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What we do when we make sense of *Borgen*

Introduction: The interpretative skills of the audience

In this chapter I will continue to explore how the idea of the contextual field can be used to illuminate the meaning of events and processes represented in media texts. I will draw on an episode of the Danish political drama, *Borgen*, to demonstrate how, in order to follow the storyline, audiences do in fact already employ many of the general concepts of the contextual field. Audiences require these general, abstract concepts in order to make sense of the dramatic events offered to them. They draw on them incrementally as the plot unfolds, slowly but surely combining them with the hues, shades and details of the specifics of this particular story, with these particular characters, in this time and place. Through this combination of general ideas and local detail, audiences begin to build up stocks of quite specific background knowledge as an episode progresses, remembering what has already happened in the episode, and potentially from previous episodes, and keeping this quietly in mind. As the episode continues they then, at the appropriate points, refer back to these past moments in order to make sense of new moments in the unfolding of the narrative. Sophisticated skills of interpretation are employed, for the most part intuitively rather than consciously, as many of the general concepts of the contextual field are applied *in situ* to the local tones, colours and details of particular events and processes. The optimistic lesson to be drawn from this is that such audiences already exhibit many of the capacities and skills I am advocating. The challenge is simply to make these more explicit, to refine them further and to apply them to news and current affairs as well as to complex political dramas.

As viewers are not players within the sequence of events, and so are not positioned within the contextual field as Sandy was in the previous chapter, they are always attempting to follow what is going on from within their position as external observers. They will be alert to those relevant *objective factors in the contextual field* (see Chapter 2, page 32) that can be identified from the vantage point of an entirely external observer. By *entirely* external I mean to indicate someone who both isn't involved in the field of action *and* doesn't make any attempt to understand how involved, situated, actors experience that field. However, much in the *Borgen* storyline does in fact rest on viewers also being able to identify with the situated position of the characters within the story, attempting to take their viewpoint and to see the world through their eyes. So, viewers will never be entirely external in the sense I've suggested. There is a link here with objective factors, as being able to take the perspective of involved actors means that viewers will also be alert to the various different ways in which the contextual field presents itself to these characters as an objective contextual terrain. This is an *objective contextual terrain confronting different characters in different ways*. The terrain inevitably confronts the characters in different ways as they are situated in different positions within the contextual field that provides the arena for the episode's unfolding events. The objective terrain confronted Sandy in particular ways because she, likewise, was facing it from a distinctive position, and attempted to negotiate that position in the best way she could, all the time facing the loss of her rented apartment. In *Borgen*, the contextual terrain also presents itself to the characters *in situ* as a specific field of pressures, constraints, risks, possibilities and potential negative and positive sanctions. Their knowledge about some of this terrain will be fairly accurate and well informed, whereas their knowledge about other aspects of it will be murky or non-existent.

Viewers of the *Borgen* episode need to grasp the essentials of all of this in order to understand the various dilemmas around which the plot revolves. Competent audiences of *Borgen* need to be able to understand a good deal about the *subjective ways* in which characters perceive the objective circumstances in which they find themselves. For when *Borgen's* characters experience the powerful objectivity of the contextual terrain that faces them, they do so from within a particular, culturally inflected frame of meaning. That is, from within a deep layer of subjectivity and culture that guides and moulds how they apprehend, perceive and feel about the pressures, duties, obligations, expectations, opportunities and dilemmas that confront them. This is to point to the situated subjective component of their apprehension of their objective context. I think of this moment as the actors' analysis of context, or *context analysis*.¹ As a situated actor's (or in the case of drama, a situated character's) analysis of their contextual field will be deeply affected by both the nuances of their objective position and their cultural and individual

perspective on this, there will almost always be a gap between how they experience a situation and the sense of this grasped by a viewer. A viewer, as an external observer, can never totally inhabit the body and perspective of an actor who is in the midst of either a political drama or a news event. In terms of knowledge of the objective characteristics of the relevant context, the characters involved in a drama and the people involved in a news event can know more about their context than the audience, but they can also know less. It is important to remember this, and to be prepared to think about its implications in situations where a grasp of context is significant.

But there is also a further moment of subjectivity involved in how situated actors *process and respond* to their own analysis of the objective context, with its various networks, pressures and dynamics. If the first moment is concerned with how they analyse their contextual field, this second moment is concerned with the process by which they combine that analysis of context with other aspects of their subjectivity as they come to act in a particular way. Such actions may be rationally calculated, emotionally detached, consciously aware and decisive, or they may be devoid of rational calculation, fuelled by emotion, completely intuitive, and hesitant. Alternatively, they may possess various intermediate combinations of these or other characteristics. Further, their actions may be driven more by their perception of immediate external powers, forces and constraints or, alternatively, by the more enduring aspects of who they are as an individual, or as a collective actor, including their values, ethical orientations and principles, both personal and professional. Such identities include a sense of their own history and integrity, and their loyalties, commitments, tastes, ambitions, ideals, virtues and so on. These are aspects internal to an actor that social theorists have got used to calling *habitus*, and we will return to this important conception later in the chapter.²

