

## A Theory of Mediated Cultural Encounters

Europeans, and indeed humans in general, have always moved across borders and thus encountered European others. Moves could be temporary, as a consequence of hunting, trade or war, but moves could also be more permanent as part of settling in a new part of Europe. A recent discovery by Danish archaeologists showed that the Egtved girl, found in a Danish grave from the Bronze Age (1370 BC) and considered an iconic Dane, was in fact a migrant from Southern Germany. Genetic technology is now making it possible on a larger scale to determine how all Europeans have ancestors and genes from many different places. Nations are clearly not made up of people with a very homogeneous background, we seem to fit the modern slogan of EU very well: ‘unity in diversity’. Genetically, we are a mix but we have much in common, yet the mix of genes and cultures has also resulted in variations.

In line with that, various forms of historical evidence show import and influence from many parts of Europe but also from Egypt and other more distant places. Europe’s historical past is a strong reflection of the fact that globalization, and thus all forms of social and cultural encounters, has always been an integral part of our way of living. The dynamic between the local, the national, the regional and the global is vital for people, societies and cultures (Held et al. 1999: 15f). Ancient Europe and modern Europe are, however, very different when it comes to the intensity, speed and forms of cultural encounters taking place. We can physically move around much faster, and with the rise of modern media it has become increasingly easy to experience mediated encounters.

Literature, news, film or TV programmes can move easily cross borders, especially considering the proliferation of digital media and platforms.

All Europeans are born in a specific place, in a local community and, in most instances, also in a particular nation state. Growing up in this specific setting influences our identity strongly. We are formed by family, by social, educational and cultural institutions, and by social networks. We are also influenced by mediated information and fictional or factual stories about reality. Humans are storytelling beings; narrative is a fundamental part of our social imagination (Gottschall 2012; Bruner 2002; Turner 1996) and the way we understand ourselves and our closer or more distant others. The cognitive evolutionary psychologist Michael Tomasello (1999) has even defined our highly developed ability to read other people's minds and intentions and develop a social imagination as being the essence of what distinguishes humans from other primates. Being able to form a social imagination is a precondition for our collective life—within local and national cultures and across borders. In Jerome Bruner's interpretation of Tomasello, mediated narrative forms—from oral traditions to digital cultures—are central for such individual and collective processes:

For it is the conventionalization of narrative that converts individual experience into collective coin, which can be circulated, as it were, on a base wider than a merely interpersonal one. Being able to read another's mind need depend no longer on sharing some narrow ecological or interpersonal niche but, rather on a common fund of myth, folktale, "common sense" (Bruner 2002: 16).

The modern sources of narratives within Europe are, to a large degree, formed by film and television, although books and other print media still play an important role. According to European statistics from the EU in 2014 ([www.statistica.com](http://www.statistica.com)), the average TV viewing time in the EU is around 2 hours and 20 minutes, and more than 80% of all Europeans watch TV every day. Watching television fiction is an important part of this fascination with TV, but other forms of entertainment and sports are also popular. For instance, if we look at European events such as the Eurovision Song Contest, Champions League or the European Championships in football and handball there is no doubt that such major events represent a transnational European narrative of some kind. They play on cultural stereotypes and symbols, and they are part of a

narrative building on mediated forms of cultural encounter between European national cultures that feed off differences. But by using such a common framework and set of rules in a game based on difference, on friendly combat, they utilize both difference and sameness. We are Europeans and we play by the same rules; we may be different, but we interact and follow the same structures and procedures in a creative way. Maybe such mediated cultural encounters in sports and entertainment—and other intensive media events nationally and transnationally—create the closest we get to something like an imagined, European community, despite the differences and the diversity of European cultures.

The concept of an ‘imagined community’ is Benedict Anderson’s famous definition of a national, collective identity (Anderson 1983). Nations are, of course, much more than just imagined, in the sense that they have physical and legal borders, institutional frameworks and distribute rights to members accepted as citizens. As individuals living in specific national communities, we may have different backgrounds and even speak different languages, but it is Anderson’s theory that imagination, shared stories, symbols, memory and history are part of the cultural cement that holds narratives of identity together. So, nations and also transnational spaces are not just dominated by political, social and economic processes, they are to a very large degree suffused with symbolic, cultural, cognitive and emotional processes. As EU members, we are by birth both national citizens—maybe with a double citizenship, which is allowed in certain countries—and European citizens, with a long list of special rights. A European citizenship is a legal fact, but Eurobarometer data year by year show that we Europeans, despite decades of European integration, feel mostly national ([http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm)). The number of people that also feel European, or even mostly European, is, however, also rising. Social contacts in general and mediated cultural encounters are important in this development. The degree to which we are confronted not just with national but also transnational stories plays an important role in how we perceive and regard each other as Europeans.

## IDENTITY AND THE POWER OF NARRATIVES

There is empirical evidence and theoretical backing for two facts that could, in the first instance, seem contradictory: television audiences around Europe tend to prefer their own national drama production

above everything else, but US and UK drama forms are also extremely popular all over Europe and in many other parts of the world. Joseph Straubhaar has called this the ‘cultural proximity’ principle (Straubhaar 1991, 2007), meaning that we tend to prefer products that speak into and from the social and cultural context with which we are directly familiar. This theory of cultural consumption is in line with theories of social cognition (see, for instance, Fiske and Taylor 1991; or Zerubavel 1997) and broader theories of social perception and the role of stereotypes (e.g. Jussim 2012). We frame experience in group terms, based on circles of closeness and common understanding from family, neighbourhood and region up to nation.

