to identify. The present transnational audience study of Danish television drama series shows how audiences around the globe relate to and feel drawn into the storyworlds offered by recent Danish series for very similar reasons: viewers generally adhere to the realistic and authentic depiction of the storyverse and the characters within it; they appreciate the interconnectedness of crime with politics and media; and they enjoy following the ambivalent – often female – main protagonists juggling their professional and private lives as they proceed over the course of several seasons and numerous episodes to solve their particular obstacle. While our study participants describe similar patterns of textual involvement, some of them believe that this is related to the close cultural proximity of Denmark, while others underline that their interest in the same elements of these series is due to a sense of cultural distance.

Straubhaar, who coined the concept of “cultural proximity” for television formats in 1991, explained in his later work that “cultural proximity must be seen not as an essential quality of culture or audience orientation but rather as a shifting phenomenon in dialectic relation to other cultural forces” (2007: 196). He identifies these other forces as genre proximity, cultural shareability, value proximity, and thematic proximity. He then locates the mechanisms of these proximities within Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “cultural capital” as a structuring force behind the interest in and choice of television series by viewers. Cultural capital (the sources of knowledge provided by education, family, religion, or other personal networks) creates – in alliance with gender, ethnicity, and age – the “possibility space” that enables us to interpret the world around us. But the concept also raises some questions: how, for example, is culture and value distinguished? And are genre formations not the specific cultural expressions of a society?

In the end, cultural proximity remains dominant in Straubhaar’s approach (2007) and escapes empirical operationalisation (Trepte, 2008). Our results suggest that thematic and value proximity in the reception of Danish drama series are so important that they should not be underestimated; study participants around the globe relate to the very same topics and themes that Danish series offer them – politics, media, and gender roles. Danish television drama series thus make *practical sense* to their viewers (Weiß, 2001). In other words, our participants were able to engage meaningfully with cultural products regardless of their own cultural belongings. Instead of operating within the logic of national cultures, practical sense-making is located in the social sphere and within an interactionist perspective rather than within culture, referring

to meaningful topics for viewers which resonate with their life circumstances and phases, value-belief systems and attitudes, and central themes of their lives. In short, they resonate with the viewers' lifeworlds. This enables viewers to negotiate urgent topics and relevant themes regardless of how culturally close or distant they might feel to the way of life presented.

Interestingly, audiences tend to *attribute* their textual engagement within the logics of culture with either cultural proximity or distance; they position themselves culturally in relation to the cultural product in question and their perceived or imaginary conception of this culture. From a sociological perspective, the relationship between society and culture can be described as the connection between an organising and interacting structuring principle that produces culture – objects, norms, beliefs, or attitudes. The societal aspect is formed by actual people interacting and communicating with each other, thereby producing – and at the same time bonding with – a shared culture. The distinction is essential, since it illustrates the social constructedness of culture and emphasises the more universal principle of symbolic interactionism. While symbolic communication with verbal and non-verbal language impacts the realm of our imagination, interaction as such happens in all societies, employing and producing multiple cultures. Cultural and social aspects are thus intricately related. Put in Bourdieu's words, "social order is progressively inscribed in people's minds [through] all the hierarchies and classifications inscribed in objects (especially cultural products), in institutions [...], or constantly arising from the meetings and interactions of everyday life" (1984/2010: 473).

The distinction between the cultural and the social sphere is important: the social sphere relates to a more universal state of human agency, social action, and symbolic interactionism; and the cultural sphere relates to the expression of these social interactions. Locating differences within the cultural sphere without distinguishing it from the social sphere involves the risk of "essentialist culturalism" (Aksoy & Robins, 2008) – different cultural expressions would thus be located in fundamental human differences, while in fact they are cultural expressions contingent on the very same social interactional processes. The present perspective on audiences and the reception process takes as its point of departure active and acting audiences that are "doing media" (Eichner, 2017) as part of their social, everyday life activities. Audience activities are therefore everyday life practices that are meaningful because they make practical sense to the viewers both individually and socially.

