



Identity, Interculturality, and Language Learning on British Television: A Case Study of International Crime Drama and Its Reception in the UK

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ABSTRACT

A recent article in the *Evening Standard* posed the question, “Is it a coincidence that just as governments are seeking to close their borders, television is opening them? [...] With the boom in streaming services, a single TV drama can cross borders like never before. Yet still, telling local stories appears to be the secret to international appeal”. Indeed, in post-Brexit Britain, television viewers have access to an ever-increasing number of foreign-language programmes. But what is the relationship between the local, national, and transnational presented on screen? And how do these dramas influence viewers’ perceptions of the countries, nationalities, and languages depicted? This article addresses these questions by focusing on popular crime dramas from France, Italy, and Germany as case studies, and analysing their reception amongst UK audiences. The programmes taken into consideration here are: *Spiral*, *Mafiosa*, *Inspector Montalbano*, *Maltese: The Mafia Detective*, *Inspector Falke*, *Dark*. All are readily available in the UK through the BBC, Walter Presents, and Netflix. In order to explore how these programmes are received by the UK audience, viewing groups were held in Hull, between September and November 2018. Members of the public were invited to watch examples of the series and discuss the presentation of themes such as national identity and nationhood, and to reflect on the ways in which these programmes challenge or reaffirm preconceived ideas about languages and European cultures. This article presents the findings of these viewing groups, exploring how these programmes promote and challenge national cultural and linguistic stereotypes. The article ultimately sheds light on the extent to which international crime drama can function to encourage language learning and intercultural awareness in the UK in the twenty-first century.

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A recent article in the *Evening Standard* posed the question “Is it a coincidence that just as governments are seeking to close their borders, television is opening them?” (Jones n.pag.). Indeed, in post-Brexit Britain, television viewers have access to an ever-increasing number of foreign-language programmes. Shows like *Spiral* and *Inspector Montalbano* routinely draw large numbers of British television viewers and are part of a boom in programming and services that has made a wide range of options available to audiences through a variety of platforms. Walter Presents, Netflix, Sky, and BBC4 are well-known examples, and the Language Learning with Netflix software extension even arguably has the potential to transform the way the British learn languages (Tapper).

Thanks to this boom, “a single TV drama can cross borders like never before. Yet still, telling local stories appears to be the secret to international appeal” (Jones n.pag.). So what is the relationship between the local, national, and international presented on screen in these programmes? And how do these dramas influence viewers’ perceptions of the countries, nationalities, and languages depicted on screen? Whilst we are viewing our favourite 9 p.m. crime show, for example, what else are we discovering about the country we are seeing and the people we are hearing on screen? Can our viewing even influence our attitudes towards languages and encourage us to embark on learning a new language?

These were the research questions behind the “Watching the Transnational Detectives: Showcasing Identity, Internationalism and Language Learning on British Television” research project run by colleagues in modern languages at the University of Hull in 2018–19. The research was funded by the “Multilingualism: Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies” (MEITS) multidisciplinary project as part of the AHRC’s Open World Research Initiative. The project sought to address some of the above questions by focusing on six television crime dramas from France, Italy, and Germany that have become popular in the UK, and conducting viewer-reception focus groups to explore precisely how these programmes are received by UK audiences. The programmes were: *Spiral*, *Mafiosa*, *Inspector Montalbano*, *Maltese: The Mafia Detective*, *Inspector Falke*, and *Dark*. In choosing the exemplar programmes, we were careful to choose series that are readily available to viewers in the UK via the BBC, the online streaming service Netflix, and the video-on-demand service Walter Presents, and have attracted large numbers of viewers.¹

The “Watching the Transnational Detectives” project sought to interrogate the relationship between identity and culture through language in the broader context of a globalising Europe, by examining how television programmes specifically have the potential to foster positive attitudes towards and interest in multilingualism, interculturality, and language learning. The aim was to enhance our understanding of how the cultural representation of multilingualism in European contexts can influence and promote language learning. The focus on television as a means of cultural representation coupled with the analysis of viewer responses to this cultural form allowed for the exploration of the relationship between the (potentially) monolingual television viewer and the multilingual society that these programmes collectively reveal.

In order to establish how and to what extent such programmes can encourage interculturality and promote multilingualism for audiences in twenty-first-century Britain, we organised a series of public screenings of these crime dramas, held in Hull between September and November 2018. Participants were invited to watch just one episode from a series and then discuss what had struck them during their viewing. This article presents the findings of these discussions, shedding light on a segment of the UK audience’s responses to the six aforementioned series. After providing contextualising information about the presence of international television drama in the UK today, the six crime series selected as case studies, and research methodology and challenges, the article presents aspects of the UK audience’s

¹ A note on terminology: the project team conceived of the original research project as a study of British television in a post-Brexit context, focusing specifically on audience reception in a Northern English city as a case study. In using term ‘British’ in the project title, we sought to evoke the wider media discourse around ‘British vs. international’ that followed the Brexit referendum result of 2016. However, scholarship on television reception tends to speak not of British but of UK audiences, thereby acknowledging that ‘British’ television platforms and services like the BBC, Netflix, and Walter Presents are available in both Great Britain and Northern Ireland. To situate better the article within the field, I have therefore adopted the convention of speaking of UK viewers and reception in a UK context. This does not mean that I see reception as homogenous across the UK but the analysis of reception from different areas of the country is outside the scope of the present study.

reception of these six exemplar programmes, as demonstrated by our sample viewing group. Our participants' comments reveal the extent to which these programmes are perceived as nationally specific, and thus as vehicles for the showcasing of ideas of national identity and nationhood. Our discussions also highlighted how UK viewers think these programmes can challenge or reaffirm their preconceived ideas about the languages and cultures in question, by revealing how engrained and attractive national cultural and linguistic stereotypes can be. We began this research project aiming to shed light on whether international television crime dramas such as these might encourage language learning and intercultural awareness in the UK post-Brexit: after reporting on the discussions we had with viewers, the article concludes with some observations on this potential of the international television crime drama series in the UK.

As far as terminology is concerned, like Walter Iuzzolino of *Walter Presents*, when working with our focus groups, we chose to describe these television crime dramas as being “international” in preference to “foreign”. References to foreignness emphasise difference and otherness, and highlight how these series apparently do not belong to, and are even distant from, the social and cultural experience of the UK. The notion of “international” instead marks these series as belonging to broader global trends in television storytelling and production to which UK programming also belongs, and highlights the similarities between the experiences that these series narrate and the UK context. The use of the term “transnational” in our description of the project points to the methodological framework we employed to analyse these international series. After all, as Iuzzolino hopes, these series contribute “in a small way [...] to that traffic of ideas of openness and sort of liberal open-minded cultural exchange, which, I think, is at the root of anything of any value in life” (qtd. in McCausland and Hameed). Traffic of ideas of openness and cultural exchange are at the heart of the transnational, which, as a framework, begins to shed light on the positive experience that watching international television series can constitute. As we will see, the transnational as the meeting point of national specificities through the viewing of international series in the UK national context reveals much about how these shows appeal to audiences, how recognisability is key to negotiating the intercultural encounter that the shows offer, how language plays a crucial role in shaping the international “aesthetic” of these series, and how audiences ultimately receive and react to these dramas. This article therefore uses the term “international” to describe these television series more broadly, and “transnational” to indicate the methodological framework through which we analyse them.

INTERNATIONAL TELEVISION CRIME DRAMAS IN THE UK

International television series have become increasingly popular and present in the UK since 2010. Since the initial, sporadic broadcasts of *Spiral*, *Inspector Montalbano*, and *Wallander* on BBC4 that began in 2006, the availability of international television dramas has gone from strength to strength across multiple platforms. The popularity and media praise for the Scandi noir series *The Killing*, *Borgen*, and *The Bridge* certainly played a part in this explosion (Esser 422). But there have also been changes in the television distribution landscape that have facilitated the opening up of the UK to international television products.

