Chapter 9

LOOKING INTO THE ABYSS

The Transnational Puzzle in *Dark*

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> We were convinced that it was possible to tell local stories coming out of
> Germany that could hit an audience anywhere.
>
> —Jantje Friese

It is not always easy to discern the setting of many of the series streamed by Netflix. Several of its most recent shows—such as *The End of the F***ing World* (2017–19), *The Innocent* (2021), and *Élite* (2018–22)—are set in non-places (to borrow loosely the term from the French anthropologist Marc Augé), or, perhaps, more accurately, "somewhere that could be anywhere."[1] This de-localization of many of the series created by Netflix has been deemed one of the main elements of their success worldwide, because their lack of cultural specificity allows viewers to concentrate simply on the plot. As audiences are already familiar with the shows' audiovisual codes as well as with genre conventions and tropes, which are employed throughout the countries of production, they are able to "translate" them without impediments.[2] As a consequence, Netflix viewers can switch from one international series to another without having to make a strong cultural or aesthetic transition. This strategy seems to be key to Netflix's approach to international expansion via global content, as it allows the platform to attract audiences in the 190 countries in which it streams with a single production. However, as will become clear, Netflix's landscapes are not always as neutral as they seem, and its shows are often more culturally loaded than may at first appear to be the case. This is because, in order to find its way onto screens worldwide, Netflix needs to find a balance between

local and global content, between the national and the transnational. According to lb Bondebjerg, audiences prefer their own national drama production, even if US TV formats are—and have been for several decades—the audiovisual "native language," so to speak, both in Europe and in other parts of the world.[3]

Thus, in addition to producing original content in the US, Netflix also increasingly does so abroad. These "Netflix Originals," as they are known, are then aired synchronously in all 190 countries. One of the most successful non-English-language Netflix Originals to have been produced in the wake of this necessity for new, globally accessible content is *Dark* (2017–20). The series is a perfect example of the success of the Netflix strategy to venture into foreign markets and to co-produce local stories of a "transnational nature" with global appeal:[4] products to which international viewers can relate and that are both understandable and enjoyable across borders, but that still tell a tale inserted in a specific cultural realm.[5] In this respect, *Dark* typifies the "future of television" as Netflix seems to have conceived it.[6] As it is complex, intellectually demanding (albeit not overwhelmingly so), "binge-watchable" and—as this chapter will explore—utterly transnational, *Dark* is part of a growing global audiovisual culture that, thanks to the possibilities offered by streaming platforms and the use of internationally recognizable audiovisual codes, aims for innovative, quality products to please niche audiences of "committed viewers"[7] worldwide. As *Dark* creator Jantje Friese argues: "You have to dare to be more independent, to find a niche. Then you can find your audience all over the world. If you only try to grab the entire German audience, you can't really deliver quality. Looking only at the audience figures in Germany is not good for the product."[8]

As Netflix's first original German-language series, *Dark* has become a milestone in the history of German audiovisual media, enjoying both commercial and critical acclaim and being mentioned in the same breath as highly popular and celebrated shows such as *Twin Peaks* (1990–91) and *Stranger Things* (2016–). In this regard, and as will be explained in the following section, the German series has firmly established itself in the category of what is considered "quality television."[9] Indeed, from the outset, it was the intention of its creators to fashion a product with a particular aesthetic and narrative value, and not mere fodder for a German audience that is accustomed to historical retellings of the war, or "monster-of-the-week" criminal series such as *Tatort* (1970–).[10] As a consequence, the series has not only been a success in its country of production, but, since its release, has managed to attract

international audiences, with over 90 percent of its viewers coming from outside Germany,[11] many of whom even follow social media recommendations to watch the show in the original German version with subtitles.[12] Indeed, *Dark*'s success, as will become clear, stems from its ability to take elements of German cultural heritage and package them in a way that makes them accessible and engaging for audiences worldwide. It is these qualities that make *Dark* "not so much a German series, but rather the perfect Netflix series."[13] In light of this, and by drawing on research by Mareike Jenner (2018), lb Bondebjerg (2017), and Daniela Schlütz (2016), the purpose of this chapter is to analyze *Dark* against the backdrop of recent media developments, and to reflect upon its reception with regard to quality media and transnationalism.

Complexity, Aesthetics, and Worldwide Audiences

Rather than applying a one-size-fits-all model, like the one that traditionally targeted mass national audiences, particularly US ones,[14] Netflix instead aspires to appeal to niche audiences[15] with "a great variety of individual tastes"[16] in all of the countries in which it delivers its products. This approach allows the company to reach a transnational, individualized mass audience—a policy that has been so effective that it has prompted Neil Landau to observe that "niche is the new mainstream."[17] This strategy is based upon offering products that are both transnationally accessible, as described above, and also respond to the criteria of what is considered to be "quality TV." Although the term "quality TV" was coined in the 1970s by American critics— albeit without ever really defining the term[18]—for decades traditional TV channels could not afford to offer what by today's standards is seen as quality programming, and instead opted for products that appealed to those viewers who were not seeking intricate or perplexing plots, but who were happy to start viewing at any time during the series run without feeling they had missed out on anything. Given that TV shows used to be aired once a week at a particular time, it would not have made economic sense for shows to be long-running or complex, as it would have meant that viewers could not afford to miss a single episode. Instead, "monster-of-the-week" type shows allowed viewers the freedom to tune in to short self-contained narratives that required no catching up. However, as technology has enabled asynchronous and nonlinear viewing, pay-TV channels and, more recently, streaming platforms no longer have to adhere to the constraints of network television, and have

thus managed to increase the quality of domestic audiovisual products. The critical and commercial successes of shows such as *The Crown* (2016–), *Stranger Things* (2016–), *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017–), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017–22) have changed the media landscape and increased the expectations of audiences and the pressure for content producers. *Dark* can deservedly take its place alongside those shows, having received universal critical acclaim and overwhelming approval by audiences worldwide (Rotten Tomatoes 95 percent, IMDb 8.8) who are in search of "quality TV." The show certainly ticks all the boxes that Schlütz identifies as being necessary for quality television: it is "complex," "hard to turn off" (binge-worthy), and involves, among other criteria, complex serial narratives, multifaceted characters, and enhanced visual qualities,[19] as will be discussed below.