But if this is the case, and can explain the strong preference for local, national products, how do we then explain the huge, almost universal popularity for decades of US–UK cultural products? A series of empirical and theoretical studies since 2004 have dealt with the global, transnational dominance of US–UK formats (Chalaby 2009) but also pointed out that things are changing. What used to be seen as monolithic dominance is in fact much more complex. Michele Hilmes (2012) has coined the term ‘network nations’ to point to the rise of transnational networks of production, regionally and globally. Elke Weissmann has gone even deeper into the structures of contemporary transnational drama production, specifically what she calls the special relations and mutual influences between the USA and UK (2012). Bielby and Harrington (2008) and Steemers (2004) have also studied how agents in production, buying and distribution inside Europe are influenced by certain cultural values and stereotypes. The message behind these theories and studies of transnational cultural flows are that cultural encounters matter: US–UK drama has become a closer encounter for European audiences after decades of being exposed to rather large quantities of such products. Products from other parts of Europe are often not distributed outside the nation of origin or, at best, mostly just to a region geographically and culturally close to the producing nation—as is, for instance, the case with Scandinavian television drama.

But social cognition theory also tells us that behind group and individual preferences we do find quite substantial universal commonalities. Cultural and social stereotypes about others are a natural short-hand way of framing other Europeans. However, focus group studies or surveys of film and television drama show that when confronted with products from other European countries we also develop a broader and different

understanding of our European others. Cultural encounters and, in this case, TV drama are therefore part of a wider theory of social and cultural categorization that can make us understand European integration better.

What we have seen recently is a rise in transnational, European TV drama, a development that points to deeper structural changes in the European media landscape. This development and the fact that European TV drama travels better than before indicates that there are universal dimensions and commonalities behind what often seem to be strong national, cultural identities. So, while audiences still prefer their national TV series above everything else, we have to acknowledge that US–UK TV series have always been extremely popular as well, the second-best choice so to speak, and of course more prominently on offer across all European countries than the national series. The new tendency of a larger variety of European series that travel within Europe is, although still a niche phenomenon, a sign that our national, cultural preferences are not necessarily a permanent state of affairs. Local-national preference does not exclude broader cultural encounters with other European TV drama.

Yet, how do we explain the fact that we like our own national stories best, and why is it that we can also develop a strong affiliation to non-national stories to which we have been exposed? Anderson clearly indicates that imagined communities and narratives based on national cultures are all but homogeneous; in fact, they often thrive on contradictions and conflicts that challenge an established consensus (Anderson 1983: 215f). This view is strongly supported by Jerome Bruner, who takes the discussion to a more general level. For Bruner, all narratives are in fact guided by a dialectic between self-identity forming shaped by our close culture, and by conflicts and other narrative strands within this culture or between this culture and others (Bruner 2002: 87). Narratives have one dimension of domestication, coherence and ordinariness, and another dimension of breaking with such norms. Even within a national narrative, “culture is not in one piece, and neither are its stock stories. Its vitality lies in its dialectic, in its need to come to terms with contending views, clashing narratives” (Bruner 2002: 91).

The intensity of globalization and migration in Europe since the EU’s formation in 1957 of course contributes to this complexity of national cultures, and, if nothing else, this development certainly challenges more uniform and traditional notions of national culture. Mediated cultural encounters are not just a reflection of transnational, cultural encounters;

they are also the result of a more global, multicultural change within established national cultures. In most European countries, the mixture of multicultural identities is shifting as a result of migration, people moving across borders within the European Union, and the integration of people with roots in, for instance, the former European colonies. These changes clearly have implications for how Europeans see themselves and challenge the traditionally more monocultural notion of Europe. The changes also influence the stories and themes appearing in film and television across the continent. Mediated cultural encounters are gradually developing into more global stories, stories concerning us and European others or about the multicultural reality of the societies we live in (Bondebjerg 2014; Appadurai 1996).

In a general sense, narrative is not just the result of a complex, creative act, an expanded form of fiction; it is also a constant part of our everyday experience and the way we interpret the world around us. It is an individual act of making meaning, and simultaneously a part of the interaction between our individual life and mentality and our social networks and interactions. We use narrative to understand our daily life. According to Mark Turner (1996), narrative and stories are simply essential for human thought. Sometimes there can be a tendency to see TV drama as primarily entertainment. However, we do in fact need to view such carefully constructed, larger narratives as part of the way we use narrative in everyday life and as reflective of a basic and very fundamental cognitive dimension. The primary elements of narratives are “small stories of events in space” (Turner 1996: 13), but the elements that such everyday stories consist of are related to the large classical dramas and stories, from Shakespeare to modern Nordic noir. We relate much quicker and easier to stories that have a cultural closeness to the kind of society and locality we grew up in and where we perhaps still live. The connection between our own ‘stories’ and the stories told by creative teams within our own local culture is tighter.

Basic story structures are, to a large degree, universal; we can recognize and understand characters, conflicts and narrative structures in most forms of foreign TV drama or in film and novels. However, the actualization of specific structures in a particular cultural setting also makes a difference. Studies of audience reception of national and foreign TV drama clearly indicate this: the closer the link between a specific national audience and the story world, the richer and more nuanced the response (see Chaps. 6 and 7). However, at the same time, many studies show that audiences

can easily understand and interpret foreign TV drama and relate to it by playing on the relation between their own experiences and that of the narrative world on display (Liebes and Katz 1993/1990; Barker and Mathijs 2008, see 35f).