Lifeworld, practical sense-making, and action-guiding themes

The concept lifeworld refers to the perceived reality viewed from the individual's perspective, serving as the basis of sense-making processes and individual agency in the world. As such, it comprises our experience of the world in its material and interactional manifestations with intersubjective ideas, knowledge, norms, and values. The

concept originally gained popularity through Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, and has been sociologically interpreted by Alfred Schutz and later Jürgen Habermas. For Habermas (1981/1984) in particular, the concept of lifeworld bears some resemblance to Bourdieu's notions of field and habitus; fields, according to Bourdieu (1995), point towards specific structured spaces – the political field or the scientific field – which can be regarded as a force within which the actor operates and takes a position. Unlike Bourdieu's fields, which constitute specific thematic areas, the notion of lifeworld encompasses all lived experiences from the subject's point of view, including everyday life experiences as well as non-routinised and exceptional life experiences. According to Schutz, it is “that province of reality which the wide-awake and normal adult simply takes for granted in the attitude of common sense” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973: 3–5). Both Schutz and Habermas emphasise the social and interactional dimension of the concept in regarding individual experiences as genuinely social. The lifeworld is neither an objective outside world nor a subjective individual world – instead, it is the *intersubjective world* that constitutes the background context of action.

The relevance of the concept for understanding media experience lies in its time-space stratification: the lifeworld is not a universal timeless construct, but constitutes the present world with a past [*Vorwelt*] and a future [*Folgewelt*]. While the lifeworld is the taken-for-granted background for our actions, each action adds to our world experience and thus to our knowledge of this world which, in turn, influences our future actions in the form of a “horizon of expectation”:

Each step of my explication and understanding of the world is based at any given time on a stock of previous experiences, my own immediate experiences as well as such experiences as are transmitted to me from my fellow-men and above all from my parents, teachers, and so on. (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973: 7)

As individuals, we are aware of the ephemerality of this world with a past, a present, and a future. In contrast to this *Weltzeit* [universal time], Schutz also identifies the individual time and social time. The temporality of our individual life courses is influenced by social time, constituting our life phases. Similar to changing needs, motives, and sense-making processes, dominant themes can change according to our life phases: “the individual lifeworld refers to the personal politics of moral considerations of integrity, life plans and self-reflexivity as opposed to, and in confrontation with, systemic boundaries” (Rasmussen, 2014: 53). In this connection, Neumann and Charlton (1988: 21) employ the idea of “action-guiding themes”. Action-guiding themes are the structural premises for media reception processes (and other social actions), which are closely linked to the concept of lifeworld and its temporal character. The lifeworld, as an intersubjective realm, with its specific social norms and values (which are time-based in the sense that they depend not only on the situational lifeworld, but also on life phases), consists of actors that act in relation to each other, thereby creating social needs and motivations. These intersubjective needs solidify into themes that bias our actions. While our individual lives are guided and biased by specific “situational

themes” (such as hunger and its connected strategies and tactics to satisfy hunger), persistent situations are guided and biased by more persistent themes. Neumann and Charlton refer to more permanent situations such as gender roles, but they also refer to themes depending on life phases such as parenthood, illness, or coming-of-age as “trans-situational themes” that guide our social actions and therefore our media use. Thus, recipients choose and consume media biased to and based on trans-situational themes that become action-guiding.

The social uses of television

Elaborating this approach, Weiß (2000) aims to understand how permanent themes interconnect with life phases and the lifeworld, thereby affecting media consumption. In combining Habermas’ lifeworld approach with Bourdieu’s field and habitus, Weiß explains how the theme of “success” as expressed in television formats for young people (for instance, in popular soap operas) impacts and interconnects with the thematic bias of adolescents. The adolescent phase, he argues, is characterised by the need to prepare for the labour market and cope successfully with one’s own life project within the central field of labour. At the same time, adolescence is a phase of transition, of instability and inchoateness – the career path has not yet become part of an everyday life routine (Weiß, 2000). Fantasies about individual, successful lifestyles are therefore a central life theme for adolescents that are presented in their favourite television series, and that make practical sense to them.

