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Danish TV drama: Behind the unexpected popularity

Editorial

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Following the recent and entirely unprecedented boom in global exports, Danish TV drama has become an unexpected ‘darling’ of the international television industry and enjoyed widespread acclaim from international critics and audiences alike. Up until the late-2000s, Danish TV series were by and large only sold to Germany and other Nordic countries. However, after 2010, Danish TV series produced especially by the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, DR, have been exported on a truly global scale. Denmark’s transition towards becoming an international player is not only unprecedented and surprising, but it has also been an extremely swift one that was initially provoked by the BBC’s decision to broadcast the first season of *Forbrydelsen* (*The Killing*, 2007-2012) in January 2011 on BBC4 (Jensen, Nielsen and Waade, 2016). After this critical ‘shop window’ exposure, and during the course of only five years, Denmark went from being a relatively insignificant exporter of audio-visual content to punching markedly above its weight in the international market for audio-visual television drama.

With its small population and strong public service broadcasting tradition that has focused on the needs of domestic Danish audiences and issues of national interest and concern due to its political remit, the near global success of Denmark’s television industry over the last five years is not only unprecedented and swift, it is also impressive and interesting from a media scholarly perspective. Previous work on transnational audio-visual distribution and reception has repeatedly shown that non-Anglophone audio-visual content rarely exports outside its geo-linguistic region due

to the perception that audiences in other regions would be far too culturally and linguistically removed (McFadyen et al., 2000; Sinclair, 2009; Straubhaar, 2007; Pertierra and Turner, 2013). As such, a public broadcaster from a relatively small nation lying at the Northern periphery of Europe with a language spoken by only 5.6 million people has created what we could indeed term a *peripheral* counter-flow (Jensen, 2016) in many senses. Firstly, it is peripheral in a geographic sense; Denmark is by all intents and purposes on the geographic periphery of, if not the entire world, then at least the Global North. Secondly, Danish is also far from being a world language, such as Arabic, French, English, Mandarin, Spanish, Portuguese or another dominant lingua franca used by people around the world. Traditionally, the presence of dominant languages in audio-visual content has been an important factor for global export. Thirdly, the counter-flow originates from a market dominated by the public broadcasting sector. This also challenges existing theories within the field of media economics that emphasise competitive and commercial media market structures as more fertile ground for successful exports (e.g. Olson, 1999; Doyle, 2013). Finally, the peripheral counter-flow is also very much creative in its nature. The Danish TV series – together with other Nordic dramas under the popular label of Nordic noir – seem to have created an ideas-based counter-flow, impacting on the production, themes, narrative characteristics and aesthetics of series originating elsewhere (Creeber, 2015). As such, the recent success of Danish drama series does, if not defy, then at least tentatively challenge established theories on the transnational content flows of television that by and large have relied on an interplay of geographical, cultural and language explanations that account for why audio-visual content flows in the way it does. It calls on us as scholars to find alternative explanations and expand and transform existing theoretical frameworks in the process.

Much has already been written about the reasons for the unlikely success of Danish TV drama. Many scholars have pointed to the intrinsic textual and aesthetic properties of the drama

series themselves such as innovative and demanding plots, double-layered narration, strong female characters and gloomy settings (e.g. Turnbull, 2014; Agger, 2016; Dunleavy, 2016). Other scholars have pointed to particular factors concerning the way Danish TV series are produced and financed (e.g. Redvall, 2013; Jensen, Nielsen and Waade, 2016; Nielsen, 2016) and how the general brand of Nordic noir and its relation to Scandinavian crime literature (e.g. Stougaard-Nielsen; Hansen and Waade, 2017) and film (Hedling 2014) have provided important associations for their international success. Additionally, the popularity of Danish TV drama has benefitted from overarching systemic developments within the media industry. The increased interconnectivity between peripheral markets and between the periphery and the centre caused by digitisation, commercialisation and liberalisation and the resulting exponential growth in channels, platforms and other services providing audio-visual content to more and more niche-oriented audiences may very well mean that there is now a demand for good stories no matter where they are from. These systemic developments have caused audio-visual markets around the world to increasingly resemble each other in the sense that what succeeds in one market is also increasingly likely to succeed in another market.

The ambition of this special issue is to dig further into our understanding of Danish television drama by exploring, questioning and scrutinising it from a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches that use different conceptual tools to think its unexpected international popularity through. Readers are offered a palette of insights into the historical and contemporary influences that texture Danish TV drama in terms of genre, ratings, aesthetics and production processes, as well as insights into the international and transnational reception of the series in territories such as the UK, Australia and Japan.

In the first contribution, ‘Mapping the Times: Past–present Relationships in Historical Danish TV Drama 1995–2015,’ Gunhild Agger provides an inspiring discussion of the dialogues

between the past and the present that emerge in Danish historical TV drama productions by tracing how historical fiction is imbued with indications of the time in which it is produced. Agger draws on a rich pool of conceptual resources that include the work of Paul Ricoeur (1983-85) and Robert Burgoyne (2008) on ‘connectors’ and ‘reenactment’, and Svetlana Boym’s (2001) notions of ‘restorative’ and ‘reflective’ nostalgia. By doing so, the article demonstrates the negotiations and implications of the interplay between history and contemporary issues by using examples from eight series produced between 1995 and 2015.