Seen from the perspective of cognitive film and media theory (for instance Barratt 2014; Turner 1996; Gottschall 2012) the ability to construct and understand stories is universal and a part of our evolutionary luggage. But, on top of our cognitive, narrative apparatus, many variations and cultural differences can appear, just as we develop our ability to understand and use stories socially and culturally in a specific context. There is no contradiction between the basic universal understanding and the social and cultural variations. Furthermore, as Turner (1996) and Fauconnier and Turner (2002) have pointed out, ‘blending’ is a central concept if we want to understand how we create social imaginaries. In line with theories of embodied meaning, that is, the fact that cognition, emotion and body interact (Johnson 1987; Lakoff and Johnson 1980), Fauconnier and Turner define blending as the very creative way in which humans can combine elements from familiar worlds with the unfamiliar and use imagination to simulate new forms of meaning and experience (Turner 1996: 83f). They point to three important dimensions and processes constantly in use, often unconsciously, but also more openly reflected: *identity*, understood as a constant process of experiencing sameness and difference on a personal and more general level; *integration*, understood as the dynamic where new elements and concepts and merged with existing ones; and *imagination*, understood as the way in which imaginative structures and processes make us develop and integrate new experiences and knowledge (Fauconnier and Turner 2002: 6). These elements are clearly present in both everyday life and in our reading and experience of mediated stories, no matter whether they build on our primary local-national culture or the more transnational: in all cases, we have to identify, integrate and imagine what we see on the screen.

Fauconnier and Turner’s concept of blending is a general theory of embodied thinking and experience. However, it is also very much a theory that tells us why stories that have a close, cultural proximity elicit an especially rich response in local audiences. This theory also indicates why other stories can be reasonably well understood but often activate different kinds of response. Identity, just like narratives, has a strong universal dimension but an often equally dominant local/national/regional dimension. Reporting on large-scale empirical studies of the geography

of viewing, Barratt (2014) documents that Asian groups of audiences and Western groups of audiences have the same understanding of specific film sequences but also that there are marked differences which seem to reflect cultural and/or evolutionary differences. Some differences between groups of Westerners and Europeans may also apply, but have not yet been identified. The relation between individual, social and cultural group differences and more universal dimensions of mediated cultural encounters are, however, still interesting to investigate.

### TV DRAMA RECEPTION: UNIVERSAL AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

In theories of social cognition, scholars talk about the role of social and cultural categories or schemas in the way that we perceive others. Social cognition is about the manner in which we talk about our experiences and expectations, the kind of assumptions we make of ourselves, other people and the situations we encounter in real life or in mediated encounters (Fiske and Taylor 1991: 97). Such social and cultural schemas can be vague and fuzzy or they can be pretty firm and established, but we always use such schemas—they are a way of quickly understanding what we experience or the communicative situations of which we become part. Although they may take the form of closed stereotypes, they are also important in order to reduce the complexity, which is often part of life and mediated stories.

In his book *The Perception of Others: Integrating Cognition and Culture* (2015), Perry Hinton talks about human cognition as “the predictive brain”. We bring very active social and cultural schemas to social and cultural encounters with other humans or with stories in the media. Our brain is not just a blank cultural slate on which society and culture can imprint. Encounters are the result of a meeting between some universal, cognitive and emotional features and a specific social and cultural context. So, as Hinton indicates, the fact that a number of basic cognitive schemas and capacities are very much universal is not in contrast with the fact that social and cultural factors play a role in our perception and that ‘common knowledge’ arising from the community of an individual can influence experience and behaviour (Hinton 2016). Besides encounters in everyday life, mediated cultural encounters are important because they contribute to the kinds of networks that social and



cultural schemas form and the development of enhanced or new network connections, schemas and memories that arise based on what we already have in our perception.

Cognitive sociology speaks of our social imaginary as the more complex social and cultural schematic systems that we carry as part of our embodied cognition and experience. For the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, in *Modern Social Imaginaries* (2004), the social imaginary is something beyond purely intellectual schemes. It is more embodied because it represents “the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others ... and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Taylor 2004: 23). This is something carried in images, norms, schemas, stories and legends; it is shared by an individual as part of a larger social group. It is a form of collective common understanding, common practices and a “shared sense of legitimacy”. As others, Taylor also points to the nation as the source of a still very powerful narrative, but it is a narrative that contains “supranational loci”, for instance Europe, and it seems clear that national narratives globally have something in common (Taylor 2004: 176).

This idea has something in common with Michael Billig’s observation in *Banal Nationalism* (1995) that nation states and national cultures are typically structured around something both “particular and universal” (Billig 1995: 83). His main point is that even though national cultures and narratives tend to see themselves as unique, as a clear ‘us’ against ‘all others’, the schemas and mechanisms defining national cultures are very much alike, despite those variations that different societies and cultures of course produce. As Billig concludes:

If nationalism involves imagining an international context, or international order, as well as imagining ‘ourselves’ and ‘foreigners’, then ‘we’ can claim ‘ourselves’ to be representing the interest of this international order: ‘we’ in our great particularity, can be imagined to stand for ‘all of us’, for a universal audience of humanity (Billig 1995: 89).