It is not easy to summarize the story told in *Dark*. While the first episode leads the audience to believe that they have encountered yet another "missing-child story" à la Nordic Noir,[20] it soon becomes apparent that this is not a case of "where" the missing boy is but "when," as the show involves travel across time and across dimensions, and entails an intricate family saga, in which everything and everyone seems to be connected. Set in the shadow of a nuclear power plant in the fictional German town of Winden—a name that already foreshadows the twists and loops the viewer is about to encounter[21]—the narrative centers around four families. In the opening episode, the disappearance of Mikkel Nielsen triggers developments that link the looming power plant and the mysterious caves in the forest, which function as a time-portal, with the secrets and lies of those living in Winden. The viewer soon discovers that the series pivots around time travel; but, in *Dark*, time is cyclical, so that the ending has the potential to be the beginning and vice versa. Past, present, and future are intertwined. What is more, there are not only alternate timelines but alternate worlds, meaning that each character can also have multiple alternate selves.

However, *Dark* is not only complex because of its plot, but mainly because of its convoluted narrative arc and its multilayered structure, with numerous subtexts built upon a solid symbolic foundation. This does not presuppose any specific cultural knowledge, but it certainly rewards interpretation and decoding. These subtexts work both visually and within the storyline, and, as will be examined below, refer back to German intellectual and popular history, as well as international mythological and religious sources (the Minotaur and Saint Christopher, among others). This complex narrative arc is the kind of "narrative special effect" that Mittell describes as being one of the qualities of

complex TV.[22] Such effects captivate viewers and have them intrigued to understand the twists and turns of the narration. In this regard, *Dark* follows in the footsteps of "puzzle films," which have been increasingly popular since the 1990s—*The Usual Suspects* (1995), *Lola rennt* [Run Lola Run] (1998), *Memento* (2000), *The Others* (2001), and *Inception* (2010) to name just a few—which invite audiences to "play along to crack the interpretative codes and make sense of their complex narrative strategies."[23] As Mittel observes, the appeal of these products for the viewer is not necessarily in solving the mystery, like some sort of puzzle, but rather in appreciating the strategies used to manipulate the narrative.[24] Although Mittell argues that not watching a series as it is being broadcast at a weekly pace might isolate viewers and thus not allow them to share a collective experience, this does not seem to be true for *Dark*, which has fans re-creating, interpreting, and theorizing about the series online.[25] The series appears to be an example of how the national collective experience from the 1980s and 1990s has been replaced by a transnational collective experience, with audiences worldwide becoming actively engaged in the developments of the plot, which again fuels the transnational interest in the show thanks to internet platforms and social media. This is common for many contemporary media products, with forums functioning as paratexts, which together with more professional content (blogs, reviews, websites) contribute to the understanding of the storyline and characters,[26] and lend additional "credibility and aura" to the show.[27] In the case of *Dark*, the series has generated a considerable number of paratexts, both by professionals (reviews in the printed and digital press, the *Dark* Netflix official site, TV blogs) and by fans (videos and texts on different topics published on social media, and question-and-answer platforms like Quora and Reddit), with viewers creating family trees for the characters in a bid to untangle the timelines, as well as blogposts during the early seasons speculating on who the ambivalent characters of Adam, Noah, and the Stranger were. The active, multilingual discussions present in these internet sites are proof of the enormous fandom that has grown around the series, and also of its immense impact internationally. *Dark* became a worldwide success soon after its release, and its "travelability"—that is, the demand for a product outside its original market—has been ranked very high in countries as different as the United States, Japan, Russia, and Spain.[28]

As a complex narrative, *Dark* is rich in unexpected twists, and provides numerous foreshadowings and callbacks, which require, and reward, repeated viewing.[29] Indeed, while some allusions to the aforementioned myth of the Minotaur are quite obvious and will be picked

up by many viewers on first viewing, others are more subtle and only become apparent much later in the series, or are skillfully echoed in the soundtrack, as will be shown below. For example, while Martha, the sister of one of the missing children, Mikkel, performs the role of Ariadne in both worlds, she speaks prophetic words that are clearly linked to her own life. Her performance as Ariadne reveals for the first time in season one an idea that will be explored again in Martha's own life: namely, that the knot that binds her and her boyfriend, Jonas, needs to be severed in order to restore time in the origin world. Other examples of foreshadowing relate to Mikkel, with Martha asking their mother, Katharina, in episode one whether he is adopted (which he eventually will be) or when he wears a skeleton costume, in a clear reference to his death. Moreover, one of the first scenes in episode one features him playing a magic trick on his father: Mikkel makes a pawn disappear under a glass, and, at his father's questioning how he has done it, he answers: "Papa, the question is not how. The question is when?" (S1 E1). This playing with interrogative pronouns is also emulated later by the Stranger, an older time-traveling version of Jonas, who transforms the newspaper headline "Where is Mikkel?" to "When is Mikkel?" What is more, Martha's death in the season two finale is also signaled in advance by the cryptic way that older Jonas/the Stranger looks at the exact spot on the floor on which she will be killed or at the gun that will be used. Likewise, the infinity loop, which symbolizes the character of the Unknown (i.e., Jonas and Martha's offspring), is also a representation of the two worlds being united and eternally recurrent, and is featured on several occasions in the three seasons. It appears on the gravestone of the missing Mads Nielsen, and on the blackboard in the school in both seasons one and three.