In her analysis of the popularity of Danish television series in the UK since 2011, Esser points out that

historically, UK audiences [...] have much domestic programming to choose from, and where TV fiction is imported, it overwhelmingly comes from America [...] In contrast, the average share of European imports was less than 1%. Even European co-productions, which had higher production budgets but were ill-reputed as “Eurotrash” and “Europudding”, accounted for no more than half a percent [...] In short, until the present decade, UK viewers were strangers to TV fiction from Europe, let alone Denmark. (412–13)

Since 2010, significant changes have resulted in the increased availability and broadcasting of international television series. Steemers explains that in the past decade, “UK content is increasingly less central to the success of UK distributors [and] there has been a clear shift, with distributors becoming more open to non-UK programming because of a more competitive

market in acquisitions”, not least because of a shortage of first-run UK dramas (742). As a result, there has been an increased “use of overseas content, including subtitled drama from Denmark, Sweden, and other non-English speaking territories” (Steemers 742). This is particularly the case for BBC4, the “UK’s mixed-genre television channel for all adults offering an ambitious range of innovative, high quality output that is intellectually and culturally enriching” (Esser 418).

Since its launch in 2002, BBC4 has provided a home for “programmes that reflect the key public service aims of education and provision of access to arts, culture and knowledge for the general public” (Andrews 412). The channel is well-known for its home-grown dramas alongside acquisitions of world cinema, European crime dramas, and arts documentaries (Andrews 412). Mazdon tracks the history of these acquisitions in crime drama specifically, and argues that, thanks to the channel’s aim to provide “an ambitious range of innovative, high quality programming that is intellectually and culturally enriching, taking an expert and in-depth approach to a wide range of subjects” (“The BBC’s Services in the UK”), “the scheduling of *Spiral* and its European counterparts [sic] on BBC4 thus immediately positioned the dramas as ‘serious’ ‘quality’ television distinct from the more populist offerings of BBC1” (Mazdon 113). This conceptualisation of international drama series as constituting quality television is important to understanding the recent, rapid increase in their availability in the UK. Mazdon points out that

the presence of these subtitled European productions on domestic television screens is surprising given longstanding British attitudes towards “foreign” television. As Mark Lawson noted, one of the most notable changes in television in recent times has been the shift in our attitude to non-English language programming. Discussing earlier attitudes to foreign television Lawson remarks, “with very rare exceptions such as *Das Boot*, the rule then was simple: if we didn’t make it, we made fun of it”. (112)

She argues that the apparent shift in attitude occurred thanks to the praise that international series have received in the UK media and the way in which they have been compared to the very best of Anglophone drama and therefore constitute quality television. Given the free-to-view nature of BBC4 for UK television licence holders, the platform provides large numbers of viewers with access to international television dramas. As a result, for this research project, we were careful to choose two series that are accessible through BBC4, in order to ensure that participants at our viewing could continue to watch them, should they wish to do so.

The notion of international television drama as constituting quality television is also intrinsic to the philosophy behind the video-on-demand service Walter Presents. Launched in 2016, the platform specialises in subtitled foreign-language drama and comedy, and is curated by Walter Iuzzolino, co-founder of the service with Jo McGrath and Jason Thorp. The platform clearly benefits from industry shifts in distributing non-UK programming, as it sources international series and brings them to a UK audience via a distribution partnership with Channel 4 and Global Series Network. The programmes are selected for inclusion on the basis of three criteria: they must be huge hits in their country of origin; they must be critically acclaimed or award-winning nationally and internationally; and they must be examples of “premium stuff, just as beautiful as the very best English and American drama you’re used to but a lot more varied” (Iuzzolino, “Meet Walter” n.pag.). The local is part of the core appeal of these series: Longden has argued that, when looking at television programmes in the global context, we can see that

local and national products and concerns still exist, and local culture still thrives in TV. Local culture, as provided for by local/national TV has become attractive to the global TV market and Walter Presents recognises that. Walter Presents draws attention to the local/national, and viewers are promised and provided with an “authentic” local experience and not one created/branded originally for a global audience. (9)

Part of the attraction of these shows is thus their potential exoticism, which is often underlined by Iuzzolino in the introductions he gives to each series on the platform in the guise of curator. This role imbues Iuzzolino with the authority to label the shows he chooses as being of high quality. Moreover, as Longden (12–13) points out, Iuzzolino’s professional background as a television producer renders him a professional gatekeeper of television culture and a trusted and experienced voice who can designate a programme of sufficient quality that it is worth

watching. The popularity of the platform is clear: in its first two weeks, the service's eleven titles attracted 1.1 million views on Channel 4's on-demand platform All 4 (McDonald). Significantly, the service is free to access, another important determinant in our choice to screen episodes from three series that are available through Walter Presents, as participants would easily be able to continue to watch the series that we had introduced to them.

The increasing popularity of Netflix as a platform through which UK viewers can access international television drama must also be recognised. The video-on-demand service launched in 2007, moving away from its original business model of DVD rentals delivered by post to viewers' homes. In 2010, this service expanded to include unlimited film and television downloads, signalling what Jenner calls the reinvention of the service "for a new era in film and television distribution" (261). This new era has seen Netflix move away from exhibiting purely film content to streaming television content and then producing and distributing serialised drama. Jenner explains:

most other streaming services are linked to a television branding infrastructure and offer a chance to catch up with missed programmes, but Netflix now offers the first—and for long periods of time only—chance to watch its original dramas. The streaming service thus moves away from its previous business model where it only provided film and TV dramas that had already been shown elsewhere and are often already available on DVD, to being the first in the chain of media exhibition. By turning the familiar chain of first, second and third market distribution on its head, Netflix offers a distinctively different form of media distribution. (261)

This different form of media distribution has also arguably triggered a new form of media consumption in this context: the phenomenon of marathon or binge-watching (Matrix 120). Such consumption patterns can be sustained thanks to what can arguably be seen as the platform's "quantity, not quality" approach to content selection. To begin to quantify this idea, it is helpful to consult some of the unofficial online Netflix catalogues that list what is currently available to watch through the service: according to New on Netflix UK, in January 2021, there were 6,392 available films and television series across all genres available to viewers based in the UK ("Full Catalogue"). Analysis of the content of Netflix USA from August 2020 suggested that 55 per cent of the total Netflix library was then made up of English-language titles (Moore), indicating the quantity of international material available through the platform in English-speaking countries. It was for this reason that we selected one series from this platform to share with our participants, as a way of introducing them also to the potential of accessing more international television through Netflix.

The six series that are our focus here were selected because of their popularity in the UK and their availability to large numbers of viewers, thanks to the three platforms that host them. *Spiral* and *Inspector Montalbano* seemed obvious choices for inclusion, given their presence on British television screens right from the start of the boom in international drama. *Spiral* (original title *Engrenages*, produced by Canal+ 2005–20) is a police procedural and legal drama set in Paris, which follows the lives of Captain, and later Commander, Laure Berthaud and her team of investigators. The show premiered in the UK on BBC4 in 2006, and each subsequent series was broadcast by the channel. The first series proved popular with audiences, attracting approximately 200,000 loyal viewers (Holmwood). Viewing numbers went from strength to strength, with individual episodes regularly achieving audiences of approximately 1 million ("Weekly Top 30"). The success of *Spiral* was also an important factor in the decision to acquire other international programming for BBC4: speaking in 2007, the then "BBC4 controller Janine Hadlow said the show proved there was an appetite for European drama series in the UK. '*Spiral* is the kind of thing BBC4 should be showing,' she added. 'It looks and feels different. It brings you into another world [...] We are also actively looking at other European crime dramas to see if they might work for us'" (Holmwood n.pag.).

Inspector Montalbano was one of those "other European crime dramas", with two episodes initially shown on BBC4 in December 2008. The Italian police procedural (*Il commissario Montalbano*, produced by RAI 1999–) is based on detective novels and short stories by Andrea Camilleri, and follows the professional and personal life of the titular character, Salvo Montalbano, a police inspector in the fictional town of Vigàta, Sicily. BBC4 broadcast the first four series between February and April 2012, and series five to eight between August and

October the same year. The programmes attracted audiences of 600,000–900,000 (“[Weekly Top 30](#)”) and proved a popular addition to the channel’s Saturday night slot, which has become synonymous with subtitled dramas.