Let us assume that national cultures have a lot in common, despite variations and differences, and that the mind is clearly built on important, embodied categories of cognition and emotion. If this is the case, we can much better understand the kind of mediated cultural encounters going on in Europe with regard to TV drama as a national and transnational

phenomenon. An interesting case, to which we will return (see Chaps. 5 and 9), is the Swedish–Danish crime series *Bron/The Bridge* (2011–). Scandinavian societies such as Sweden and Denmark have a lot in common as welfare states. They can understand each other’s languages, and have a common and sometimes violent history together, but they still have strong intercultural stereotypes of each other. These stereotypes, or social and cultural schemas, are clearly used as narrative fuel in the series and in the casting of the main characters.

The creative process of making the series was in itself a form of cultural encounter. One of the Danish co-directors, Charlotte Sieling, has expressed this in a paradoxical way: “we worked actively with the differences, which Danes and Swedes imagine exist between them, but we have done so to find ... universal similarities” (Brask Rasmussen 2011). She points to the use of an urban space that is alike in both Sweden and Denmark, although with specific variations. Interestingly, the Danish main writer of the series, Nikolaj Scherfig, also underlines this. He talks about creating a series where the authentic dimension was secured by truthfully depicting the social, cultural and national differences, but at the same time creating a transnational story. The concept of a border, he says, has both a particular form and a universal dimension: “There are cultural borders everywhere, and the way we relate to people on the other side of the border is based on some specific local/national differences, but the way we relate is pretty universal, and people everywhere can read their own situation into it” (Bondebjerg 2015). The proof of this dialectic between local/national and universal is perhaps that the series has been remade almost identically but in different border locations: a US version on the border between the United States and Mexico, and a British–French version around the tunnel between the two countries.

What modern cognitive sociology tells us about social and cultural schemas and encounters has direct influence on the study of reception of TV drama as part of such encounters, and the forming of our social imaginaries, or, as the cognitive sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel calls it, “social mindscapes” (Zerubavel 1997). Zerubavel puts forward a “sociology of the mind”, where he wants to balance the individual, sociological and more universal aspects of our mind and our cognition (see Fig. 2.1). Besides focusing on the universal commonalities of cognition, Zerubavel stresses that cognition is also a social and cultural process. He talks about cognitive socialization and of the existence of cognitive

Cognitive individualism	Cognitive Sociology	Cognitive Universalism
Thinking as individuals	Thinking as members of thought communities	Thinking as human beings
Subjectivity Personal experience	Intersubjectivity Conventional cognitive traditions	Objectivity Natural or logical inevitability
Personal cognitive ideosyncrasies	Cultural, historical, and subcultural differences	Universal cognitive commonalities

**Fig. 2.1** Scope and agenda for cognitive sociology. Based on Zerubavel 1997: 20

subcultures while pointing out that “as we become socialized and learn to see the world through the mental lenses of particular thought communities, we come to assign to objects the same meaning that they have for others around us ... only then do we actually enter into the social world” (Zerubavel 1997: 15).

The three dimensions of cognitive sociology are not to be understood as completely separate layers in our mind and personality. Everything occurs within an integrated self, an embodied complex of experiences, emotions and memories (Damasio 2012: 10ff), an *autobiographical self* where brain, body and emotions interact with the outside world, creating patterns of experience, emotions, narrative structures and images, giving us the feeling of an identity. What Zerubavel’s three dimensions offer is a sociological model where our subjective and intersubjective world experiences are part of something that all humans have in common.

This may seem a bit abstract, but when you conduct focus groups with different viewer groups on how they experience and relate to particular TV drama series it all becomes quite concrete (see, for instance, Lai and Astrupgaard 2016; Liebes and Katz 1993). When watching television drama, audiences quite clearly react to what they see on the screen with types of responses that mirror Zerubavel’s three dimensions. This means that we gain a clear impression of *subjective cultural screen encounters*, where viewers react to a character or an event by drawing on personal memories or experiences. Here, the mediated cultural encounter touches upon very deep personal emotions and experiences, but they can of course also be enriched by more general experiences with the same phenomenon. In other instances, the reactions and responses to particular TV stories rely much more on the intersubjective dimension of our mind and personality, the place where we react on the basis of group identification and belonging to a community or subculture. We may call

this *collective social and cultural screen encounters*, because reception and reactions are based on shared local, regional, national and transnational patterns of recognition. This can take many different forms, because it is a reception based on identification with characters or story or a negotiation of cultural identity on a higher level.

Such a definition of otherness is not necessarily negative. On the contrary, we often hear reactions from viewers who identify otherness, reflect on how this is different from their own culture and society, and, in the end, see the experience of otherness as something interesting, something to learn from. This is clearly connected with the last dimension of reception, which we may call *universal cognitive, emotional screen encounters*. Since, as already indicated, we can understand and enjoy film and TV from all over the world—some better than others—a large part of our reception and reactions are based on the fact that as human beings we all have the same bodies, brains and emotional systems.

Many of the basic elements connected with narratives are fundamental human forms of interaction and primal emotions. Even if a TV drama from a remote part of the world can seem more strange and difficult to understand because of certain cultural and social differences, we do understand characters, roles, emotions and so forth, and thus, to a certain degree, identify with the characters and understand the story world. Lene Heiselberg works with this deeper emotional dimension, based on tests done in DR's research department (Heiselberg 2016). What her thesis shows is that viewers have immediate emotional responses to narrative sequences and characters, responses they often cannot directly verbalize, because they take place on a very embodied level. However, she also stresses that research into reception needs to combine such neuro-physical methods with other more qualitative approaches to gathering data.