The lifeworld offers a frame of interpretation and reference for experiences, including media experiences. It is a space of action and experience, grounded upon symbolic interaction, on the basis of which subjects interpret the world. The lifeworld thus acquires a thematic bias, resulting from the themes that influence and guide actions in the individual phases of life. This thematic bias is also contingent on the social fields and available resources in question. The lifeworld, phases of life, and guiding themes are therefore crucial for dealing meaningfully with media and constitutive for social action (see Eichner, 2014; Weiß, 2001).

Considering televisual experiences in light of the lifeworld, action-guiding themes and practical sense-making makes it possible to achieve a more nuanced understanding of the social uses of television. It directs the focus to topics that seem universal, but also locates them within the realm of the social sphere, which is characterised by its specific time-space stratifications and its diverse cultural expressions. It also makes it possible to understand previous research in a new light, for example a study by Herbert Gans (1962) on the popularity of American films among adolescent audiences in Britain. Rather than explaining the success of these films in terms of economic parameters or cultural imperialism, Gans elaborates the specific theme that they offered their young, working-class audience in Britain: “a projection of adolescent aspiration-fantasies” and characters with “working class traits” seeking a middle-class lifestyle (Gans,

1962: 325). In other words, these American films were successful because they met the action-guiding theme of a specific working-class youth culture that many British films were failing to address at the time. This fits neatly into Iwabuchi's (2002) observation regarding the aspiration to modernity that young Taiwanese experienced in the consumption of Japanese music and television. It is also reminiscent of Singhal and Udornpim's approach (1997), which emphasises the significance of common values and themes that address and attract audiences across cultures, as well as connecting with Larkin's (2003) study on the popularity of Indian films among Nigerian audiences and "parallel modernity".

The lifeworld concept helps us to understand why specific themes have the potential for cross-cultural appeal, attracting viewers across different cultural expressions and despite the distances between them. The concept of lifeworld also helps us to understand why many people (but not all) relate in a similar manner to the same topic. The above-mentioned studies are examples of textual engagement that cannot be explained sufficiently with the logic of cultural proximity/distance. As I have argued, they are in fact examples of how topics within fictional media resonate with the action-guiding themes of their audiences. The studies thereby draw on media texts that are consumed within a specific geo-linguistic region (Straubhaar, 1991, 2007; Larkin, 2003) or a specific place (Gans, 1962; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Singhal & Udornpim, 1997). The present transnational study, however, shows that Danish drama series attract viewers from very different parts of the world because they generate a similar interest in all their audiences.

Audience engagement with Danish drama series

Audiences around the globe enjoy Danish drama series because they perceive them as more authentic and credible than American imports or domestic productions (see, for instance, Esser, Jensen & McCutcheon, and Kaptan in this anthology). The sense of authenticity is created through the depiction of current topics and credible characters and through the recurring theme of strong, yet ambivalent, female lead characters. A range of topics are mentioned repeatedly by the interviewees, such as the interconnectedness of politics and media, which is most obvious in the political drama *Borgen*, but also present in the crime dramas *The Killing* and *The Bridge*. The struggle of combining family life and responsibilities with a career and the empowerment of women featured in all three series, but again they were most present in *Borgen*. In the following section, the worldwide data has been clustered and analysed with regard to aspects of lifeworld relevance and the topics mentioned above (and not, as in the individual chapters, per country).