Other main plotlines are equally hinted at through visual elements, bonding the narrative and adding to the circular compact nature of the plot. Hence, the existence of an alternate world or a mirrored reality is already pre-empted in *Dark*'s symmetrical opening credits, just as the symbol of the triquetra, a recurrent image in the show, hints at the existence of three different worlds. One of the best-conceived plot points of the series is the multiple appearances across time of a pendant bearing the image of Saint Christopher, the patron saint of travelers, which is not only a subtle allusion to the various time travelers, but, once again, stresses the interconnection of different times and characters. For example, when Hannah finds out she is pregnant with Egon's baby in the 1950s, she initially wants an abortion. In the backstreet "clinic," she meets young Helene Albers and gives her the necklace with the pen-

dant and introduces herself as Katharina. Helene Albers will eventually bear a child, named Katharina, the mother of Mikkel, Martha, and Magnus. When Katharina travels back in time to search for Mikkel and her husband Ulrich, she is killed by her own mother, who is unaware of their relationship. Before dying, Katharina grabs the necklace from her mother's neck and accidentally buries it in the sand near the lake where Jonas, Martha, Magnus, and their friend Bartosz usually spend their summer evenings. Years later, that necklace is found by Jonas, and eventually gifted back to Martha, who is Helene's granddaughter and—due to the loops of time travel—also Hannah's great-great-great-great-granddaughter. The story has yet another twist: one day in the lake, Bartosz tries to scare Martha by telling her about a dead woman who is supposedly buried in the lake. Little does he know by then that he is referring to Martha's own mother. These "narrative special effects" reward the attentive viewer with the satisfaction of solving the puzzle, and increase their commitment to the show.

Characterization is also crucial to *Dark*'s global success. According to Schlütz, "quality TV" also has to be believable, plausible, and consistent.[30] In this regard, actions and reactions of the characters ought to be those that can be found in the real world, while the plot and its twists need to show consistency. This is possible even within the implausible realms of a science-fiction world because, as Schlütz argues, even if not all of the aforementioned criteria are met, the most important element is that the story is "emotionally realistic."[31] This also contributes to the story being transnationally accessible, as Bondebjerg argues: "Even if a TV drama from a remote part of the world can seem more strange [*sic*] 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."[32] Viewers of *Dark* from different parts of the world can, for example, easily empathize with a parent losing a child and with the lengths they would go to recover them. "Emotional realism" is also particularly evident in the character development of young Jonas: the innocence of youth is rapidly stolen from him through being confronted with a cruel truth and, as one of the reviewers mentions, "every stare he gives has the weight of two seasons, and hundreds of lifetimes he's now lived."[33] This authenticity and plausibility concerning characters is also reflected in the superb casting of the series: actors performing the same character at different ages bear an uncanny resemblance to one another, so that viewers have no doubt of who that character is, when they first meet them at a different time. Even if they are not immedi-

ately recognizable, as is arguably the case with Jonas and Claudia and their different iterations, close-ups on their distinguishing marks (scars or heterochromia) lend consistency to the characterization.

Both image and sound are essential aspects of audiovisual story-telling. Visual features and high production values are, according to Schlütz, as important as complex narrative and multifaceted characters for quality TV.[34] Indeed, Schlütz argues that in order to be regarded as quality, a series should make an appropriate narratological use of in-novative techniques with regard to photography and sound. Several of those techniques are to be found in *Dark*. Besides the frequent split-screens, which contribute to forging the narrative by showing different epochs and juxtaposing characters at different ages, shots from above are employed in several instances to convey the idea that something or someone is controlling the characters.

The color palette and the use of music also play crucial roles in help-ing to structure the narration. Firstly, colors contribute to delimiting the different timelines: in the present, 2019, the colors are muted and dull, with gray and brown dominating the color palette; the 1980s, by contrast, are far brighter and more vivid, with predominantly primary colors, whereas the 1950s scenes are tinged with gray and sepia tones, which then turn darker when we travel further back to the 1880s. Yel-low is especially saturated in the "present," and plays a crucial role in the narrative: Jonas's yellow raincoat—which alternate Martha then "inherits" and which also makes a brief appearance in the "origin" world—has become an iconic symbol of the show, much like the Dali mask from *Money Heist*. Moreover, the yellow of the time travelers' coat also has symbolic value in that it is mirrored in the yellow radioac-tive barrels and protective garments in the nuclear plant, the source of the energy that makes time travel in the series possible. Just as nuclear fallout poses a threat to the world, the fallout of Martha and Jonas's relationship—the Unknown—has the potential to become a destructive force for all involved.