We know from both cognitive sociology and from reception studies that proximity and distance on the social, cultural and generic levels play an important part in mediated cultural encounters (Hinton 2016). Generally, we tend to have less rich and detailed images of distant others with which we do not have a lot of contact or experience. Cultural encounters with people from a close group and culture with which you identify seems easier than with more distant others, but intercultural communication is possible and can develop over time (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 231). Proximity and distance can apply on many levels, for instance spatial, temporal, social or cultural distance (Hinton 2016) or any combinations of these. Clearly, media can play a role here, since

modern media has greatly shrunk the world in virtual terms and brought things closer to us than ever before. Narrative is a natural part of human reasoning and experience and is used in our everyday life. The way we talk about life as roles, stories and as different spaces and stages we play on has a strong similarity with mediated narratives (e.g. Goffmann 1959; Meyrowitz 1985).

For an anthropologist such as Arjun Appadurai (1996) this is an important inroad to understand cultural globalization and mediated cultural encounters. Instead of focusing on the global power game between media empires and big worldwide companies, he addresses the imaginary and cultural dimensions of globalization. His key phrase for the understanding of media narratives as cultural game-changers and global encounters is “scripts for possible lives”:

They are resources for experiments with self-making in all sorts of societies, for all sorts of persons. They allow scripts for possible lives to be imbricated with the glamour of film stars and fantastic film plots and yet also to be tied to the plausibility of news shows, documentaries ... media provide resources for self-imagining as an everyday social project (Appadurai 1996: 3–4).

When Europeans are confronted with stories from other European cultures, and not just US, UK or their own national stories, their social and cultural schemas of these European others are challenged—challenged in the sense that their previously less rich and heavily contextualized understanding of European others gets renewed and imbedded in their mind and body as stories with both a sameness and difference to those already strongly present in their close cultural framework. Simple schematic forms and categories attached to others are thereby enriched and changed.

### TRANSNATIONAL ASPECTS OF MEDIA RECEPTION

One of the first studies to map out and theoretically reflect on transnational reception of TV series was Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz’s *The Export of Meaning: Cross-cultural Readings of Dallas* (1993/1990). The study was based on ten focus groups representing different sub-cultural Jewish communities in Israel (Arabs, Moroccans, Russians and Western immigrants) and American and Japanese communities too.

The focus groups both involved making the members retell an episode of a programme in their own way, and answer questions about the relation between story world and reality, genre and different forms of involvement in the series. One of the major findings of this study was that most of the groups got emotionally and intellectually involved in the series and story. They did so in varied ways that seemed to reflect their own social and cultural background. Liebes and Katz saw a difference in the way in which the different groups retold the core story, a difference between telling it as “a sociological story of family, a psychological story of personality or as an ideological paradigm” (Liebes and Katz 1993: 7). Another interesting element of their findings in relation to narrative was that mutual aid and negotiations in the groups were very clear (1993: 82f) and took the form of interpretation, evaluation and orientation. Like in real life conversation, these groups in fact acted as groups in the understanding and interpretation of the series (1993: 90f). Furthermore, the importance of the relation between fictional story worlds and real life was confirmed as roles and interpretations were often connected to such referential discussions.

The interesting thing about this study is that it confirms how groups with very different social and cultural backgrounds can in fact understand and relate to the same series but also that the mediated cultural encounter taking place reflects different cultural and social schemas. Liebes and Katz concluded that there is a global reach and attraction in a series like *Dallas*, and that, in a way, the series is a very “primordial tale” that asks the most fundamental and mythological questions of a society—in other words, it has a universal potential (Liebes and Katz 1993: 141). However, in its way of telling this primordial tale that we can all relate to and understand, the series is also so American and hyperbolic that it confirms rather than challenges our stereotypes. At least what we see are very different decodings, called “referential” and “critical” (1993: 152). In the first kind of decoding, people tended to discuss the conflicts, norms and characters in a serious manner, often comparing this reading to the group’s own culture and norms. This was the case with some of the groups representing rather traditional societies and norms. Other groups—mostly Western ones—could also adopt a referential position but with a more “ludic keying” (1993: 152), and take a position on the aesthetics of the series. This was clearly the case for those taking a critical view of the series.

The study of the transnational reception of *Dallas* certainly underlines the cultural differences in the reception of a successful global TV series. But the analysis, and the fact that *Dallas* was such a huge worldwide hit, also underlines our ability to understand and use audiovisual stories that are not from within our own culture. Following Zerubavel's already mentioned division of our social and cultural mindscapes (see Fig. 2.1), this means that we have a high percentage of embodied, universal, cognitive and emotional elements in the way we understand and react to others and different situations. Yet we are also individuals and social beings in a specific social and cultural context, something that influences the way in which cultural, social and mediated encounters are played out in our particular form of everyday life. The intensity and frequency with which we are confronted with others and with mediated cultural forms determines the richness of our schemas and categories of others. This is one of the reasons why US media products instil a whole American way of life in our European and national reality. And this is why our own national media culture or proximal regional cultures seem more natural and easy to interpret and understand.