Anne Marit Waade’s contribution ‘Melancholy in Nordic Noir: Characters, Landscapes, Lights and Music in *The Killing*’ offers us the valuable conceptual resource of melancholy to view Danish TV drama. The article discusses melancholy as an aesthetic emotion, how it has inspired scientists and artists throughout history, and the development of ‘Nordic melancholy’. Using this discussion as background, the article focuses on how melancholy is expressed in the Danish TV drama series, *Forbrydelsen* (2007-2012), while making several connections to other non-Danish productions, such as *Hinterland* (2013-), *Broadchurch* (2013-2017) and *Wallander* (2005-2013; 2008-). The article exemplifies an engagement with new research perspectives on the ‘emotional turn’ and how moments of affect (Nelson, 2016) offer a novel way of assessing the international popularity of Danish TV drama.

In ‘Danish Television Drama Series: A Sunday Evening Phenomenon,’ Hans-Peter Degn and Stinne Gunder Strøm Krogager also provide a historical perspective based on the ratings of Danish drama series with impressive domestic track records, which the authors suggest may have contributed to their international export. DR has succeeded in building a highly successful Sunday evening drama slot that commands an average share of no less than 60 per cent of audiences. By investigating the characteristics of the audiences and drama series in this slot, the authors discuss how the drama series continue to command consistently high ratings – despite the general increase

in channels and general decline in audiences for all programmes – and how this achievement has inspired the second public broadcaster TV 2 to also prioritize drama productions.

In the special issue's fourth contribution, 'Dialogues Between Audience Research and Production: The History of Testing Television Drama for the Danish Broadcasting Corporation,' Eva Novrup Redvall explores another historical, and largely overlooked, perspective on the production of DR's drama series: the way in which audience research has been used as what she terms a 'dialogue-based tool' to create a conversation between the creative production staff and their potential audiences pre-broadcast in an attempt to improve the public broadcaster's output in various ways. For example, it was due to highly critical audience responses to comedy dummies in the 1990s that DR executives decided to invest in producing the high-end drama series that the broadcaster is now so well-known for domestically as well as internationally.

In the fifth contribution, Andrea Esser's 'Form, Platform and the Formation of Transnational Audiences: A Case Study of How Danish TV Drama Series Captured Television Viewers in the UK,' the focus moves away from the domestic context and on to their international reception. Esser convincingly argues that in order to fully understand the unexpected and sizeable success of Danish drama series in Britain, we must look at both the form and platform of the series as well as the kinds of audiences the series attracted. Esser shows how no less than eight interrelated factors, which include textual aspects of innovation, political interventions and educated BBC4 audiences, made it possible for the series to accomplish increasing audience ratings and facilitated a surge in non-Anglophone dramas.

In 'Travelling or not? A Content Analysis Mapping of Danish Television Drama from 2005 to 2014,' Rasmus Helles and Signe Sophus Lai demonstrate the use of a quantitative methodology to question and discern the extent to which systematic differences in the formal characteristics, themes and communicative styles of characters impact the international popularity of Danish TV

drama. Based on carefully constructed frames of coding and clustering, the authors distil the results of a content analysis of the first episode of 32 series. They suggest, as much other work on the reception of Danish TV drama in other countries shows (e.g. Dunleavy, 2016), that the presence of strong female characters is linked to positive export patterns while series with low production values and simple narrative structures are less successful.

In the final contribution, 'The 'Three-leaf Clover': A Methodological Lens to Understand Transnational Audiences,' Pia Majbritt Jensen and Ushma Chauhan Jacobsen embed their discussion of the unexpected international popularity and export of Danish TV drama within the transnational interconnectivities between different groupings of audiences that all impact the distribution, broadcast and viewing of audio-visual content today. The authors explain the need for expanding and reconfiguring the notion of audiences and discuss the opportunities and challenges of using this methodological lens when researching the circulation of Danish TV drama in an eight-country audience study. The article concludes by showing how this circulation is shaped by different historical trajectories and varying intensities of interest found in different parts of the world, and the permeability between transnational audience groupings.

By providing readers with this palette of insights on Danish TV drama that emerge from different approaches taken by the different contributors, we hope that this special issue will also contribute to presenting, highlighting and understanding a number of contemporary issues within current media scholarship generally, namely: the importance of historical trajectories, the value of using well-established concepts like nostalgia and melancholy to view new phenomena, the role of national television production practices and structures, the vicissitudes in audience preferences and choices, and the necessity of engaging with transnationalism in the global television industry.

Finally, we would like to extend our sincere appreciation to all the contributors and reviewers for their involvement, time and expertise and to everybody involved in *Critical Studies in Television*, and especially the tireless efforts made by the editor, Janet McCabe.

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