Likewise, music is another piece in the puzzle. The somber musical setting is in harmony with the visual scenery, particularly as there is a predominance of night scenes or dark interiors, shady forests, caves, and candle light. The coordination between the visual and musical treatment helps define the oppressive and closed environment from which some characters repeatedly express a wish to escape, all of which contributes to creating a feeling that is present throughout the series and which lends it unity. However, the sound in *Dark* goes far beyond the task of setting the scene. Indeed, as Ben Frost, the composer of the

soundtrack, observes, the melodies replicate the "cyclical, circular pat-terns"[35] that are to be found in the narrative, while the main motif in the soundtrack mimics the doppler effect, which is also reflected in the name of one of the protagonist families (the Dopplers), as well as in the dual quality of the characters and in the existence of parallel worlds. Furthermore, while the diegetic sound announces the transitions be-tween times and worlds—very often via a menacing and sinister noise, which is also prominently referenced in the subtitles—the extradiegetic music of the songs included in the soundtrack has been selected both for its musical properties (strings, operatic voices, and industrial and eerie sounds) and because music from a particular period contributes to placing the plot, enabling viewers to know where/when they are. The content of the lyrics is also in keeping with the overarching themes of the show with their references to powerlessness, love, regret, and time: "The Labyrinth Song" (Asad Avidan, 2014, S3 E4), "My Body Is A Cage" (Peter Gabriel, 2010, S2 E8), "If I Could Turn Back Time" (Cher, 1989, S3 E1), "You Spin Me Round" (Dead or Alive, 1984, S1 E1 and S3 E2), and, most importantly, Nena's "Irgendwie, irgendwo, irgend-wann" [Somehow, Somewhere, Somewhen] (1984, S1 E1 and S3 E8) are illustrative examples. All these details underpin the content, and contribute to making the narrative arc cohesive, thus also meeting the expectations of a high-quality audiovisual product.

The show's iconic music has also played a key role in *Dark*'s appeal for international audiences, and increased its "travelability" potential. The wealth of information online about the soundtrack attests to how much *Dark*'s choice of music has appealed to audiences worldwide, with dozens of playlists on Spotify and different websites collecting all songs and musical pieces from the show. Music has a communicative effect, particularly among younger generations, and thus contributes to creating a transnational cultural space. This is even more so the case, because most of the soundtrack is in the international language of Eng-lish. Even in the case of the German songs, such as those by Detlev Lais and Nena, the regional specificity is less important, as they reflect the sounds of a certain period—the 1950s or the 1980s—and are thus also able to transcend language and cultural barriers.

Dark: Transnationalism and Cultural Translatability

For most of its history, television has been utterly national and commit-ted to reinforcing national borders.[36] The onset of streaming platforms,

however, has contributed to the ongoing process of blurring national cultural borders and has also defined the (self-)perception of European media.[37] As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, in the course of its worldwide expansion, "Netflix has made true efforts of regionalization and nationalization"[38] to please national audiences that have a strong relationship to their own experience of TV and to their own localities. According to Bondebjerg, "[w]e 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."[39] On that account, Netflix has tried to please domestic audiences through its non-English-language Netflix Originals, but has still instilled these products with a patina of "transnationalism," in terms of genre tropes, narratological devices, and characterization, which allows them to travel. In so doing, the company has incorporated in these productions the audiovisual codes that audiences feel are part of their native audiovisual tongue: this, in spite of Germany's former reservations,[40] is mostly the audiovisual language from the US and the UK, as Bondebjerg suggests,[41] but more recently also from Scandinavia, due to the popularity of Nordic noir. Such "regional" products are still able to enter international markets because of their adherence to international audiovisual codes and the fact that most local elements are diluted by being "transnationalized."

In this sense, *Dark* has managed to incorporate a "grammar of transnationalism",[42] which makes the German show palatable for international audiences. Such "grammar" implies in this case the adoption of the aforementioned audiovisual codes of complex/quality TV—mainly from the US/UK and Scandinavia—and the presence of "tropes, values and myths which can potentially resonate in any foreign market,"[43] together with a setting that could be almost anywhere (a hospital, a police station, a school), as well as atemporal spaces, like a church or a lodge. However, the show also establishes a dialogue with Germany's cultural and intellectual history, offering additional appeal to domestic viewers. All in all, this results in a compilation of Germany's "greatest hits" in literature and philosophy, sugar-coated with ample references to translatable popular culture, perfectly packaged within the international vocabulary of contemporary media strategies.

It should not take viewers too long to find familiar elements in the visuals of *Dark* that will keep them watching. Nordic noir had already been a staple of German TV even before big shows such as *Forbrydelsen* (The Killing, 2007–12) and *Broen* (The Bridge, 2011–18) became interna-

tional hits. According to Eichner and Mikos,[44] collaborations between the Danish public broadcaster and ZDF resulted in several series, such as *Livvagterne* (The Protectors, 2009–10), *Ørnen* (The Eagle, 2004–6) and *Den som dræber* (Those Who Kill, 2011), being aired on ZDF's Sunday late-night slot. Moreover, the status of Scandinavian crime-fiction in the country—with names such as Stieg Larsson and Hennig Mankell being top of German bestseller lists—most probably played a role in the positive reception of these shows in Germany. In this respect, *Dark* plays with both the visual language and the conventions of Nordic noir. The influence of Nordic visuals on the appearance of the show is undeniable, with its "dimly-lit aesthetics" and "barren landscapes" reflecting the emotional tone of characters,[45] as is often the case in TV crime shows coming from Scandinavia.[46] In addition, besides the already mentioned "missing child" trope,[47] the construction of characters[48]—most notably, taciturn, and emotionally distant police chiefs Nielsen and Doppler—and the presence of strong female characters also reflect the connection with Nordic shows. Notwithstanding that, the narrative pace in *Dark* is faster than in its northern counterparts, and more closely resembles the editing of American productions, embracing, once again, a more transnational audiovisual approach.