It is striking that study participants around the globe regarded Danish series as particularly authentic and credible, regardless of geographical location or linguistic background. Danish drama series are often compared to American quality series such

as *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013–2018) or *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–2013), which are also liked by many viewers but regarded as less authentic and real than Danish series. The characters in the Danish series and their actions – as well as the overall setting – are regarded as closer and more relevant to viewers’ own lifeworlds. A 56-year-old university professor from Germany claims: “I would say all of us sitting here could be Birgitte Nyborg”, indicating that she is all too familiar with the worries of a woman at the height of her career, struggling with her marriage and the double burden of family and work. Authenticity, realism, or resemblance to everyday life is mentioned frequently by the participants in all focus groups. Throughout her interview, one 49-year-old participant (the CEO of a medium-sized company in Berlin and mother of a teenager) emphasises the relevance of *Borgen* for her own lifeworld:

It’s right to the bottom realism. It’s authentic, real, drastic, you perceive it as real. Nothing is glossed over. It looks less glossy-styled, it has this realism, closeness to everyday life, to everyday references, to life-worlds that are known.

It becomes clear that authenticity means more than credibility. Authenticity includes an allusion to the participants’ own lifeworlds. They can follow and identify the worries and decisions of the characters not only figuratively, but truly, rooted in their own lives as mothers, professionals, or husbands. In contrast to the emotional realism described over 30 years ago by Ian Ang (1985), viewers of Danish drama series do not transfer emotions from a distant, glossy world into their own realities, but perceive the world depicted in these series as being similar to their own worlds. This sense of authenticity and realism is reinforced by the specific aesthetics of Nordic Noir, such as bleakness, darkness, dissonant music, and electronic soundscapes (e.g., Creeber, 2015; Waade, 2017) and the specific staging of a strong but ambivalent female lead character (e.g., Agger, 2011; Eichner & Mikos, 2016; McCabe, 2013; Povlsen, 2011). When characters “are sort of greasy oiks, who’ve just fallen out of bed, you know, or not made up” (participant, UK group); when they seem “very real without the excesses of the Hollywood TV series” (participant, Argentina survey); or when “shooting here conveyed that darkness, that not being able to see the details” (participant, Turkey group), viewers perceive Danish drama series as more realistic and closer to their own lives.

In other words, the sense of realism and authenticity is independent of the geo-linguistic location of the viewers. Viewers from Denmark, who can draw on their real-world experiences to compare the discrepancies between screen and reality on a daily basis, also notice and appreciate the authenticity and realism in Danish drama series. A viewer from Aarhus, Denmark, explains:

It is not identification. It’s more like something you recognise from politics in your everyday life. I’m generally interested in politics without being politically engaged, but I think that it’s important, and I follow a little. What happens at Christiansborg? And how is that exactly? So, I think in this way it was easy to relate to the series. That’s how it is. It’s a more realistic idea of how politics or everyday life takes place in Denmark. (Female, 59, librarian)

Her comment also refers to the dominant topic of the interconnectedness between politics and media – evident in all three main examples (*Borgen*, *The Killing*, and *The Bridge*) – but most dominant in the political drama *Borgen*. Participants from all over the world connect to this theme, especially when it resonates with a personal interest. For instance, one student of political and social sciences from Germany is particularly fond of the depiction of the interaction between politics and media. Throughout the discussion, he refers back to his political interest as a dominant theme in his life that guides his professional career as well as his choices of media consumption. Likewise, a 33-year-old participant from Turkey relates his preference for *Borgen* to his own general interest in politics and his profession as an employee of a daily newspaper; the political themes in *Borgen* motivated him to choose this series in the first place, and the realism and authenticity of the series kept him “tuned in”:

It was realistic. I mean, there are also some elements which pique my interest. Because it's political. The influence of media over politics and country, and how media influence the politics of a country. I mean, how maturely media express the idea of its governing. [...] I think that the discipline to not deviate from the core, the real issue – focal point is very good. This kind of seriousness made it easier for me to watch.