From Walter Presents, we selected one programme for each of our countries of focus. This limited the selection of crime dramas available and informed our choice of *Mafiosa*, *Inspector Falke*, and *Maltese: The Mafia Detective*. *Mafiosa* (*Mafiosa, le clan* produced by Canal+ between 2006 and 2014) follows the story of Sandra Paoli, the lawyer of a Mafia clan in Corsica who finds herself at the head of the organisation following the murder of her uncle, the previous boss. The series was launched in the UK on the Walter Presents platform in 2016 and was billed as

an explosive crime thriller set in the wild and enchanting island of Corsica [...] This is *The Godfather* meets *Sex and the City*, a powerful family saga drenched in blood, revenge and corruption [...] Corsica offers a stunning and unusual background to the story: rocky mountains, lush green valleys, glamorous seaside villages—it looks like heaven on earth but it is a living hell. The sheer contrast between the lyrical beauty of the setting and the violence and brutality of the story makes this series utterly irresistible. ([Iuzzolino n.d. n.pag.](#))

Inspector Falke premiered in the UK on Walter Presents in February 2018. The series features the investigations of Chief Inspector Thorsten Falke and, in the first series, Chief Inspector Katharina Lorenz in Hamburg. The original German programmes are part of the well-known and long-running series *Tatort*, which began in 1970. Mattson explains the format of the series, which “is actually a collection of series, as each regional network of the ARD produces a limited number of episodes yearly. Regional productions focus on criminal investigations carried out by particular detectives in large urban centres of the various networks’ domains: Munich, Duisburg, Berlin, Hamburg, Leipzig, or Vienna, for instance” (162). The ARD is a consortium of public-law broadcasting institutions of the Federal Republic of Germany and the fact that *Tatort* episodes are made by these institutions in different regions of Germany is arguably part of the programme’s success, longevity, and appeal, as Göbel-Stolz explains:

Tatort airs on Sunday nights, primetime, on one national station, DasErste, run by the ARD. Although there is only one time slot, 8:15 p.m. on Sunday—much like the US show *CSI* (CBS), which has a Las Vegas, Miami, and New York location, each with their own team and cases—several locations are utilized in *Tatort*. All teams and locations share an airtime, meaning they are rotated from week to week [...] The production structure of *Tatort* thus provides a microcosm of the combination of regional and national, typical of German television. (195)

The first series of *Inspector Falke* that featured on Walter Presents is constituted from the first six *Tatort* episodes that were set in Hamburg and featured Falke, originally broadcast in Germany between April 2013 and October 2015.

Maltese: The Mafia Detective was our selection for an Italian series from Walter Presents. The mini-series (*Maltese—Il romanzo del Commissario* produced by RAI in 2017) is set in 1970s Sicily and follows Inspector Maltese as he returns to his native Trapani for a friend’s wedding and is drawn into a murder investigation that reveals a web of corruption at the heart of the police force. According to Longrigg, the appeal of the series for the UK viewer lies in its gritty and realistic treatment of the Sicilian Mafia, alongside the presentation of Sicily itself:

Maltese shows the mafia in the way most Sicilians experienced it, day to day: people living in fear, under insidious threats of violence, loved ones disappearing without trace, while the judges insisted the mafia doesn’t exist. Like Montalbano, the location of *Maltese* combines gorgeous scenery—an unspoilt seafront, a historic town centre crammed with churches and lovely palazzi, and a maze of narrow streets just perfect for an assassin’s cat and mouse chase—with abandoned developments, empty half-built hospitals and crumbling industrial plants. Director and showrunner Gianluca Maria Tavarelli delivers a feast for the tourist and the crime fan. ([n.pag.](#))

The final series selected was the mystery thriller *Dark* (produced by Netflix 2017–20). The science fiction elements to the show meant that this series was not necessarily an obvious choice of

crime drama. However, when making our selection, we took into account the availability of the programme through Netflix and the fact that the series was in fact the platform's first original series to be entirely authored, shot, and produced in Germany, but made available across the platform's other national catalogues. The first series was broadcast in 2017 and was described as "a classy, knotty, time-travelling whodunnit for TV" and "a sophisticated, grown-up, German-language thriller that revels in its own distinct and foreboding vibe" (Bakare). Moreover, according to Mousoutzanis, the series' appeal is derived from the fact that it "is clearly an exemplary instance of the type of fictions that have been variously described as either 'quality' [...], 'peak', and 'prestige' (when the focus is on production and cultural value) or 'puzzle' [...], 'network' [...], and 'complex' [...] (if attention is paid to the level of complexity of plot, theme and characterisation)" (n.pag.). The mystery element lies in the viewer's need to unravel the complexity of the interlocking and intersecting narratives and multiple character arcs, aspects which made the show popular with undergraduate students of German at Hull. We were keen to see whether our viewing group participants would find the series similarly entertaining, and how they would respond to the programme's potential to showcase national cultural and linguistic specificities, despite its international producer.

ANALYSING AUDIENCE RECEPTION

Our aim in holding viewing groups and inviting the participants to comment on the series being watched was to explore whether these programmes are perceived as nationally specific, whether they showcase ideas of national identity and nationhood for UK viewers, and if they can function to encourage language learning and promote interculturality in the UK post-Brexit context. We therefore sought to ask open discussion questions, to allow our participants the opportunity to comment on aspects of the programmes that were of most interest to them. We also asked the same set of questions at each viewing group, as follows:

- 1) Have you seen an episode of this show before?
- 2) What were your first or second impressions? What struck you most?
- 3) What do you think the programme revealed about France/Italy/Germany and French/Italian/German culture? Did that match your expectations?
- 4) Could this episode have been set anywhere? What is culturally specific to what you have just watched?
- 5) Can you pick out three French/Italian/German words that are new to you (perhaps repeated throughout the programme)? Did you understand their meaning? How? Did you have any previous knowledge of the language to help you?
- 6) How important do you think it is to have the sound on to appreciate what is being said? Would you prefer to watch a dubbed version of the show? Why or why not?
- 7) Does watching the programme make you want to visit the country/location? And learn the language? Why/why not?
- 8) Would you watch the next episode?

We advertised the viewing groups to the local community in Hull but it remained a challenge to recruit viewers. We had average audiences of ten for each screening, but found that the members of the general public who attended tended to have some prior link to the university and an established interest in the language and culture of the programme being screened. Members of the general public from beyond the university sphere with little to no prior knowledge of the three languages involved did not readily attend the focus groups. Before analysing the comments of our viewers, it is important to point out the potential impact on our research findings of the composition of the audiences. In particular, any assessment of comments about the "foreign" aspects of these programmes should be tempered because of our viewers' prior knowledge and experience of the languages and cultures in question. Nevertheless, the discussions provide useful insights into attitudes towards international television programming and its potential to showcase multiculturalism and multilingualism in the UK, arguably thanks to its appeal for audiences already interested in such questions. In particular, our participants' answers to the above questions still shed light on the perceived national and cultural specificity of these series, their use and challenge of stereotypes, and the importance of the foreign language in the viewing of these programmes, as we shall see.

Crime drama is an internationally established television genre that deploys recognisable tropes in terms of plot, characterisation, and *mise-en-scène*. Sue Turnbull points out that,

given the ongoing transnational trade in representations of crime, which began well before the arrival of the television set, it may be important to ask just how, for example, a British television crime drama may differ from an American or Scandinavian crime drama, once we get past the obvious differences in accents and scenery. Are there, for instance, fundamental differences in the structure, content, and/or style of these shows? (7)

Indeed, Richard Klein, the controller of BBC4 between 2008 and 2013, has suggested that the UK audience's already established familiarity with the crime drama format was behind the success of the Danish series *The Killing*: the show "had echoes to shows, [sic] people here already know: *West Wing*, *24 Hours*, [*Inspector*] *Morse*, *Midsomer Murders*. These are all things that we know and are very familiar with. And so we kind of know. We know the language, we know the geography of these shows and the mechanics of them" (qtd. in Esser 423).