As well as the tone and topoi of Nordic noir, *Dark* also resorts to a range of internationally recognizable elements, which add the complexity that appeals to audiences in search of more demanding TV. These include biblical and mythological references such as the recurrent reference to the myth of Ariadne and the labyrinth. As mentioned above, both Martha and alternate Martha play the character of Ariadne in the school play, and the red thread that Ariadne gives Theseus in the mythological account to help him emerge from the labyrinth after killing the Minotaur is alluded to on different occasions in the show. It is shown repeatedly in the complex cave system as a guiding line to help Jonas—and anyone else—to find his way, but it also links the photographs of the protagonists that are mapped out on a wall in the opening of the first episode, functioning from the very start as a clue that reveals that all characters are somehow interconnected. In German, the term "red thread" (*roter Faden*) refers to the common thread that makes an argument or a story cohesive. In a comparable way, the Ouroboros, the ancient symbol depicting a snake eating its own tail, also has a prevalent presence in the series. In the cave, the Stranger ties the red thread to a ring in the shape of the Ouroboros, and the symbol is also reflected in the bracelet that one of the characters gives to his future wife during their childhood. Thus, in addition to hinting

at some of the key themes in the show (the eternal cycle of life, end and beginning, death and rebirth), the Ouroboros symbolically hints at the circular nature of the plot. Moreover, scars on Jonas's body—which are shown time and again—also have a mythological/biblical resonance, as they echo Ulysses' arrival at Ithaca, when his nursemaid recognizes him from the scar on his leg, and also the scene in the Gospel according to John, when the apostle Thomas recognizes Jesus from the scars in his hands and side. Such iconic devices, which, as previously discussed, contribute to forging the plotline and carry great symbolic weight, are mixed together with pop-culture references.

Albeit not in the same naive way as *Stranger Things* (a Netflix show it is often compared with), *Dark* also re-creates a "make-believe land of the 1980s," with iconic cultural products that could easily be recognized anywhere, and which support a certain "cultural proximity" (Straubhaar) or cultural nostalgia for Netflix consumers. The thesis that streaming platforms—just like film or television before them—capitalize on nostalgia is not new (cf. Pallister); they do so in order to develop a sense of community and/or generational identity in viewers. While remakes, reboots, prequels and sequels are all re-creations that exploit the positive memory left among audiences by a particular show, programs might also be intrinsically nostalgic, by aiming to evoke in audiences feelings of "yearning for a time period they might feel attached to," both directly and vicariously.[49] Shows such as *Little House on the Prairie* in the 1970s, and *Brooklyn Bridge* in the 1990s, have benefited from this yearning for times past. They are part of a collective nostalgic response that, as Pallister affirms, is born in the "mediated knowledge of that earlier time period and its popular culture."[50] Shows streamed by Netflix also lean on this collective cultural nostalgia: *Stranger Things* (2016–), *The Crown* (2016–), *Cable Girls* (2017–20), and *Dark* are evident examples of Netflix's strategy to feed viewers with a subjective/emotional viewing experience, in which they can either relate to the period that the show is set in or find comfort from the ideas and values linked to that era.[51] Furthermore, as Schwindt remarks, nostalgic shows also respond to the company's wish to gain the attention of Generation X and baby boomers for their market.[52] Precisely the viewers pertaining to those generations would be the ones to recognize in *Dark* such references to the antinuclear Smiling Sun, Rubik's Cube, allusions to films such as *Back to the Future* (1985) and *The Goonies* (1985), and comics (*Captain Future*), or the portrayal of fashion, with fuzzy hairstyles and varsity jackets—the last of which is an example of an object that "travels well" among cultural realms, due to its omnipresence in pop-

ular US high-school movies of the 1980s and 1990s, such as *Teenwolf* (1985) and *The Breakfast Club* (1985). The recurring references to bars of Raider chocolate as clues within the narrative are primarily meant for domestic audiences, who will remember that Twix bars were called Raider in Germany until 1991. Even if international or younger viewers cannot decipher those cues, the references will nonetheless resonate with them, particularly through the Raider TV advertisement that appears in the show with its unmistakable 1980s aesthetics. Similarly, attentive Generation X-ers will relate the Ouroboros to the cover of Michael Ende's *Die unendliche Geschichte* (1979), the most internationally successful example of German young-adult fiction at the time. The two snakes biting their tails also decorate a medallion that is central to the plot of the novel, and are one of the many symbols in Ende's story that refer to a circular conception of the world. Additionally, besides these transnational and international references, there are other elements of the show that are utterly a part of contemporary German sociocultural history: Helmut Kohl posters for the 1987 election campaign, German bus stops, green German police cars, Hawaii Toast, white socks with sandals, queues at bakeries, and Reclam books, among others. However, even if such local elements function as mnemonic topoi for nostalgic purposes, as suggested above, they are also made accessible to international viewers. Throughout the series, there is an attempt to eliminate cultural borders and to translate regionally bound devices. Thus, international viewers might not recognize the politician in the poster, but his style and the fact that his poster shares a space with the 1980s band Modern Talking contribute to situating him in a certain epoch; the same happens with the retro-looking police VW Golf, the 1 *Pfennig* coin or the Hawaii Toast, introduced as "comfort food" and easily understood as the equivalent of "mac'n'cheese" or similar for US viewers.

Equally transnational is Netflix's thematization of contemporary issues and the attempt to incorporate diversity within its original shows. Jenner refers to the inclusion of (loosely defined) "Western values,"[53] which have become distinctive for streaming platforms—sometimes in a manner that defies their wish for plausibility. In *Dark*, there is a well-defined effort to portray female empowerment—with women appearing in meaningful, leading roles, and advancing the storyline—and to include traditionally underrepresented groups such as homosexual and transgender characters, as well as individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, as a dystopian narrative, *Dark* pivots around a social concern and, thus, echoes the debate around nuclear power, with mentions of Chernobyl, acid rain, and cases of cancer, even before the nuclear

meltdown portrayed in the show. Moreover, the plotline is strongly aligned with the decommissioning of the nuclear power plant and the role of nuclear power in enabling time travel. In this regard, in an interview, *Dark*'s creators acknowledged that they were inspired by their own childhoods in small German towns during the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986 in Ukraine, when the release of radioactive materials over Europe spurred widespread fears of contamination and further accidents. According to bo Odar, such fear is "a very German, or European, feeling that Americans don't get, because they [have] never had fallout like that."[54] However, further events—such as the accident at Fukushima, and the ongoing debate worldwide over the safety of nuclear plants, together with the global success of *Chernobyl*, the series launched by HBO in May 2019—have contributed to widespread suspicion of nuclear power in other countries, making nuclear plants, particularly when they are depicted in the threatening way they appear in *Dark*, creepier transnationally.