To grasp the importance of various forms of mediated cultural encounters in Europe, from production to reception, it is worth noticing the increase of co-productions and creative collaboration in the European film and TV industry over the past ten to fifteen years (Bondebjerg 2016; Bielby and Harrington 2008) and the fact that European TV drama is starting to replace US broadcast TV series in both the total schedule and prime time slots. This means that audiences across Europe—still primarily a niche audience among the cosmopolitan, educated city populations—are getting a greater dose of European narratives, and that discussions on national and other forms of identity influence public discourse, not least following the success of Nordic noir (Bondebjerg and Redvall 2015). If we look at the big picture, there is still a rather strong US/UK dominance in Europe, and we do see clear patterns of proximity and distance in the way co-productions and distributions take place, the so-called “geo-linguistic regions” (Straubhaar 1991; Sinclair et al. 1996). Regions such as Scandinavia, Southern Europe or Central Europe still show a bigger tendency for collaboration within those regions than across regions (Bondebjerg 2016).

However, as the *Dallas* study shows, it is important not to overestimate the dominance of the proximity schema—the fact that we tend to collaborate and better understand those others that we see

as close to ourselves. This is perhaps best illustrated by looking at some of the results coming out of studies of the reception of highly successful global blockbusters in very different parts of the world. In Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs' *Watching The Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences* (2008), data were collected from more than 20 countries around the world, 14 of them European. They looked for various "modalities of reception", that is, how different audiences attach a kind of reality to a fictional product, the exchange between the imaginary world and the social experience. In other words: the study focused on how the film was evaluated based on both the aesthetic and narrative form and on the values and themes played out, and on how this relates to the experience and everyday life of different national audiences. According to the introduction to the book:

A context of reality and an imagination is invoked along with a set of shared, stock figures, which are borrowed from personal past histories and culturally encountered materials. Stories are always set within a context, which combine the real and the imaginary, the known and the guessed at, the rule-governed and the unknown (Barker et al. 2008: 13).

In his very interesting summary of the findings across nationality, called "the functions of fantasy" (Barker 2008: 150f), Barker finds clear distinctions between, for instance, vernacular and spiritual readings and also the forms of engagement with the story world and the whole context surrounding the *Lord of the Rings* as a cultural phenomenon. But also—to his own surprise—he has to admit that the reception across the twelve countries he looks at can be summarized under 10 headlines, which we will merge into just four main overarching modalities of reception:

- *self-definition*: reception of fiction building on social and psychological reflexivity, who are they, who am I and so forth;
- *experiential qualities*: reception based on and defined by the cognitive-emotional impact of fiction;
- *thematics and social and cultural meaning*: reception based on a reality-oriented negotiation between the film's plot, conflict, characters and story and the context and experience of the viewer;
- *filmic qualities*: reception based on interpretations and evaluations of genre, style, director, actor and so on, the aesthetic modality, so to speak, but also the experience of the film in relation to film and media experience in general.



What this means is that behind the diversities of specific personal reactions, and reactions that reflect national differences or social group differences, there is something universal in the way audiences across the world deal with the film. In Barker's words, it seems like it is experienced as a "form of nonreligious spirituality" of "ethical self-discovery" (Barker 2008: 175). He also stresses that probably the fact that the film is fantasy and set in a fictional faraway place makes it easier to go beyond the personal particular or the very socially specific. However, Barker further reflects on the "seemingly distinct country patterns" of reception by warning against a too simplistic and direct correlation between reception and national culture. He finds it difficult to accept the idea that people are constituted in some simple sense by membership of their national community. On the other hand, he concludes that we have to recognize that in complex ways nations *are important*: "This is most evidently so where nation and language broadly coincide. It means that conversations, debates and flows of ideas are largely ... contained within the country's borders" (Barker 2008: 176).

Through this large-scale study of global reception across many nationalities we also end up in the dialectic between the universal and cultural and the relevance of social diversity. In fact, all types of audience relate to the film in much the same way or through the same basic modalities. The differences are on a particular level, and these differences are of course just as important and interesting. So, difference matters, in the sense that we need to be challenged in our everyday cultural norms and schemas by other types of mediated cultural products. But the basic universal patterns of our embodied mind are what make it possible for us to understand something which is perhaps distant from our normal media diet or cultural understanding. If we want the EU, with its diversity of nations, cultures and languages, to come closer to the everyday life of people living around Europe, one of the most effective tools is having stories from all over Europe. Fictional stories travel much easier and have greater impact than news and politics (see, for instance, Edgerton and Rollins 2001; Groot 2009, 2016; Rosenstone 2006), although both transnational news and policy are of course essential to continued European integration. The fact that the cultural dimension came very late into the European project is one of the reasons why Europe as a space is conceptually rather distant to many ordinary Europeans and the everyday life they live.

## IMAGINED COMMUNITIES: GROUP AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES

Understanding nations and cultures as imagined communities involves the concepts of group and collective identities. But what exactly is a collective identity, how stable and coherent is it, and which processes influence the construction and change of such identities? *Emotional dimensions* of national or other group identities are easy to see in, for instance, the European Championship of football, where fans ritually, symbolically and often very loudly support their national team. But equally strong emotional group bonds may exist on a more local level, where football clubs have huge groups of fans. However, in the world of today, such teams consist of players from many parts of the world and fan groups can in fact be both very local-regional and very transnational. There is also clearly a set of *actions and forms of social network* connected to such national or local versions of group identity. To be part of this collective culture of football means doing different things together and thus actively sustaining and developing the feeling of belonging to the particular community. Even in the case of football culture, there is also some kind of *cognitive framework* in the understanding of what the basics of football culture is all about.