Yet in her research into the reception of Danish crime dramas in the UK, Andrea Esser highlights what scholars have identified as the "innovative textual qualities" unique to the Danish series, which UK audiences also identify as being culturally specific to Danish productions and part of their appeal. These qualities include: the use of landscape to underline a character's emotional or mental state; the radical (for television) use of dark colours, dim lighting, and rain to mimic a cinematic aesthetic; the strong female character; and the skilful storytelling that interweaves social and cultural issues with private themes (Esser 414–15). Esser's interviewees picked up on some of these aspects when they described the series' appeal for them, highlighting "the use of colours and landscape" and the 'subtlety' of the music and the way actors look and dress" (423). Such qualities can be seen to constitute the national cultural specificity of these series, as they are not evident to viewers in series from other national cultural contexts. This would suggest that, despite the international presence and circulation of television crime drama, there are cultural specificities embedded in national crime dramas that UK viewers are able to identify. Our viewing group participants demonstrated that this is also the case for the six series under consideration here, even if these specificities are initially identified as being linked to accents and scenery.

Our viewers commented in particular on the locations and the *mise-en-scène* as being markers of national cultural specificity. These aspects were often articulated as being in opposition to the international nature of the plots. For example, the storylines of *Spiral*, *Inspector Falke*, and *Inspector Montalbano* in particular were identified as being more international in nature. Of *Inspector Montalbano*, one participant commented that "the show couldn't be set just anywhere, even if the plot could be set anywhere", highlighting how location and setting establish a sense of national cultural specificity and thus difference from the UK context in particular. The plot becomes a device through which familiarity is created, arguably minimising the difference and otherness that the series apparently foreground on screen in their choice of location and *mise-en-scène*. These aspects then function to codify the representation of reality offered by the series, which must be decoded by the viewer. In his analysis of television, John Fiske explains that

the only way we can perceive and make sense of reality is by the codes of our culture. There may be an objective, empiricist reality out there, but there is no universal, objective way of perceiving and making sense of it. What passes for reality in any culture is the product of that culture's codes, so "reality" is always already encoded, it is never "raw." If this piece of encoded reality is televised, the technical codes and representational conventions of the medium are brought to bear upon it so as to make it (a) transmittable technologically and (b) an appropriate cultural text for its audiences. (4–5)

Television locations and *mise-en-scène* are examples of the embodiment of technical codes that foreground a certain representation of conventions and thus a specific perception of

reality. It is this apparently French, German, and Italian perception of reality that our viewers highlighted, as they identified the national cultural specificities of the six series.

In the case of the French specificity of *Spiral*, our viewers commented on the gritty, realistic feel of the series. For them, there was a direct contrast between the location of Paris and the international nature of the plot: the images on screen felt specific to France whilst the plot referred to “neutral” concepts that were derived from and could apply to multiple national contexts. Even the interiors felt “realistically French”, one participant commented: there is a “richness to the interiors, with piles of files everywhere”, unlike the spotless, futuristic sets of American series *CSI*, for example. Realism and grittiness become markers of the authentic Frenchness of the series for our viewers, echoing the reading of the series’ appeal offered by Sue Deeks, Head of Programme Acquisition at the BBC when *Spiral* was acquired. Deeks characterises *Spiral* as “a gritty drama with a smart, stark quality to it and a really compelling narrative”, which was also doing something new and fresh for French crime drama series (110).

These audience and critic perceptions of *Spiral*’s realism echo those of scholars who argue that the series belongs to the broader tradition of realism in French culture (McCabe 102). *Spiral* also arguably draws on the more recent cinematic tradition of new realism of the mid-1990s to early 2000s, which is characterised by “an evident engagement with social realities, inhabiting an uneasy middle ground between the ethnographically dispassionate and the dramatically compassionate” (Powrie 487). There are certainly striking similarities between the gritty and unromanticised depiction of Paris and that of other northern French locations of new realist films, the representation of which demonstrated “a return to filmic codes of realism and an extra-filmic engagement with the sociopolitical realities of a contemporary France in which economic insecurity, political alienation and social dislocation were prevalent” (Dobson 179). Indeed, this attention to sociopolitical realities is also evident in *Spiral* but was not overtly commented on by our viewing group.

This representation of France was seen by our viewers to contrast with that of *Mafiosa*. Whilst this is perhaps not surprising, given the Corsican setting of the latter, viewers did comment on how the island felt far removed from the national specificities that they felt conceptualise “mainland France” as such. For them, “this is another France—one step removed from the France I know” and “it doesn’t seem to be France as an English person sees France, because of the language which is recognisably not French, and the complete absence of food”. The conclusion that the viewing group came to was that the location does not feel at all like the French mainland but rather is typical of a Mediterranean island. However, our viewers also vocalised a feeling of anywhere-ness, in that this could be any island in the Mediterranean: according to one viewer, the “old buildings juxtaposed with shiny convertibles, plush interiors, and the affluence of docks [sic], it all feels typical”. Moreover, our viewers commented on the clash of the idyllic island landscape and lifestyle with the Mafia life of crime that constitutes the focus of the plot; one participant summarised: “there are clear contrasts between the island’s beauty and the horror of crime. The island landscape hides these problems”.

Here, our viewers were highlighting what scholars have commented upon as the tendency to focus on the “regional picturesque” in representations of Corsica and other areas of southern France: François de la Bretèque explains that this preference for the picturesque peculiar to the *méridional* is “couched in historical and ideological terms. For here a dominant culture (French) has supplanted another more or less residual culture (Occitanian, Catalan, Corsican), which now only expresses itself [...] by the other. Films offer the means to express this way of seeing very powerfully” (58–9). Significantly, our viewers did highlight one specific expression of Corsican culture that struck them during their viewing: the Corsican language. According to one participant, “the language makes it neither French nor Italian and therefore both”, that is, Corsican. Language was thus deemed an important aspect of the national specificity of the series, not least because of its function in marking the authentic Corsican setting.

Our viewers were quick to highlight the similarities between the location of *Mafiosa* and those of *Inspector Montalbano* and *Maltese*, both set in Sicily. Again, the picturesque island location is foregrounded, particularly in *Inspector Montalbano*, whose location our viewers described as “clean” and “picture-book”. They commented especially on the lack of traffic, which makes even the town of Vigàta not feel urban, and on the lack of mopeds and cars, which they associated with Italian towns. One viewer said: “it doesn’t feel real. The location is a pastiche,

an exaggeration of Italy”. Another commented on how the series must be marvellous for the tourist industry, and also explained that, for them, “detective series often have this attraction, where a fictional drama is linked to a real place that people can visit”. Picking up on this aspect, a third participant said, “yes, the show is a tourist advert for the area: even though there’s a murder there every week, you still want to go!” Viewers underscored the importance of food in creating this idyllic version of Italian life, commenting on how the inclusion of so many typical dishes appears to be something to attract foreigners but must in fact be explained by the fact that Italians are interested in food.

The appeal and thus national specificity of *Inspector Montalbano* arguably lies in the picturesque Italian landscapes, beautiful Mediterranean beaches, and traditional Italian foods, all elements which for our viewers meant that the show could not be set anywhere else yet also felt too idyllic and therefore “unreal”. This idealised reality of *Inspector Montalbano* has been instrumental in attracting tourists to the province of Ragusa where the series is filmed (Magazzino and Mantovani). This increase in tourism has also produced a shift in “the local policies aiming at enhancing the [island’s] cultural heritage through the promotion of film tourism” (Lo Piccolo et al. 288). In 2015, Ragusa entered into a partnership agreement to support the production of *Inspector Montalbano*, “with the purpose of finding the financial resources for the TV production, as well as selecting and promoting the cultural heritage of South-Eastern Sicily” (Lo Piccolo et al. 288). The promotion of a selected Sicilian reality was clearly noted by our viewing group.

But our viewers did not feel that *Maltese: The Mafia Detective* functioned to promote Sicily in the same way. According to one participant, the location was “not pretty pretty! Not Montalbano pretty. It feels cold. I can’t see Maltese taking his shirt off to go swimming”, referring once again on the idyllic and idealised setting of *Inspector Montalbano*. In *Maltese*, for our viewers, the Italian specificity came once again from the location and *mise-en-scène*. They explained that the series “felt very Italian. Apart from the retro feel, the setting was very Italian”. When asked to explain what was “very Italian”, they highlighted the architecture, cars, motorbikes, and food, pointing to the importance of setting for creating a sense of place for the series as well as revealing what UK viewers might expect Italy to look like. Indeed, one participant explained that what had struck them was the “architecture against the ruins of different eras. It reveals a fragmented history that feels very Italian”. Yet not all of the locations in the episode felt Italian to our viewers: we watched the first episode, which opens with the pursuit of a suspect in Rome, before the action then moves to Sicily. Our participants commented that “the opening chase could have been anywhere; Rome is anywhere, but Sicily is Italy”. For them, the attention given on screen to the *mise-en-scène* of Sicily was what functioned to create a sense of Italian reality, and thus the national cultural specificity of the show.