Nonetheless, even if *Dark* adapts to the norms of a "grammar of transnationalism" and its narrative is meant to become universal, Jenner argues that Netflix products also "remain geographically and ideologically bound."[55] This is a claim that *Dark* viewers, and also its creators, would agree with. "I've heard several times that *Dark* is designed in such a way that it could theoretically play anywhere, but it still has many unmistakably German elements," a Reddit user expressed, while bo Odar declared in an interview that there was something "inherently German about the whole thing."[56] Indeed, beyond the various German pop-cultural references at a surface level, *Dark* also reflects upon prominent philosophical and literary developments in German intellectual history, which, together with the quality criteria already mentioned, further its value as an audiovisual product. The viewer is not confronted with a charming whodunit or time-travel story like *Back to the Future*, with its continuous humorous remarks, but rather with an intellectually engaging piece, which demands sustained, rational involvement.

In this respect, the series is rich in motifs and themes associated with nineteenth-century German literature and thought. This was a period when the German-speaking cultural realm gained international fame through its literary, musical, and philosophical accomplishments, which notably revolved around individual freedom and the search for the absolute, in its multiple forms. Both of these themes are extensively elaborated in *Dark*. Indeed, co-creator Friese herself admitted in an interview that German philosophy was the one thing she felt a German produc-

tion could offer Netflix's international audiences.[57] And, so, many ideas found in Goethe, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer—all referenced in the show—are presented in *Dark* in a diluted form, which makes them accessible both to national and international viewers. The beginning of a number of episodes includes intertexts with quotes by Albert Einstein, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Friedrich Nietzsche that support the narrative arc by becoming a guide to the plot. Whereas this recourse might seem an easy strategy to capture younger audiences in search of a nice phrase to enhance their status on social media, the show itself develops ideas set out by the main philosophers of the nineteenth century. Among other philosophical aspects that are discussed throughout the series, the central one is the dichotomy between determinism and free will, which is linked to the idea of the "eternal return," as depicted by Friedrich Nietzsche, and which finds an echo in the cyclical scheme of the narrative. This also seems to portray the confrontation between the beliefs of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, whose system of ideas is embodied by the protagonists, Jonas/Adam and Martha/Eva. Both feel trapped in a cycle of suffering and desperation, but, while Adam only aims to destroy "all servitude to [our] feelings" (S2 E7) to reach peace in the form of nothingness—a very Schopenhauerian thought—Eva still holds to the hope of love. She wishes to repeat the cycle endlessly, for the sake of life, even if that entails sorrow and misery for her and her loved ones. In the final chapter, there is a hint at Schopenhauer's paradigm prevailing over Nietzsche's, when Hannah, Jonas's mother, pronounces the words: "And then everything was suddenly dark and somehow the world had come to an end . . . And the weird thing is that it felt very good for everything to be over, like suddenly being free of everything. No wants. No needs. Unending darkness. No yesterday, no today, no tomorrow. Nothing" (S3 E8). This final "Schopenhauerian turn" at the dinner table in the last episode seems to embody precisely what *Dark* brings about: the "popularization" of German philosophy among audiences who discuss metaphysical and ethical issues in relation to the show, and, in so doing, build a transnational community, which finds its home on internet sites dedicated to the series.

Beyond its engagement with the German philosophical tradition, the series also reflects several literary trends of the nineteenth century, which have largely traveled beyond the German-speaking regions.[58] These originate mostly in the Romantic—and particularly in the Dark Romantic—literary tradition, and play a crucial role in the series, both visually and narratively. Literary resources and motifs such is the wanderer on a quest (archetypal for the Romantics, and famously repre-

sented by Caspar David Friedrich in his painting "Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer" [Wanderer above the Sea of Fog] 1818), the relevant role of nature (most particularly of woods, caves, and paths) and the notion of *Waldeinsamkeit* [the feeling of solitude in the forest], and the uncanny idea of the *Doppelgänger* as the reverse of our own self, are all key concepts in the show. The concept of *Waldeinsamkeit*, which is linked to the German tradition of the *Märchen* [fairy tales] and is central to the writings of Joseph von Eichendorff and Ludwig Tieck—in whose tale "Der blonde Eckbert" (1797) the term appeared for the first time—has been received in other cultural traditions, most memorably by Henry David Thoreau (in his celebrated *Walden*, 1854) and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote a poem entitled "Waldeinsamkeit" (1858). The notion is also present in several paintings by Caspar David Friedrich, whose representations of solitude resonate in the numerous images in *Dark* in which the protagonists are depicted on their own, with their back to the viewer and surrounded by nature, mostly in the forest. In this regard, nature in *Dark* is also linked to the Dark Romantic. Just as in the popular tales collected by the Grimm Brothers, in which the forest is the setting for spooky and terrible events, the forest in *Dark* can also be a threatening place: it is witness to children being abducted and found dead, it is the place from which the most ominous characters emerge, and, rather than being a place in which one can find oneself in a metaphorical sense, it is the place in which characters literally find themselves by meeting their uncanny doubles. Furthermore, the series also plays with another trope of the Dark Romantic tradition, namely the vague boundaries between dream and reality, thereby adding to the feeling of uncertainty experienced by the characters. In this regard, the series seems to replicate the atmosphere of texts written by E.T.A. Hoffmann, which often display split personalities, the existence of Doppelgänger, or the feeling of losing a grasp of one's identity or even of reality itself. All of these elements convey to viewers a sense of the uncanny, which is also sustained by symbolical repetitions (dialogues that are replicated in different times and in different worlds, mirroring images of mothers and daughters, or the ubiquitous yellow raincoat), which grant unity to the atmosphere in the show. The plot also confronts characters time and again with their Doppelgänger: sometimes, these "doubles" are they themselves, albeit at a different age; on other occasions, they are confronted with their offspring or relatives, who remind them of their former self and a former time. However, not even killing their own parents (Claudia/Egon, Hanno/Bartosz, Adam/Han-