Sometimes, the combination of external pressures and goal-directed personal or collective ambition can lead to values, ethics and loyalties being subordinated, and sometimes, perhaps less often, the confrontation between external pressures and personal ideals can lead to ambitions being forfeited for the sake of ethical commitments. This is an aspect of actors' interior lives in which they decide, more or less consciously, how to conduct themselves, and consequently it is useful for viewers to try and grasp what is happening within this process. The viewers thus need to engage in an analysis of how the situated actor's conduct comes to be what it is: how they reconcile their perception of context with what they'd like to achieve, and with how they'd ideally like to behave. It can be seen immediately here how it is very useful to differentiate **between** attempting to grasp the contextual field confronting an actor (*context analysis*) **and** attempting to grasp the process by which an actor combines their sense of this contextual field with deliberations or judgements about how to act (*conduct analysis*). The precise role an actor's analysis of

context plays in their subsequent actions can vary a great deal, and can be more or less at the forefront of an actor's mind as they act. It is important to try and be alert to this when attempting to diagnose motive and rationale for a character's actions. I will say more about this process later.

In any case, we do want to know how characters move from their perceptions and understandings about the contextual field into acting in particular ways at particular junctures – moving from context to conduct. Why actors do what they do – the kinds of actions that will be at the heart of any episode of any drama as well as being central to most news and current affairs events – can involve a whole range of subjective internal processes of impulse, emotion, reasoning, choice and decision-making, within which objective features 'out-there' in the contextual field are both internalized *and* responded to in the form of actions. Consequently, in addition to continuing to direct attention to the objective elements with the contextual field in what follows, I will also provide a more fine-grained exposition of concepts that can illuminate *both* of the important subjective dimensions of actors' orientations to the contextual field.

The episode I will focus on is that of 'State Visit', the 6th episode of the first series of *Borgen*. Let me start by making a very general point about the character of the background knowledge audiences bring to their understanding of a text. A viewer who watches the whole of the episode of 'State Visit', from beginning to the end, will, at any one point in the episode, be able to relate the current onscreen events to everything that has come before. There will be an intuitive, interpretative, tacking backwards and forwards, between the knowledge of what has happened thus far and knowledge of what is happening right now. This is an interpretative movement from the part to the whole, and from the whole to the part, in what theorists call a 'hermeneutic circle'.³ This means that someone who comes to the episode half way through, or keeps coming in and out of a room where the episode is playing, will build up a poorer, more fragmented and disconnected, sense of the whole, and this will inevitably affect the quality of their interpretation. When a viewer attentively watches the whole of an episode, she will relate to the later scenes within that episode in a way that is analogous to how the viewer of a single news bulletin will relate to that report when she already has a good deal of background knowledge about the issue being presented. This news' viewer is able to place the episodic vignettes presented to her within a single bulletin into some kind of context – into broader, deeper, historical, social and narrative contexts – so that what is happening on the screen, being seen and being heard at the moment, makes greater sense than it would do to someone without any background knowledge. The greater the background knowledge, naturally assuming that it is relevant to the issue at hand, then the more equipped the audience member will be to grasp the essentials of what is going on.

The assiduous viewer of the *whole* series of *Borgen* is correspondingly that much better equipped again than a viewer who has only seen the 'State

Visit' episode. The viewer of the whole series knows the main protagonist, the Danish Prime Minister, Birgitte Nyborg, well enough to know that it is important to her to be an ethical, principled, politician. Her dilemmas typically involve ethical principle. However, her ethical character is not one that is committed to pure ideals separated from any real-life context. For Birgitte is a realist as well as an idealist. A recurring theme is how to reconcile high moral ideals with the need to be pragmatic in situations that demand principled responsibility in a context of limited powers. Understanding this dilemma means that the viewer recognizes not only the moral principles but also the *in-situ* nuances of the power relations facing the prime minister. Understanding these, in turn, means being able to draw on abstract, general, conceptions of power relations within contextual fields, and to visualize how feasible Birgitte's ethical and policy ideals, and those of her party, look when situated within such a strategic or contextual field inhabited by organizations and other entities possessing distinctive powers and significance. We shall see that an attentive, competent, viewer of 'State Visit' is routinely able to grasp a good deal both about the relevant objective nexus of power relations and about the various interdependencies that make up the structural context of action. Such a viewer is also able to grasp a good deal about Birgitte's character, about what moves and animates her, and thus about what to expect from her as a social actor.

These are impressive levels of background knowledge for audiences to deploy, levels that wait there, lying dormant, until the appropriate moment. We usually take for granted these levels of skill and dexterity required from viewers in order for them to follow a story by drawing the appropriate aspects of stored knowledge to the fore at just the right moment. However, it is necessary to positively reflect upon what is involved in this dexterity if we are to fully grasp its importance. For the essential point is that the majority of *Borgen's* viewers automatically, intuitively, call on these skills as a matter of course. In developing a critical pedagogy for audiences of news and current affairs we are asking such audiences to cultivate something akin to the skills used in reading a political drama such as *Borgen*, but to apply them *self-consciously* to current affairs, and to hone them to a fine critical point. The difficulties will lie not in audience incapacity to rise to these heights of interpretation – as such skills are already part of the cultural competence of viewers of drama and other stories, albeit developed to different levels depending on the complexity and demands of their favoured genres and sub-genres. The difficulties will lie in changing ingrained, inured habits, somewhat ironically unaccustomed to news and current affairs programmes making the kinds of demands on their interpretative skills that are commonplace in other genres.