The participants often discuss the way politics is portrayed in the American series *House of Cards* and *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2008). These series were perceived as similarly likable as the Danish ones, but less realistic and less close to people's own reality. Many viewers claim to feel closer to the political system depicted in the Danish drama series than that in American television series.

It is noticeable that the participants who do engage with the political themes in Danish drama series show a general genre preference for political drama, have a strong personal interest in politics, or are involved professionally in politics. When the interest in politics is absent, or when politics is perceived as negative, Danish series – especially *Borgen* – can be perceived as too complex and confusing. A 45-year-old male car mechanic from Germany who grew up in the former German Democratic Republic expresses his frustration with politics, resulting in a lack of interest in political drama as a genre:

With *Borgen* it's like that... so I don't like politics in general because it's a swamp for me. I've already experienced that for real – politicians. Then I'll rather have a thriller. *Borgen* [is] nice and well done, but ultimately not for me.

His disenchantment with politics emerges throughout the interview, solidifying into a persistent action-guiding theme. It also resonates with his repeatedly expressed frustration with the West-German political system, reflecting the sentiment of 23 per cent of the inhabitants of the former German Democratic Republic that they were the losers when the two halves of Germany were reunited (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, 2014).

A second topic that matters to our participants is the balance between family life and career. The tendency of Danish series to feature female lead characters leads to

a particular story development with specific tensions that would not emerge in the same way with a male protagonist (Eichner & Mikos, 2016). For many participants, this is a noticeable and pleasurable effect; it allows women as well as men to reflect on their own agreements with potential future or actual partners. One 26-year-old female research assistant from Berlin says:

For me, the central theme that catches me is this woman in this position. It works for me because it's a woman and not a man. What does a woman do, how does she cope when she and her husband are suddenly no longer on an equal footing? What about the children? I have weight issues, but I am the prime minister. How does my husband handle it? Can they do it, or can't they?

Here, the resemblance to this young woman's own lifeworld (she is just starting her own professional career) is more figurative and similar to the emotional realism experienced by *Dallas* viewers that Ang (1985) has identified. However, the topic provides various points of connection from different lifeworld perspectives. In one discussion group from Turkey, the participants perform a reality check by discussing some of the tensions arising for Birgitte Nyborg owing to the fact that she does not have a nanny – a situation which is not unusual in many European high-income households:

Participant 1: Well, of course, I mean the prime minister's child falls ill and they have to bring the child to work –

Participant 2: – of course, of course.

Participant 1: Well, I mean there're no people to look for, care for the child. That evening I –

Participant 2: – if they don't pay for it, yeah.

Participant 1: Well, they take turns. Their homes don't change for example.

Participant 2: Yeah, yeah, yeah!

Interviewer: They don't build a palace.

Participant 1: They live in the same cramped place!

(Female, 48, civil servant, Turkey; male, 38, associate professor, Turkey)

This dialogue focuses on the way Danish social reality is depicted in Danish television series, with fair wages and family-friendly working hours allowing a life independent of paid help and enabling both partners to pursue their own careers. But as *Borgen* clearly shows, this also creates tensions in the negotiation of gender roles. What is important here is that the series allows middle-class audiences from other cultural backgrounds to connect and relate to the family life depicted in a tangible way. Neither the prime minister nor most of the secondary characters could be described as extremely wealthy (although the multi-millionaire Freddie Holst in *The Bridge, season 3* is one exception in terms of Danish series as a whole), and the logistical problems

arising when a child falls ill, thereby making a busy week even harder to get through, are understood by viewers around the world. One 40-year-old participant from northern Germany points out:

But maybe these characters also rank on the same level with the viewer, so that people think, “Yes, they also have these problems, how would I do that with the kids, with the job? How do I reconcile it all? What happens when I’m ill...?” [...] Maybe that’s what brings the characters closer and makes them more human and familiar, because sometimes they have such problems that very normal people have at home. (Male, chef)

When the topic depicted is not a central theme in the viewers’ lifeworlds, it will be disregarded or rejected during the reception process. When asked directly about her feelings regarding the depiction of characters who have to juggle family life and work, one female participant from Sydney answers: “Well, we don’t have kids so that aspect didn’t exist”.