nah) or younger selves (Helge Doppler)—which links back with the idea of predestination—is going to prevent those precise events that they want to avoid happening.

In this respect, as Jenner notes, genre can become a medium to "formulate a transnational version of history" by obliquely tackling problematic issues, rather than addressing them directly in a more accurate representation.[59] It is my contention that *Dark*, making use of the mystery/science-fiction genre, replicates the intergenerational debate that existed in Germany during the twentieth century without directly addressing it, and to do so employs notions and beliefs from the country's own literary and philosophical tradition. As seen above, decision making plays a central role in the show, with individuals being forced into having to make difficult choices. However, active choices are eventually shown to be an illusion, because events will repeat themselves perpetually, no matter what actions or decisions are taken—even if one decides, for example, to kill one's younger self. To date, German film and TV shows that have gained recognition abroad have tended to be set during the Nazi regime or the postwar period; even films that are not ostensibly set in those times, such as *Die Welle* [The Wave] (2008) and *Das Experiment* [The Experiment] (2001), nonetheless examine the way that people can become *Mitläufer* [followers] and supporters of immoral behavior. Few German films that have been successful abroad have not dealt with those themes of individuals being swept along by, and complicit in, the system, with *Lola rennt* (1998) and *Toni Erdmann* (2016) being notable exceptions.

In *Dark*, the 33-year-cycle allows the series—whether intentionally or not—to *avoid* those episodes in history that would be more familiar to international audiences, namely the Third Reich and the GDR. Nonetheless, their presence feels like the elephant in the room in the series. The war, for example, is subtly introduced in the very first shots of the very first episode, which features the bunker that will then play a central role, as well as close-ups of masks, grenades, and gothic font in the inscriptions on the wall. Further aspects relating to the war permeate the whole series: for instance, missing father figures, the cover-up after the war in the 1950s, and the apocalyptic atmosphere in the future, which relates both to the threat of nuclear power, but also to the fear of a nuclear conflict between the USSR and the United States, which loomed large during the Cold War period.

The introduction of the philosophical debate over personal free will seems to be particularly revealing in a series in which the younger gen-

eration travels back in time to find out that they, and not their parents, are indeed the cause of the ills of the world. In this regard, the series appears to question the reproaches made by younger generations of the older generation with regard to their past behaviors—that is, their culpability in the events that defined the first half of the twentieth century. Friese herself hints at this possibility:

> We feel delving into those dark themes has a lot to do with who we are and what happened in the first years of the last century, when basically there were two world wars and lots of people were killed in the name of Germans. It's something that we, as the younger generation, talked about extensively in school and always with the question, how could this happen? How can people actually do such dark and creepy things? I think those themes, the darkness in human behavior itself, is something that is very German.[60]

This darkness is certainly given expression in the series, albeit not directly in relation to specific historical events, but rather indirectly via a science-fiction narrative that incorporates philosophical approaches regarding the role of the individual in shaping history.

Conclusion

This localization of content, which in *Dark* involves integrating elements of Germany's popular culture and intellectual history into the show, is part of the Netflix strategy to expand through international markets. As shown above, and as Bondebjerg suggests, audiences appreciate local flavor in their media products. Thus, the company (more so than other streaming services, such as Disney+ or Amazon Prime Video) has attempted to respond to such market specificities through its non-English-language Netflix Originals. As part of its international organizational plan—which also involves a physical presence in several European capitals, for example[61]—Netflix has achieved a cultural balancing act by incorporating into its shows both local and global ingredients, so that its products adhere to the "grammar of transnationalism" (Jenner), making them particularly appealing to local audiences, but also palatable to those viewing around the world.

In the case of *Dark*, the use of internationally recognizable genre codes, quality visuals, the allure of nostalgia, and an absorbing, complex narrative, rich in transnationally recognizable symbols and tropes

that engage niche audiences worldwide, has allowed Netflix to also introduce regional specificities, which might be less familiar internationally. These include nods to popular culture, such as music, media, food, and props, as well as narratives that have their basis in the German philosophical and literary tradition of the nineteenth century, encompassing notions such as free will and determinism, and the existence of the absolute. While these elements might not be as familiar to international audiences as those they are typically exposed to in German films and series, such as the war or life behind the Berlin Wall, the truth is that they may not be so surprising either. After all, as Friese herself notes in her interview, there exist certain preconceptions about Germany, which they, as creators and producers, played with: "I don't know if it's German angst, but there is something uniquely creepy about Germans, at least from the outside perspective. . . We are definitely delivering on that."[62] In this respect, *Dark* seems to fit into a German cultural tradition of angst and *Weltschmerz*,[63] the implications of which were examined by several of the philosophers who feature in the series, frequently thematized by the Romantics, and defined the painful coming to terms with the past throughout the twentieth century. In this regard, then, the series offers its viewers a perfect mix of sensibility, complexity, and depth—exactly what they would expect from the *Land der Dichter und Denker*, the land of poets and thinkers.