The German cultural specificity of *Inspector Falke* and *Dark* were initially more difficult for our audience to discern. In the case of *Inspector Falke*, our participants commented on how much they enjoyed the programme as an example of a gritty police procedural, with good direction, serious action sequences, and a socially relevant plotline with its focus on racism. As a result, “it’s easy to miss the cultural references”. Indeed, our viewers felt that the series could have been set in the UK. They commented on how the landscape was very similar to that of Hull in that it showed a port hinterland that was flat and could have been transported to anywhere in Northern Europe: one participant commented that “the land is a type of no man’s land, an industrial wasteland”. Another noted that “the similarities to the UK are more notable than the differences here”. But all viewers agreed that the national cultural specificity of the series was to be found in the characters, who were seen to represent apparently German values and ways of behaving.

In categorising *Inspector Falke*’s characters as German, our participants were revealing the extent to which these characters carried a socially convincing sense of what a UK viewer thinks it means to be German. For them, the characters conformed to the discursive conventions of German identity, as defined in a UK context, and thus made the series feel real and authentic. What these conventions were was not pinned down by our viewers, but arguably that is not the point. As Fiske explains, “character portrayal on television works to deny the difference between the real and the representation in both the production and the reception processes” (152), with a character being judged as a successful representation according to how closely it approximates what is understood as the real. It was this judgement process that our participants were vocalising in their declaration that national cultural specificity in *Inspector*

Falke lies with the characters, which in turn revealed how they perceived and understood “the real” as it pertained to the German cultural context.

Dark was also not perceived to be particularly culturally specific to Germany by our participants. According to our viewers, “Germany is a lot better than that! It’s not very German to me” and “the forests seem very German, like from the Brothers Grimm, but that’s about it”. Moreover, viewers felt that “the landscape looks German but could also be Scandinavian or North American” and “the exteriors don’t correspond to my idea of German houses and public buildings. They could be French”. They ultimately concluded that the series “doesn’t feel especially German. It could be Northern European. There’s nothing to make you think that this is Germany except the language. The cultural specificity is the language”.

These comments reveal how important language and, by extension, dialogue are to the creation of a televisual world. Bednarek explains that “television dialogue creates a fictional world for viewers, a narrative with characters and plot (strands)—a world where characters communicate with each other” (16). And, to build on Fiske’s argument about the real on television (152), dialogue and language are also tools through which the conventions of reality are represented on screen. It was ultimately the language of *Dark* that helped our viewers to situate the series in Germany and to assess the extent to which its representation of German life and culture might be judged as realistic, according to their own perceptions of the country and awareness of cultural tropes and stereotypes.

STEREOTYPES AND THE INTERNATIONAL CRIME DRAMA

Our viewers were clearly aware of the difference between what they have become accustomed to seeing on screen in UK crime drama series and what these international crime drama series depict. Yet their comments about the nationally specific, “other” locations and *mise-en-scène* also demonstrated the widespread presence of a common set of tropes and stereotypes which the British associate with France, Germany, and Italy. From the discussion about the national specificity of the series, it became clear that the participants’ existing knowledge and perceptions of the countries and cultures in question, including awareness of common cultural tropes and stereotypes, were necessary for viewers: they would refer to this knowledge in order to engage with the representations of the real that the series offer. Tropes and stereotypes provided the criteria against which these representations of the real could be judged and deemed appropriate or accurate by our viewers.

For example, the stereotypes of France that our participants identified in *Spiral*, related to the city of Paris and the representation of the grittiness of the city as “not the Paris we are used to”. Attitudes articulated in the programme towards female beauty and Eastern European women were also seen by our participants to be stereotypical, even though the precise nature of this stereotype was not defined. Lunch with a bottle of wine was another cultural stereotype that struck our British viewers. Regarding *Mafiosa*, the grittiness and drama were perceived as tropes of French culture and French television in particular. One participant commented that the series appeared “very honest. It’s not worried about upsetting viewers and French programmes are in general earnest and serious. It doesn’t hide any of the issues. Instead, it overstates the drama and the grittiness. And the chaotic editing overstates the drama of French culture, with the use of strategic slow-motion shots to highlight drama”. There was also discussion of the influence of Italian culture on that of Corsica in terms of the family, which was perceived as a tight-knit, cohesive unit and thus representative of an Italian stereotype.

Viewers felt that *Inspector Montalbano* drew heavily on what they perceived to be stereotypes and even clichés of Italian culture: the idyllic Sicilian setting, the Mafia, the ritual of making coffee with a Moka and drinking it from tiny espresso cups. But the characters were also identified as stereotypes: “you can tick them off a list”. In this category, our participants listed: the Mafia character, the priest, the gossip, the foodie, the religious character, and lecherous and womanising men. They also commented on the “representation of women who appear exotic and different to what the UK stereotype is of Mediterranean beauty”. The other stereotype that struck viewers was the speed at which the characters speak, and their use of hand gestures. One viewer remarked, “that’s my memory of Italy. If they were speaking more slowly, it wouldn’t be Italy. You need the soundscape. You need the tone of voice and the accent”, suggesting that

the language in *Inspector Montalbano* plays a crucial role in setting the scene, even if it is also perceived as a cultural stereotype.

The stereotypes of Italian culture that our viewers identified in *Maltese: The Mafia Detective* were to do with the retro style of the programme. One participant described the series as being like a “Spaghetti Western, with the new sheriff in town”, drawing upon their previous knowledge of Italian culture and the cinema of the 1960s and 1970s to identify what they perceived to be a cultural trope. Other stereotypes of Italian culture identified included: mother’s cooking, the close-knit Sicilian family unit, physical expressions of affection between heterosexual men, the tight-knit community, and the Mafia. Regarding the latter, our participants acknowledged that “there is the potential for this to be a stereotypical focus on the Mafia for TV but there is an awareness of the omnipresence of the Mafia. All the characters know about it (it is in the background, in the shadows, everywhere but invisible) but is a subject that is skirted around. That feels more real”.

In the case of *Inspector Falke*, our participants once again had some difficulty identifying what they perceived as tropes and stereotypes of German culture in the series. They felt that there were “only hints at old cultural divisions (with East Germany and Turkey)” (what these hints or divisions were, was not elucidated further), and whilst “we do see German flags, the music and jokes are German, and there are scene-setting shots of shops and food, these are only occasional references and the series could be set anywhere”. Even the use of the federal and local police forces in the episode was seen “not as a stereotype but rather as a narrative device to show the interplay between levels of legal bureaucracy”. Ultimately, our viewers concluded that the series offers “a German version of an international type of crime”. One participant commented that “it’s not as rich in cultural references but it does seem more culturally charged. It’s also not about Germany specifically. Maybe this is why this series doesn’t export well? It’s made for domestic consumption”. This suggests that for our participants, there is a potential paradox regarding cultural specificity and exportability: the more culturally specific a series is, the better it performs as an export in the UK. After all, as one viewer remarked, “we already have general crime series—and it’s not like the Italian series, with gondolas and spaghetti all of the time”. But such attitudes perhaps also speak to a more generalised level of ignorance about German cultural life in the UK: the gondola and spaghetti stereotypes of Italian culture are arguably better known and thus more easily recognisable for the UK viewer.

In the case of *Dark*, the tropes that our viewers identified were again not specifically linked to German culture. There was some limited discussion around the stereotype of German culture being well-organised and efficient (the school and its organisation was deemed to be very German, whilst the late-night parents’ evening was not, because “everything happens really early in Germany”), and around the references to nuclear power (which were not perceived to be as radically political as was expected for a German series, given Germany’s commitment to decommissioning all nuclear power stations by 2022). Where stereotypes and tropes were identified, they were drawn from American television and film culture to explain the structure of the series and the complexity of the plot. One participant explained that “it doesn’t start like a detective programme. There’s no central figure. It feels like it’s inspired by *Stranger Things*, *Twin Peaks*, and *IT*”.