While the two topics mentioned above (the interconnectedness between politics and media and the struggle to combine family life and career responsibilities) depend a good deal on the particular life phases and dispositions of the viewers, the topic of women’s empowerment and gender roles offers the vast majority of the study’s participants a point of connection. The emphasis on women – as shown in the cast of protagonists and supporting characters or the role reversal of Saga Norén and Martin Rohde in *The Bridge* – engages the viewers by appealing to and often resonating with their values, beliefs, and attitudes regarding gender and society. The topic is central for the viewers’ engagement with Danish drama series – “That’s the great thing: the men are entirely in the supporting roles. They are the supporters and the women are at the forefront. I think this is genius”, as one 56-year-old female participant from Berlin puts it.

The Killing and *The Bridge* feature strong but lonely and edgy female investigators who sacrifice their family lives for their careers. *Borgen* offers a more complex arrangement of the female cast. Alongside the main protagonist Birgitte Nyborg (the prime minister), the journalist Katrine Fønsmark (who is involved in a complicated relationship with spin-doctor Kasper Juul) serves as the second driving character in the narrative. A range of female side characters such as the senior journalist Hanne Holm or the politician Pernille Madsen complement the character ensemble. While women are not overrepresented in *Borgen*, the general underrepresentation of women on screens otherwise (Prommer & Linke, 2017) ensures that *Borgen* is perceived as distinctly female. The strong female characters came up in most focus groups and were appreciated, and exemplified, for instance in this comment from one of the British focus group participants:

The character was a female character who’s a little bit odd. A little bit awkward in some respects, but brilliant in other respects. They are all sort of like very strong female leads. Flawed, but strong. Yeah? And I like that. I like strong women who are flawed, and men who are vulnerable [laughter]. (Female, 64, university lecturer, UK)

There are obvious lifeworld connections to the topic among several participants. Some – primarily female – participants claim to have studied or otherwise engaged in feminist theories or feminism (Australia, Germany, Turkey). One female participant, an executive employee in the steel industry, can relate in particular to the struggle of the lead characters, having to assert themselves in a male-dominated working environment. One 30-year-old industrial management assistant displays a special awareness of the topic which is triggered by the fact that his friend is writing a PhD dissertation on the subject of power imbalance. Several participants like the fact that the Danish series refrain from depicting their female characters in a stereotypical or sexist way (e.g., Australia, Turkey). The similarities between our different nationally based focus groups in discussing and negotiating gender roles within society, as well as their own positioning within that discourse, are striking. At the same time, there are differences within the country-based focus groups with regard to the perception of gender roles depending on education and social environment. While most participants are highly educated, often employed in the academic world or in a managerial position of some description, the participants from northern Germany come from a very different environment. Most of them are employed in blue-collar jobs (they are chefs, car mechanics, storemen, or shopkeepers). The discussion of gender roles and gender equality is less important for some of these participants. One 33-year-old female postal clerk from Germany tries to avoid the discussion of gender equality as such; while enjoying the narrative of the series, her values and attitudes with regard to gender roles remain traditional:

It would be bad if all men were oppressed feministically. If they are all sitting at home with a beautiful scarf and a face mask. I think that would be very bad. A man should also be allowed to remain a man. He must be free to go out and cut down a tree.