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Notes

1. Webb, "Netflix's New Series."
2. Sanguino, "Todas las ciudades."
3. Bondebjerg, "Transnational Europe."
4. Jenner, *Re-invention*, 242.
5. This balance of the foreign with the familiar is in keeping with the recipe for success identified by Seeßlen for foreign films at the Academy Awards; see Seeßlen "So gewinnt man."
6. Cornils, "Streamingmärchen"; Rolling Stone, "Goethe als Ghostbusters."
7. Zündel, "TV IV," 19.
8. Reinhardt, "*Tatort*."
9. "Quality television" is a rather complex term, difficult to define and often deemed controversial (see Bayo Moriones, Etayo, and Sánchez-Tabernero, "Quality TV," and Jenner, "Binge-watching"). For the purposes of this chapter, quality TV refers to shows that display sufficient artistry, show complexity at a narratological level, and have also received popular and critical acclaim.
10. Ibid.
11. Roettgers, "*Dark* may be from Germany."
12. Schmid, "Untertitel."
13. Cornils, "Streamingmärchen."
14. Cf. Jenner, *Re-invention*, 186.
15. What exactly that niche entails remains unclear. However, a look at the tags under which *Dark* has been cataloged on Netflix reveals that the series is likely to appeal to those looking for "genres" such as "German," "TV Mysteries," "Crime TV Shows," "Sci-Fi TV," "TV Thrillers," and "TV Dramas," or media products that respond to categories like "mind-bending," "chilling," "ominous," "cerebral," "scary," and "suspenseful," as those are the tags that *Dark* has been categorized under.
16. Zündel, "TV IV," 15.
17. Landau, "Outside the Box," 137.
18. Schlütz, "Contemporary Quality TV," 97.
19. Ibid., 100.
20. *Dark* was released shortly after German national broadcaster Das Erste aired *Das Verschwinden* (Hans-Christian Schmid, 2017), a miniseries that also deals with the shadow of a disappearance in a backwoods locale.
21. In German, the verb *winden* means "to writhe" or "to twist," as the series so often does.
22. Mittell, *Complex TV*, 43.
23. Ibid., 39.
24. Ibid., 51; Bundel, "*Dark* Season 3."
25. Mittell, *Complex TV*, 40.
26. Cf. Kozloff, "Narrative Theory," 80.
27. Cf. Schlütz, "Contemporary Quality TV," 102.
28. See tv.parrotanalytics.com for specific data on demand for the series in these and other countries.
29. Cf. Wigley, "Burning Questions."
30. Schlütz, "Contemporary Quality TV," 102.
31. Ibid., 114.
32. Bondebjerg, "Transnational Europe," 50.

33. Frank, "A Drop in the Ocean."
34. Schlütz, "Contemporary Quality TV," 103.
35. Clarke, "Ben Frost."
36. Chalaby, "From Internationalization."
37. Bondebjerg, "Transnational Europe."
38. Jenner, *Re-invention*, 213.
39. Bondebjerg, "Transnational Europe," 28.
40. Krauß, "Quality Series," 50.
41. Bondebjerg, "Transnational Europe," 26.
42. Jenner, *Re-invention*, 194.
43. Olson, "Hollywood Planet," 118.
44. Eichner and Mikos, "Popularity of Nordic Noir."
45. Cf. Creeber, "Killing"; Hansen, "Euro Noir," 276.
46. Scandinavian productions from the last few decades and *Dark* have been linked to the same "forefathers," namely David Fincher and David Lynch (cf. Hansen, "Euro Noir"), with regard to their use of aesthetics and narrative strategies. Indeed, the transcultural dialogue between US and Nordic media seems to conform to a process of "inward absorption" and "outward reabsorption." While Nordic noir has traditionally been influenced by Anglo-American crime fiction, recently its aesthetics and narratological devices define many audiovisual products from the US and the UK, such as *Broadchurch* (2013–17, ITV), *True Detective* (2014–19, HBO) and, most recently, *The Stranger* and *Safe* (both Harlan Coben adaptations, which were produced and streamed by Netflix in 2020 and 2018 respectively).
47. Hansen, "Euro Noir," 278.
48. Bondebjerg, "Transnational Europe," 116–19.
49. Sirianni, "Nostalgic Things," 187.
50. Pallister, *Netflix Nostalgia*, 3.
51. In this respect, it is remarkable that the 1980s are still Germans' favorite decade. According to a survey commissioned by the German news agency DPA, Germans remember the 1980s with a deep sense of nostalgia. Schikora, "80er Jahre."
52. Schwindt, "*Stranger Things*."
53. Jenner, *Re-invention*, 226.
54. Rogers, "New Border."
55. Jenner, *Re-invention*, 227.
56. Whitehouse, "We spoke to the creators."
57. Nguyen, "Co-creator."
58. Exactly this idea of crossing cultural borders and making art universal was already of importance in literary circles at the time, e.g., the early Romantics with their concept of *progressive Universalpoesie* [universal poetry] (Schlegel) and J.W. Goethe, who promoted the idea of a *Weltliteratur* [world literature] that looked beyond "the narrow circle that surrounds us." Interestingly, just as Goethe looked to the "ancient Greeks, in whose works the beauty of mankind is constantly represented" as a model, *Dark* also embraces Greek tragedy in its treatments of notions such as fate and loss. Goethe, "Conversations on World Literature," quoted by Damrosch, *Comparative Literature*, 23.
59. Jenner, *Re-invention*, 228.
60. Whitehouse, "We spoke to the creators."
61. Iordache, "Transnationalisation," 8.
62. Whitehouse, "We spoke to the creators."
63. Flackett, "Angst."

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