It would of course be too easy to take football culture and its attendant group and collective identities as a model for other forms of imagined communities and collective identities. But even though our relation to national film and television may not lead to the exact same strong emotional reactions, in such social actions and cognitive frameworks there is a strong similarity. We have robust empirical evidence from all over Europe of the popularity of national film and TV drama. Focus groups and other types of reception data (see Chaps. 5 and 6) furthermore tell us how the emotional involvement in such media products and the cognitive interaction between the story world and the viewers' everyday reality is more intense and direct than with foreign TV drama. In both sports and drama reception, there is a feeling of 'them' and 'us' at some level, both cognitively and emotionally. As Hans-Jörg Trenz has pointed out in his book *Narrating European Society* (2016: 145), we also find football-like emotions and national stereotypes in much of the national tabloid press in Europe. Here, the narrative is 'us' versus 'Brussels bureaucrats', 'us the people' and 'us ordinary people' against 'the technocratic elite' or, in many cases, 'us' versus 'the Germans or the Greeks'.

So, when it comes to broader cultural and social categories of a collective nature, the framework and narrative can have deep—if not always explicit and accepted—forms of rather atavistic sentiments. As already pointed out, stereotypes and cognitive and emotional dimensions of who we are naturally involve a certain element of distance to others. We are brought up in a particular culture and the way we identify with and are immersed in this culture forms our emotional, cognitive and social framework (Hinton 2016: 146). Education and media also play an important role here. Yet, in our modern, European, globalized societies it would be wrong to assume that national cultures are homogeneous and closed—in fact, they have never been. So, being exposed to media content within our national societies from other parts of Europe and travelling, working and getting education abroad can change our established collective identity. Many sociologists and political scientists studying Europeanization have pointed out that this clearly involves a more *cosmopolitan dimension* on top of other national identities (Beck 2006; Delanty and Rumford 2005; Trenz 2016).

In their book *Collective Memory and European Identity: The Effects of Integration and Enlargement*, Klaus Eder and Wilfried Spohn (2005) have studied the relationship between European integration and collective and national identities and memories. In his introduction, Spohn (2005: 3) makes an important distinction between what he calls *a European integrational identity* (the political dimension of identity) and *a European civilizational identity* (a broader social and cultural dimension of identity). The idea is that the more political dimensions of a European identity are probably still rather weak, compared to the identification with our own national society. Even though we are not directly hostile to Europe and the EU (although some are), it is definitely not as close to us as our national democracy. Products of European culture in the broadest sense are, on the other hand, much more widely available to us in our national context and across borders, such as European history and heritage, literature, the arts, film and television, food, products and so on. In many ways, perhaps rather unnoticed by national citizens, Europe is already a big part of our everyday life and culture. Spohn (2005: 2) also points to three likely scenarios for a European identity—an identity that somehow combines the political and cultural dimensions and therefore also makes mediated cultural encounters rather central. Firstly, we could imagine some kind of European collective identity as quite a weak addendum to a continued strong national identity.

Secondly, we could see European identity being stronger, with a deeper integration and thus a European dimension actually reshaping existing national identities. Or, finally, we could see an enduring and highly differentiated mix between national and European collective identities, in fact a Europe of both continued diversity and unity.

The main message in theories of collective identities is that they are much less stable than our individual self, or, to put it in another way: our experience of being an individual self comes before our social and cultural feeling of belonging. As already mentioned, the autobiographical self is the most crucial when we deal with mediated cultural encounters and reception. This part of our self is, in Damasio's words,

the sum of our life experiences, including the experiences of the plans we have made for the future, specific or vague. Autobiographical selves are autobiographies made conscious. They draw on the entire compass of our memorized history, recent as well as remote. The social experiences of which we are part, or wish we were, are included in that history, and so are memories that describe our most refined among our emotional experiences, those that might qualify as spiritual (Damasio 2012: 210).

What have been described as group identities or broader collective identities, and what is seen as a national or any other sort of identity is part of the same autobiographical self in each of us. Wherever the experiences, narratives and memories come from, they enter the same space and interact within us. This is why it is so important that we do not just live in our own little world, in our restricted national community, but are exposed to broader and more diverse forms of cultural and social experience. Trenez (2016) has identified a number of main narratives on Europe in the media, for instance *the triumph narrative* and *the crisis narrative*, and the anti-narrative or *resistance narrative*. But perhaps one of his most interesting observations is the need for a *narrative of banal Europeanization*, a narrative based on *European culture as an everyday life culture* (Trenz 2016: 59f). Instead of the grand political, cultural and ideological narratives, this type of narrative deals with how Europe is present in our everyday lives in all the different nations and regions. The EU has in fact already left a deep mark on our everyday life, whether we notice it or not, and whether we like it or not. It is not an abstract remote entity, it is here among us all the time in larger structural aspects and in details. Yet, partly because of the higher intensity of the local, regional and national forms

of experience and narrative in our everyday life, the transnational is often not fully noticed. As already indicated, this is precisely where mediated cultural encounters come in. The reception of European drama in different national cultures shows that such narratives often raise an awareness of people's own national culture and forms of everyday life along with the reality of others represented in a foreign drama.

Mediated European cultural encounters are therefore very important as inputs into our autobiographical self, which is most often dominated by the local and national. As Eder (2005: 210) has remarked, we already live in global and transnational societies and cultures, and stories that widen our memory and understanding of this will break the dominance of us "Europeans still living in the narrative world of the nation ... the world they have internalized as the world of their collective belonging". This means that an exchange of stories between us, a situation in which Europeans tell each other stories of their past and present can become part of a wider transnational construction of identity. Experiencing European stories and thus bringing actual everyday life from around Europe into the different national communities can be seen as "a learning process in terms of narrating each other's past and to this extent creating a common ground in which to see each other as particular others" (Eder 2005: 213).