A closer consideration of the dominant topics in the Danish drama series reveals that the driving factor in attracting the interest of audiences can be traced in their lifeworlds. In other words, the life phases in which audiences are situated determine which topics they are interested in – although some topics can also outlive the different life phases. This is particularly evident with regard to the topic of family and career, which does not resonate with viewers for whom family and career has little significance. The topic of women's empowerment, on the other hand, resonates strongly with nearly all participants. Redvall (2013) points out that specific Danish production circumstances and the specific production culture of the Radio Denmark organisation allow – and even demand – topics of social relevance to accompany the primary plot in television fiction produced within the Danish public broadcast system. “Double storytelling” (Redvall, 2013: 55) thus enriches the textual layers of a series, offering more potential thematic points of attachment for audiences. Understanding the interrelationship of text and audience through the logics of lifeworld rather than the logics of cultural proximity/distance allows us to understand the cross-cultural appeal of cultural products with a more nuanced perspective on the particularities of

reception that are not exclusively rooted in cultural sameness or differences, but in the more encompassing aspects of the lifeworld.

Nonetheless, cultural proximity/distance is still an important concept to which our participants referred repeatedly. While viewers outside Denmark do not usually recognise the specific country of origin of a series, they have an idea about the broader region. Based on its specific aesthetic style and on the local specificity of the places depicted, a meaningful connection is made to an actual existing location and its image (Eichner & Waade, 2015). Our focus groups came from different locations, but Scandinavia was recognised by all as a mark of quality in television series, distinguishing Scandinavian productions from American and domestic productions. The recognisable elements of Nordic Noir served as a form of regional branding adding value to Scandinavian series (Weissmann, 2012). Some audiences (e.g., UK, Brazil) regarded the use of the original language accompanied by subtitles as an important textual marker of regional branding; while other audiences regarded aesthetic and story-related elements as strong regional branding. The recognition of a specific region is important for audiences on several levels: first, because location adds meaning to the text (Eichner & Waade, 2015); and second, because it allows audiences to position themselves culturally in relation to the text. Participants from Germany in particular highlighted their cultural proximity to the neighbouring country of Denmark: “Concerning political topics, in Germany we’re closer to *Copenhagen* and *Borgen* than to *House of Cards*”, said one participant from Berlin. Remarkably, viewers from northern Germany place even more emphasis on their regional proximity to Scandinavia. One participant mentioned the black humour in Danish television drama: “It appeals to me as a North German. I think people from Bavaria do not consider this that funny”.

On the other hand, participants from Turkey and Australia underlined the cultural otherness and exoticism evident for them in Danish drama series. A participant from Australia tried to explain the general sense of exoticism: “Scandinavian countries are... I would use the word exotic. They are just more different. You know, there’s so many Italians in Australia, they’re just not very different you know? But Scandinavia ...”. The Turkish participants were even more explicit, as this one who refers to the “otherness” of Danishness:

Their lifestyle and our lifestyle in our culture... so it won’t be like their family lives are very different than ours. But they don’t have that warm, sloshy neighbourhood – I mean everyone has their own secular life. They don’t have close-knit connections. Because of that, since they don’t feel that warmth, I – we, our people won’t like that, I think. Because we always search for sympathy, a warmth, something like ours, that’s how it is. The importance of sticking to the rules, and that detectives are only bending them a little while trying to solve things, but still doing it by the book. I mean, we’re different than that too. We’ll find a way and do it. So, as I said, social life, family life, and business understanding is quite different from ours. That’s why I’m looking at it as cultural difference. (Female, 38, lecturer)

As stated initially in this chapter, audiences clearly tend to *attribute* their interest and engagement in the series within the logic of culture – either within cultural proximity or exoticism. They position themselves culturally towards the cultural product and towards their perceived or imaginary conception of the respective culture of origin. Importantly, this does not change the attraction of Danish television series or the shared interest in the topics that they present. To some extent, we can conclude that the exotic nature of Danish television series for non-Scandinavian viewers supports the idea that television is a cultural forum, as described by Newcomb and Hirsch (1983/2000) in the 1980s. Topics presented in a fictional television series appeal to us not because they are simply or solely similar to our own views, cultures, or norms, but because they allow us to negotiate specific topics relevant to our current situation. They make practical sense, meaning that they present a topic that moves a specific viewer(ship) at a specific time in their life and within a specific cultural context.