These final comments in particular demonstrate how our viewers sought to identify the familiar in what they were watching and thus to minimise the apparent cultural differences these series represent. This process of familiarisation is facilitated by the presence of the internationally established and recognised format of the crime drama, as we have already seen. Indeed, our viewers drew on their knowledge of this genre to identify that, for them, *Spiral* deploys the international tropes of the detective drama with its focus on the dysfunctional private life of detectives, the use of jokes to deal with the horror of crime, and its cynical attitude towards power structures and political pressures. *Inspector Montalbano* showcases “the stereotype of the traditional crime drama, Agatha Christie-style, set against the idiosyncratic language and the specific setting”. And *Mafiosa* was seen to pointedly utilise “the stereotypes of the mafia. Even the title of *Mafiosa* tells you it’s the mafia from the start. Then you think, the man at the start, he must be part of the mafia. The trope helps you to work out what’s happening”.

But our viewers also clearly used their own knowledge and perceptions of France, Germany, and Italy to find points of commonality between their own experience and what they were

watching, as a way of rendering familiar, accessible, and understandable the multicultural and “other” representations they saw on screen (which is perhaps not typical of viewers without prior knowledge of and insight into the cultures of the countries in question). The process of identifying stereotypes here acts as a bridge between the “foreign” crime drama and its difference from the UK cultural context. From the comments above, we can see the extent to which the viewers’ existing knowledge of the cultures in question is constituted of cultural stereotypes that are often limited, partial, and superficial in what they reveal about the source culture. This in turn might suggest that the British viewer’s engagement with these series will be similarly limited, partial, and superficial. Yet this is not the case: the discussions with our viewing groups demonstrated how British viewers make use of existing knowledge of cultural stereotypes to facilitate their interaction with the international television series they are watching. Livingstone explains that this process is in fact part of the interpretation of television series by viewers, because “when interpreting television, viewers must, on the socio-cognitive account, integrate the information in the program with their own knowledge—of the program, its genre, and of the real-world phenomena to which the program makes reference” (4).

In the context of the potential for international television series to promote awareness of multilingualism and multiculturalism, these interactions are in fact examples of intercultural communication and exchange, and thus interculturality in action. In our case, we see interculturality

as a dynamic process by which people draw on and use the resources and processes of cultures with which they are familiar but also those they may not typically be associated with in their interactions with others. This may mean that people implicitly question aspects of their own and each other’s cultures, but can also lead to innovation and the adoption and adaptation of features derived from other cultural contexts. (Young and Sercombe 181)

This highlights the potential of international crime dramas to facilitate intercultural dialogue and exchange, and thus to challenge “the traditional binary tradition of Us vs. Them [of] intercultural communication [, to] be replaced by the notion that in a networked, interdependent world the Other is in Us and We are in the Other” (Kramsch 205). As viewers identify stereotypes and tropes, as a means of finding familiarity in what they are watching, they are arguably looking to locate the other within themselves, and thus begin to locate themselves within the other. In this light, the boom of international television series in the UK begins to demonstrate some of the ways in which such intercultural exchange and dialogue is facilitated by the “shifting identities and cross-cultural networks” inherent to intercultural communication in the twenty-first century (Kramsch 205), which these programmes showcase and reveal as they cross international borders.²

IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE IN THE INTERNATIONAL CRIME DRAMA

If we turn our attention to the question of language in these series, we have seen that our viewers were quick to point out that language was a crucial element of their national cultural specificity. Language was also fundamental to the characterisation of the people on screen as well as of the culture to which they belong. This was highlighted in particular with regard to *Inspector Falke*, as our participants commented that “the uniqueness of this series is the dialogue in German. It’s what makes it German. Take it away, and it’s less atmospheric”. For them,

the enjoyment here is getting to know the characters. Part of that is what they sound like. If there was no sound or there was dubbing, it would mean you would lose a part of that person. Not understanding the words doesn’t matter (and

² A potential extension of this study would be to explore the extent to which such intercultural exchange and dialogue occurs when viewers watch international series of whose languages and cultures they have little to no knowledge. It would be useful to test the extent to which it is possible to find familiarity in such cases, in order to assess how viewers respond and experience such intercultural encounters. Such research would have the potential to illustrate the extent to which viewers rely on the recognisability of the tropes of crime drama in order to recreate a feeling of familiarity and thus begin to locate themselves in the other and the other in themselves.

you can understand them anyway, thanks to the subtitles). The personality and characterisation come through the voice.

As for *Maltese: The Mafia Detective*, one of our viewers explained that “I like to hear the original actors speak and their intonation. Their way of speaking is bound up with the character of the culture”. For example, there are “the noises Italians make (linked to gestures too) like their thinking noises and exclamations [...] the way people speak, the sounds people make, it’s full of character and personality”. Again, our participants asserted that “the language is what makes this culturally specific. Without the Italian, this could be anywhere in the Mediterranean”.

The comments here highlight the importance of language and dialogue to the process of characterisation specifically, and to the viewer’s ability to judge whether a character’s portrayal is real and realistic, an important aspect of television viewing according to Fiske (152). Seeing characters speaking another language and hearing their dialogue reinforces the idea that the viewer is watching an authentic representation of French, German, or Italian culture, which underlines the apparent accuracy of that representation. But it also reinforces the importance of language and dialogue to the creation of the fictional televisual world seen on screen (Bednarek 16). Whilst other aspects will consciously and subconsciously be taken into consideration by the viewer to judge the representation of reality that the fictional televisual world offers and to which the characters contribute (such as costumes, sound effects, soundtrack, and camera and editing techniques) (Bednarek 76), it is clear that language is unsurprisingly an important part of identifying and judging the accuracy of the national cultural specificity of these series. And it is one that our participants were adamant they wanted to keep whilst watching the programmes.

This was seen in the discussions we had around dubbing and subtitling. When asked whether they would prefer to watch a dubbed version of the programme, our participants said no. Discussing *Spiral*, one viewer stated that “sound is important for the atmosphere. The way the words are said is important for understanding. And they are also important for the ‘sound’ of the show. The background music is needed, too. Dubbing would be distracting and would add distance for the viewer. The language is a part of the show’s aesthetic”. On *Inspector Montalbano*, one participant commented, “you definitely need the sound as you need to hear them speaking quickly. Sound is part of the location”. Regarding *Dark*, “teenage speech patterns, sarcasm and mockery would be hard to dub. The speech and the sound capture the atmosphere”. And of *Maltese: The Mafia Detective*, one viewer stated emphatically: “I don’t want it dubbed. Dubbing adds an aesthetic slather of another culture. It gets in the way”.

Dubbing was perceived here as something which would take away from the national cultural specificity of these series, to detrimental effect. Subtitles were thus preferred, even if some of our participants were keen to comment on their potential drawbacks. In the discussion about *Inspector Falke*, one viewer said:

With dubbing, you lose the feeling and the sentiment behind the sentence. But subtitles require concentration: it takes effort and time to watch with subtitles.

Dubbing isn’t the culture in the UK. There was a lack of desire to raid other cultures because we always had plenty of American and UK TV. Subtitles were too hard, too distracting. That attitude is changing now [...] But the regional variations of accent and dialect are not picked up in the subtitles.

Their comments reveal the complexity of the language question in international crime drama, and shed light on how UK audiences might have stereotypically responded to and even rejected such series in the past, and how they might interpret such programmes now. The preference for subtitles, despite the additional concentration required, suggests that the viewers’ appreciation of these series is predicated on their ability to judge for themselves the representation of reality that is offered, using the subtitles as a guide to establish meaning. They do not want the additional interpretative layer that dubbing alone is seen to introduce to a programme. This echoes the findings of studies into the impact of subtitling and dubbing on the enjoyment of film conducted by Perego, Del Missier, and Bottiroli, who conclude that “subtitling does not impede, but in some respects helps, film comprehension and memory” (14). This is also the case with televisual comprehension in the case of our viewers: although we did not screen a dubbed version of these programmes, our participants’ comments reveal the nature of their

comprehension of these series as facilitated and not hindered by subtitles. They also show the extent to which viewers felt this comprehension, and thus appreciation, would be impaired as a result of dubbing. Our participants thus revealed their preference for a multilingual television viewing experience when consuming international crime dramas such as these.