## TRANSNATIONAL CULTURAL SCREEN ENCOUNTERS: NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES AND FORMS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

European TV drama is on the rise on European screens as a whole, although products from the smaller European nations still only reach niche audiences; it is still the UK and the big European nations that dominate (Bondebjerg 2016). But the Nordic noir phenomenon, the breakthrough of Danish and Swedish TV drama in the UK, and following that the rest of Europe, is a sign of a cultural counterflow. The fact that TV series such as *Wallander*, *Borgen*, *The Bridge* and *The Killing* were seen by around one million viewers on BBC Four does not in itself constitute a popular breakthrough for European TV drama in the UK. Rather, it is the kind of debate and reaction this created, and the following success in most other territories in Europe and elsewhere, that is interesting. In this book, we deal with European case studies of historical drama, contemporary drama and crime drama,

while results from focus groups and studies of reactions on social media and in the more professional press show that reception of non-national European series in other countries becomes part of a negotiation of imagined, collective identities. This sort of encounter also leads to increased transnational creativity in the form of more import, distribution, co-production and creative collaboration.

In the case of both *The Killing* and *Borgen* in the UK, there were several very dominant themes in its reception, one of them being the negotiation of transnationality and nationality (Bondebjerg and Redvall 2015). These negotiations took the form of a discussion of ‘Danishness’ as opposed to ‘Britishness’, a debate that intensified a reflexive approach to differences and similarities between those two national cultures and their relation to the European. This particular mediated cultural encounter was tied to a discussion of deeper social issues, such as the specific Scandinavian welfare state model and the English model. But they were also linked to more ‘banal’ dimensions of nationality and everyday life. In connection with *The Killing*, it was Sarah Lund, the female main character, her way of dressing, acting and her lifestyle in general, which signalled a clear fascination with a different way of life. Yet it was also the noir style of the series, the dark Nordic quality of the cityscape and the ruthless realism that fascinated and spurred a debate on the national crime tradition. In the case of *Borgen*, it was again the female character and her lifestyle and behaviour that fascinated UK viewers. In the UK, prime ministers do not cycle to work, and you rarely have such detailed and intimate views into a politician’s private life as in this series. The UK reception of these two series illustrates the potential impact of telling each other stories based on the everyday life of other nations. Such drama series lead to a negotiation of the national realities of the producing country and the receiving country. They create a deeper dynamic between different nationalities and the sum of European identities, and they foster a feeling of unity in diversity in the way we live our lives and organize our societies.

As discussed, UK productions take up a large space in the consumption of TV drama across Europe, not least in the genres of crime drama and historical drama. This is clearly reflected in how audiences and critics react: in general, we have richer cultural stereotypes and also a more nuanced cultural understanding of UK TV drama. UK drama is a long way from finding the audience ratings, popularity and initiating the intensity of public debates that national drama productions enjoy. But,

for instance, a UK series such as *Midsomer Murders* has been a steady success in Denmark for years (average audience share 35%) and is broadly liked and watched, particularly among an older and more provincial audience. In a focus group (see Chap. 5), the everyday world and type of culture represented in this series is, on the one hand, seen as very typical for British culture—a somewhat romantic village culture. For Danish viewers, this gives rise to comparisons between the dark big-city culture in *The Killing* and the small-town culture in both the UK and rural Denmark. Because Danes and other European nationals are so used to UK drama, the specific cultural encounter here seems to include a mixture of proximity and distance. National drama still generates a much more intense and deeper range of reactions on all cognitive and emotional levels, and the social and cultural reading is much more detailed. Still, this single example seems to underline that TV drama has the ability to further and nuance a process of integration of two variations of European everyday life and society.

The same type of integration between national narratives and cultures can be seen in historical drama, where Eder's point about the importance of Europeans telling each other about their national and European past is confirmed. English heritage TV drama (see Leggott and Taddeo 2015; Bondebjerg 2016) has, for a long time, been the dominant form of historical drama on European screens. Thus, UK historical drama has been the most well-known other all over Europe, and the most popular next to national historical drama. The most-viewed historical drama ever in Europe and worldwide is *Downton Abbey* (2010–), broadcast to more than 200 countries and with an estimated world audience of 120 million ([http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/06/arts/television/downton-abbey-reaches-around-the-world.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/06/arts/television/downton-abbey-reaches-around-the-world.html?_r=1)). In a comparative reception study of *Downton Abbey* in Denmark and the UK for the McCETES project (reported in Bondebjerg 2016), one of the main findings was that the theme of nationality is the most prominent reception theme in Denmark, and the lowest in the UK. This is not surprising, as the reception in Denmark largely takes the form of a negotiation and discussion of the series as 'very British' and very directly discusses the difference and similarities between Danish and British history, society and culture (see Chap. 10, p. 275 f).

Transnational cultural encounters are more important than ever between Europeans in a world where globalization has reached a new level. Mediated cultural encounters have a large part to play in this meeting

between humans, cultures and societies. National cultures and our local, regional place in this world will remain very important; they are the part of core of our self and the community to which we primarily define ourselves in relation. Yet, as demonstrated here, all human beings are very alike in our cognition, emotions and our ways of forming social relations. Stories about everyday life from other nations and cultures can alter and develop our understanding of the bigger European and global picture and thus prevent closing of national borders and of our minds. That is what mediated cultural encounters is about—that is, what the McCETES project and this book is about.

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