Audiences consciously ascribe meaning to texts based on their feeling of cultural proximity or distance. Interestingly, the mode of textual engagement via lifeworld-relevant action-guiding themes is not affected by the sense of cultural proximity or distance. So it seems likely that audiences attribute cultural proximity or cultural distance to the text itself and to their version of the imagined Other. What has become evident in this study is that audiences engage with Danish television drama series primarily because they can relate to the topics and characters with which they are presented. This sense of closeness is created through authenticity and realism; the authenticity makes it possible to transfer specific local problems to one's own lifeworld. The specific topics thereby provide a *lifeworld relevance* across socio-cultural particularities at a specific time in history. Closeness, therefore, must be considered beyond the logic of cultural proximity.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to examine audience engagement with Danish television drama series by applying the concept of lifeworld. Its point of focus has been interactionism – not culture. It is striking that viewers around the globe like Danish drama series and engage with them for similar reasons. Audiences see a specific quality in Danish drama series based on authenticity, convincing characters, good acting, and an original storytelling technique. These characteristics distinguish Danish series from American series and domestic productions. Danish series are perceived as authentic owing to their characterisation, setting, and depiction of society, making it easier for audiences to relate to relevant topics such as the interconnectedness between media and politics, the tension between family and career, and women's empowerment.

The data in this study and previous studies indicates that audience engagement does not depend on cultural differences or the logic of cultural proximity/distance. However, as argued in the introductory chapter of this anthology, the concept of cultural proximity can help us explain the cultural factor of television content and its

audience at the intersection between class and environment. Athique (2016) argues that cultural proximity can be related to Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital: the more cultural capital, the less effective is the logic of cultural proximity; and the less cultural capital, the more effective it becomes. Niche audiences and cosmopolitan taste communities therefore exist across other taste formations, and the cultural capital of viewers would therefore influence if the cultural mechanisms (with aspects of the national and the sub-national) or the other mechanisms of textual relation are more effective (Athique, 2016: 123). This is further conflated by aspects of banal transnationalism (Aksoy & Robins, 2008; Jensen & Jacobsen, 2017) and banal nationalism (Esser et al., 2016) as mechanisms of attribution.

This is in line with the concept of action-guiding themes in people's lifeworlds. The closer a media text corresponds to the current and dominant action-guiding themes of its audience, the more relevant it becomes. These themes can be regarded as the result of the *practical sense* of media reception, depending on the logic of practice, as employed by Bourdieu (1980/1990). In the analysis of text-audience relations, action-guiding themes are thus a key to understanding the appeal of a media text for a particular audience. Media content is in fact often consumed in a cross-cultural context and within the logics of proximity, but also outside those logics – they are meaningful because they have practical meaning within their audiences' lifeworlds. The lifeworld concept thus allows the consideration of the individual within the particular time-space stratification encompassing factors such as cultural practices, age, gender, or education, but also the viewer at the intersectionality of the individual and their lifeworld. The reason why audiences around the globe watch Danish television drama series may be that they feel culturally close to them, but it is often because they perceive the content as relevant to their current lifeworlds.

Danish television drama series offer their audiences rich layers of connection across cultural and national boundaries. Either accidentally or deliberately, these series hit a *Zeitgeist* nerve by offering multi-layered textual universes that emphasise a specific place and society while presenting widely relatable themes such as the interconnect-edness of media and politics, women's empowerment, and the struggle and tension between career and family. The specific way in which the society is depicted makes these texts more authentic to audiences – regardless of where they are from – and supports the engagement of these audiences with topics of *practical relevance* at the specific time of their occurrence.

Note

1. The channel and years of broadcasting for the series in question are referenced at the first mention of a television series.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all research collaborators in the project for allowing me to collate all interview material and use them for the purpose of this chapter.

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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].

Carlsbergfondet (Carlsberg Foundation) [grant number CF15-0168].

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