We were also able to discuss with our viewers the extent to which they relied on the subtitles to understand the language used in the programmes they were watching, and whether they had managed to identify words in the languages in question, and thus learn new words or phrases. In the case of *Spiral*, one viewer commented that

swear words and idiomatic phrases are not translated well, so something is lost. For example, the inappropriateness of comments and the language is not always communicated. For me there is enjoyment in learning slang and swear words through television. There's a notable difference in the level of vulgarity between the language used and the subtitles, so the vulgarity appears to have been toned down for the UK viewers.

Another commented that “the legal/criminal jargon feels similar to English and so it is easy to understand, I suppose because that language comes from French”. In these cases, our participants were clearly drawing on their own knowledge of French, but also of the English language, to fill in gaps and identify the extent of their linguistic understanding of the programme. Their tone of voice when speaking also revealed the enjoyment they felt at testing their knowledge and understanding, and learning new words.

For *Mafiosa*, the discussion around language and subtitles focused in particular on the switching between French, Italian, and Corsican that is a feature of the dialogue of the series. One participant commented, “I can pick up some differences. But if you're a UK speaker of French, that might throw you”, highlighting their own lack of knowledge of all three languages. However, another participant who clearly had some knowledge of French responded: “it's hard to follow without subtitles even for a French speaker [... But] the way the characters say things adds to the mood”. Indeed, the use of the three languages together was felt to be integral not only to the mood and setting of the series, but also to the plot and to the construction of the crime narrative. One viewer commented that “the language feels authentic here, with shifts mid-sentence that are not always easy to pick up on” and another identified how the characters use different languages to hide their conversations from others. The show's focus on action and drama was also felt to inform the language used, and our participants were able to identify individual words (for example, *vindicato* and *maître*) and a broader lexicon of dramatic language linked to ideas of inheritance and blood that were integral to the overarching subject matter of the series. Arguably, knowing that this series is the story of a mafia family enabled our viewers to identify these particular words more easily, which again demonstrates how crucial existing knowledge is to the interpretation of television series.

Our participants were also able to identify certain words in Italian in *Inspector Montalbano*, despite having no previous knowledge of the language. They listed *confusa*, *antipatico*, *amici*, *lettere*, and *commissario*. When asked how they had distinguished these words, it became apparent that our listeners were picking up words that were emphasised or repeated in the dialogue. There was also discussion about the speed of the speech in the series, with our viewers explaining that it is difficult to discern individual words because the characters generally speak so fast. One participant said that they had realised one of the recurrent characters was not Italian because “when Ingrid speaks Italian, she speaks very slowly so I could understand. The speed of the speech by the other characters makes it very difficult to understand otherwise”. This was in contrast to *Maltese: The Mafia Detective*. Here, our viewers identified words like *capo*, *grazie*, *bella sorpresa*, *ambulanza*, *sogni*, *Avanti!*, *permesso*, *papà*, and *commissario*. And one participant said, “I understood the meaning because I had heard them before but also I was not as reliant on subtitles here. There are more distinct words in this show”, in comparison to *Inspector Montalbano*. These comments about language again reveal the extent to which existing knowledge is used by viewers to interpret even the linguistic content of international crime series, despite the presence of subtitles.

Whilst language was identified as one of the key markers of national cultural specificity in *Inspector Falke*, our viewers did not comment on specific words or phrases, or the extent to

which they were reliant on subtitles to understand the dialogue. One of our participants stated that “I noticed the language less here; the tone of voice, and the anger and frustration were more striking”. Another commented that “the language passed me by! What I heard made it difficult to discern individual words. Is this to do with Romance languages versus German?”, with the conclusion then emerging from the discussion that “German sentence structure makes it hard to pick out words”. These comments suggest that appreciation for this series was linked more to the plot and characterisation, international tropes of the television crime drama format that engaged our viewers.

There was also little discussion of the language in *Dark*. The format of the series was referenced as a way of explaining this: one participant noted that “there is less dialogue here so I could watch what was on screen. They make more use of music to create the atmosphere and get us to enter this strange world”. Another commented that “there is not an awful lot of dialogue here due to their trying to build the mood of horror, which means you can’t have people chatting! The dialogue is functional”. The comments were thus less about the German linguistic specificities of the series, and more about the function of dialogue in creating suspense and tension for the viewer. The focus on the building of suspense was such that one German-speaking participant commented, “How accurate were the translations? I didn’t notice!” In the cases of the German-language series, we see here how participants make reference to the established genre tropes of television formats as a way of engaging with the programmes and moving beyond and even ignoring the apparent “otherness” that the foreign language represents.

This discussion about language reveals something of the broader appeal of international crime drama, which, as Esser argues, should instead be described as “transnational”, a term which more effectively captures the “complex, fluid webs of collaboration and interdependency” at work in the production, circulation, and dissemination of such series (426). And in light of our participants’ comments on language, we must also add reception to this list. In this context, our conceptualisation of the transnational draws on that offered by Russell Meeuf and Raphael Raphael in their volume on transnational stardom. They argue that transnational stars, and arguably transnational media products more broadly, have the potential “to produce cultural meaning in relation to (but not dictated by) the existing power structures of nations and states, to remain mobile, flexible, and open to multiple avenues of meaning and pleasure in different contexts of politics, social relations, and cultural assumptions” (Meeuf and Raphael 2). Our viewers demonstrate their mobility and flexibility in how they make personal connections with these media products. They express clear preferences for being able to hear the original language, and thus the “national Them” over the “national Us” that a dubbed version in English could arguably provide, thereby challenging the existing power structures of nations and states. And the transnational element of reception is also present in the way “connections established between the here and now of relatively distant locales overcome all the uneven relations of power of other scales such as the national, regional, continental, or international scales” (Newman 9), seen as our viewers interact with the linguistic elements of the programmes they are viewing. The identification of words, the assessment of the effectiveness of subtitles, and even the attention to television form over linguistic content, together reveal how our viewers make connections with other locales and overcome apparent national differences by employing intercultural communication strategies that ensure their engagement with and appreciation and interpretation of what they are watching. Such intercultural initiatives reveal how viewers seek to build bridges, and thus cross national borders, in their viewing of these programmes, thereby emphasising the “trans” in the transnational nature of the reception of these international television series.

“BUT DO INTERNATIONAL CRIME DRAMAS MAKE YOU WANT TO LEARN THE LANGUAGE?”

Given that the original aim of our research project was to explore the extent to which international crime drama might encourage language learning, as well as intercultural awareness, in the twenty-first-century UK context, we also asked our participants whether they felt motivated to learn the language they had seen on screen, after watching an episode of each series. In light of the preferences expressed for hearing the original language, and thus for intercultural

contact and interaction, we might expect our viewers to want to learn more of the language with which they had come into contact. After all, as Dörnyei and Csizér explain,

intercultural contact is [...] a key issue in second language (L2) acquisition for at least two reasons: on one hand, one of the main aims of learning second languages has traditionally been seen to establish meaningful contact across cultures, because L2 proficiency, by definition, creates the medium of communication between members of different ethnolinguistic communities. On the other hand, interethnic contact also creates opportunities for developing language skills and acts as a powerful influence shaping the learners' attitudinal/motivational disposition, thereby promoting motivated learning behavior. Thus, intercultural contact is both a means and an end in L2 studies. (327–8)

In our case, the international crime dramas in question are the means through which meaningful contact across cultures is facilitated, and they also simultaneously create opportunities for developing language skills through the presence of the original language. Yet the impact of these series on our participants' motivation to learn one of the languages showcased is not as clear-cut.

In the case of the French series, it was clear that many of our viewers had previous experience of learning the language. In the discussion about *Spiral*, for example, one participant commented: "I regret that my French is at the level of sandwich-ordering. I feel like I missed the specific, exact meaning of some of the words". And another explained: "it's a much more engaging thing to just listen and not have to rely on the subtitles. I feel pushed to learn French (but not the same for Danish)". Previous knowledge of French prompted the desire to know more. Yet they did also express the potential disadvantages of this prior knowledge: as one viewer commented, "when I'm watching, I can distract myself by testing my language skills instead of enjoying the show".

Some of our participants also had prior knowledge of German, and expressed similar desires to improve their language skills. When discussing *Inspector Falke*, one viewer said, "Do I want to learn German? Yes. There were bits I understood, and it makes me want to know more. If I could understand the rest of the sentence, that would be good. I wish I understood the nuance and the puns". And regarding *Dark*, another viewer commented that "there's a noticeable use of slang—I'd like to learn that". The desire to develop language skills that can better mediate the intercultural encounter which the series provide is clearly expressed here. Moreover, it is the ability to decode nuance, puns, and slang that our viewers desired, suggesting that they wished to develop their linguistic ability beyond the functional level of ordering sandwiches. They felt motivated to learn more German so as to enhance their ability to bridge the "Us/Them" binary through nuance, humour, and slang.

In the case of Italian, hardly any of our participants had any previous knowledge of the language. Here, the intercultural encounter that *Inspector Montalbano* and *Maltese: The Mafia Detective* offered did not necessarily motivate viewers to learn the language. Indeed, one participant commented of *Inspector Montalbano* that "whilst it's very idyllic and I'd like to visit if it's like that, with no traffic, and can afford a flat like Montalbano's, the language is too fast and it puts me off!" One viewer said that *Maltese* "seemed more accessible than *Montalbano*. The speed in particular seems more accessible. *Montalbano* just gives me a headache! And the accent and pronunciation in *Maltese* are more accessible, too". Apparent accessibility can thus be seen to be an important motivational factor for follow-up language learning after encountering the language through television, when potential learners have no prior knowledge of the language in question. In our case, accessibility is defined as speech at a steady speed and with a clear pronunciation, which arguably help learners to identify distinct words and build confidence in their ability to learn.

But not all participants expressed a desire to learn more of the languages in question. One viewer neatly summarised these views thus: "the availability of so much across platforms means you can dip in and out of French, Swedish, German: I can't learn them all so I won't learn any". It is important to acknowledge here that the plethora of different international dramas from a range of cultural and linguistic contexts has the potential to dissuade viewers from learning more of the languages to which they have been exposed. Whilst the presence of

multiple languages on screen does not appear to put viewers off watching these series, with more choice there is nevertheless a greater chance that viewers will feel overwhelmed by the many opportunities for learning languages with which they are faced.³

CONCLUSION

In the context of the UK reception of six exemplar international crime dramas, this article has explored the relationship between local specificity and international appeal, the role of recognisable tropes of crime drama in providing a framework through which viewers can negotiate the unfamiliar intercultural aspects of international crime dramas, the importance of language for the series' "aesthetic", and the idea of the transnational as a mode of reception. We have seen that, for UK viewers as exemplified by the members of our focus groups, national cultural specificities are indeed showcased by the international crime dramas considered here. These specificities are identified by viewers as existing in the locations and *mise-en-scène* that are adopted by the series, and not in the plot, which is often perceived to be non-national in nature. In the case of the German series, national cultural specificity was identified in the characters and linguistic soundscape. These national cultural specificities together can be seen as vehicles for the screening of multiple cultures on UK television, and thus demonstrate the extent to which international crime dramas can promote multiculturalism in the UK context.

Yet watching television also involves decoding the representation of reality that the programmes propose to the viewer. Identification of the national cultural specificities of these series is part of this decoding, as is the demonstrable reliance of our viewers on their knowledge of cultural tropes and stereotypes to inform this decoding process. Indeed, our viewers showed how they drew on their previous, often stereotypical, knowledge and perception of the cultures in question to judge the apparent accuracy of the representation of reality with which they were presented. However, this active use of previous knowledge suggests a type of interaction and engagement with these programmes that moves us beyond their potential function to merely draw attention to multiple cultures and the multicultural nature of our global existences today. Rather, these are intercultural interactions and engagements: our viewers actively sought strategies to mediate between cultures and thus bridge the gap between the "us" and "them" that international television crime dramas arguably highlight. In bridging this gap, our viewers were seeking to better understand and effectively coexist with the concepts, lifestyles, and cultures which the programmes showcase, and thus to identify themselves in the other that they were watching on screen.

The original French, German, and Italian language of the shows was seen to constitute another key national cultural specificity, and a further means by which our viewers were able to judge the representation of reality they were watching. The original language was also perceived to be a specificity to preserve, with subtitles clearly preferred and desired to dubbed versions of these programmes. This in turn suggests that viewers enjoy and even desire the showcasing of multiple languages, and thus of multilingual society, that the programmes offer. There is also the potential to learn the language through these series, and our viewers demonstrated how previous linguistic knowledge was useful in this regard. The opportunity to learn the language is an aspect of the transnational reception of these series: as viewers identify words and phrases, they demonstrate how they seek out familiarity and similarity, and therefore actively cross the national boundaries between their linguistic home context of the UK and the source context of these programmes from France, Germany, and Italy. Yet, when asked whether the programmes had motivated them to undertake additional learning of the languages in question, the answer was not so clear-cut. Whilst these programmes clearly promote multilingualism, it is uncertain whether our participants felt motivated enough to convert their interest in these languages and cultures into undertaking a programme of learning.

³ It is clear that there is potential to use these series as a means to learn a new language, and perhaps most effectively as part of a structured language programme (to avoid the possibility of feeling overwhelmed). D'Ydewalle and Webb demonstrate the potential for learning a language (or at the very least, vocabulary acquisition) through subtitled television programmes in general, whilst Richards illustrates how television viewing can support and enhance in-classroom language learning. For further discussion of television viewing as a language-learning strategy that has been successfully incorporated into language learning programmes, see Caruana ("The Italian Job" and "Television Programmes").

The findings of our viewing groups also reveal our participants' tendency to make comparisons between the programmes they were viewing. These comparisons were certainly encouraged by the format of our discussions, which were based on the same questions for each screening. And comparisons are also arguably facilitated by the broadening of programme sourcing across platforms like BBC4 and Netflix, and by the format of Walter Presents, whose website lists international dramas by country in a catalogue of programmes, the format and presentation of which invite comparisons between shows by viewers. But do these comparisons also help to promote multiculturalism? When comparing programmes, are viewers comparing televisual elements only (for example, plot, editing, or characterisation) or does cultural commentary come into the comparison? The discussions of our focus groups suggest that it does. This indicates the potential of international television dramas collectively to promote awareness of multiple cultures, and to encourage intercultural interactions and to facilitate the crossing of cultural borders through the comparison of multicultural norms and specificities which, in our case, originate in British, French, German, and Italian culture. This is another aspect of the reception of these series that can be categorised as transnational.

To conclude, we can again return to the transnational as a broader framework through which to read these series. In this context, Esser points out how form, platform, and audiences of international crime dramas are interdependent and function collectively to create opportunities for transnationalisation. She explains that

form transnationalises because more and more content depends on international markets and audiences. Platforms (enabled by technology) transnationalise their content because channel proliferation causes an increase in demand, which cannot be met domestically. Moreover, they transnationalise because they have discovered niche audiences' interest in non-domestic [...] drama. Finally, audiences transnationalise because of form's quality and transnational look-and-feel and because they can now easily find non-domestic [...] content on established, familiar platforms. (413)

In the case of the crime dramas considered here, the opportunities for transnationalisation come from the availability of these series in the UK, which is facilitated by the platforms of BBC4, Walter Presents, and Netflix, who in turn make available to UK audiences examples of quality, non-domestic programming that has a transnational look and feel. Yet the transnationalisation of the audience is arguably only completed through the consumption of these programmes, and the resultant intercultural interactions of the type that we have reported here. This is because transnationalisation does not come about as a result simply of the provision of bridges into other cultures or nations. Rather, transnationalisation is what happens when nations, cultures, and identities intersect and interact; after all, such intersections and interactions are examples of the interstice as a crucial "in-between" space that provides the opportunity for the negotiation of identity and meaning (Bhabha 2). For viewers of international crime dramas, it is in watching other cultures, listening to other languages, and deploying strategies to further understanding and appreciation, that audiences become aware of the difference between what they are watching and their own cultural context, and thus the cultural and linguistic specificities of these programmes. This awareness moves them out of the national space and into an intercultural conversation and transnational dialogue that function across nations, cultures, and languages, and promote multilingualism and multiculturalism to the viewer.

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