With television news there has typically been a tacit compromise between producers and audiences that the latter aren't to be stretched. The absence of any protocols signalling that audiences for news stories should ground their reception of such stories within the kind of carefully defined context – the

relevant networks of relations – routinely required for political or crime drama has had consequences. The culture of audience reception presumed by this is one that is passive and prosaic. It means that audiences – who are also, of course, citizens with democratic rights and responsibilities – routinely accept that it is normal and natural to respond submissively, without the resources of a critical frame, to a news culture pervaded by the power of rhetorically inflected, but relatively empty, opinion and argument. There seems to be little appreciation of, or at least very little articulacy about, how far this falls short of a response that would be more appropriate, one grounded in the robust analysis of forces, relations and dilemmas embedded in context. The challenge that faces us is one of heightening reflexivity and awareness about these issues; there is a need to improve the standards we set ourselves in the reception of news and current affairs accounts.

By looking more closely at what a political drama such as *Borgen* requires from its audience we can create a more detailed picture of the kinds of things that, at a minimum, should be required from audiences for its non-fiction equivalents. I will show that audiences bring a *general* understanding of contextual fields and their significance to their understanding of the dilemma that confronts Birgitte in 'State Visit', and will distinguish between different aspects of such general understandings. I will also show how audiences necessarily combine and interlace these general understandings with knowledge of *particular details* about *this* story in *this* time and *this* place. This process of interlacing is extremely skilled, and shouldn't be taken for granted, but neither, I am insisting, should it be thought of as something beyond the capacity of audiences for news and current affairs.

Subjective factors in the contextual field

In the last chapter I set out a basic repertoire of objective elements around which to focus the subsequent discussion. The broad picture of the contextual field introduced there was focused around just a few key conceptual themes that appear in the sociological literature as power, social structure, agency, time and space. The detail provided in box 2, 'Objective Factors in the Contextual Field', on page 32 elaborated on one or other aspect of these themes, and on the ways in which they interweave. It provided an objective context allowing us to 'embed and root' events, avoiding the seemingly free-floating presentation of events in news reports that Bourdieu and others have complained about. In order to be able to systematically map out the contextual field relevant to a particular account it is necessary to also think about subjective issues. Thus, in this chapter I want to complement the previous discussion by focusing now

on subjective factors, and these are outlined in **box 3**, below. Accordingly, in the description and analysis of 'State Visit' that follows, it will be fruitful to try and identify as many of these subjective elements as possible, and then to carry this knowledge through into the analysis of current affairs texts in the chapters that follow. In order to build on the discussion above, I indicate in brackets which aspects can usefully be thought of as most immediately relevant to the analysis of an actor's *context*, or, alternatively, to the analysis of an actor's *conduct*. It should always be remembered, however, that an actor's analysis of their context necessarily informs their conduct, as decisions about how to act are almost always made with knowledge of context in mind. In understanding *Borgen*, audiences necessarily carry out the following tasks:

Box 3 Subjective factors in the contextual field

- identifying the knowledge key actors have of the contextual terrain in which they act, including their knowledge of externally imposed pressures, obligations and constraints; the opportunities afforded by the external terrain; and the likely consequences of particular courses of action (*context analysis* - I will discuss these towards the end of this chapter under the label of 'situational knowledge')⁴;
- identifying how much this knowledge of the contextual field includes knowledge of the subjectivity of the individual and collective actors who populate that terrain (*context analysis*);
- ascertaining what the embedded cultural stocks of knowledge, cultural orientations, subjective values, moral principles and ideal goals of key actors are (I will discuss these towards the end of this chapter under the useful labels of 'general dispositions' or 'habitus'.)⁵ These cultural dimensions affect how context is perceived, but they will also work through into informing an actor's conduct (This means they are relevant to both *context and conduct analysis*.) A further step in looking at this factor would be an awareness of how aspects of habitus were initially moulded and formed;
- ascertaining which of the forces, pressures and potential sanctions on a key actor's behaviour – emanating from the contextual field – are experienced as benign and helpful and which are experienced as unsympathetic and unwanted (*relevant to context and conduct analysis*);

(Continued)

Box 3 (Continued)

- ascertaining which of the forces, pressures and potential sanctions on a key actor's behaviour are perceived as intractable within a given time period, and which are perceived as potentially malleable or temporary (*relevant to context and conduct analysis*);
- interpreting how a key actor, in coming to conduct themselves in a particular way, 'orders their concerns' into some kind of hierarchy⁶ in order to deal realistically with the inevitable tensions between their ideal values and goals and the compromises and negotiations demanded by the contextual terrain in which they are positioned. Which values are they prepared to compromise and subordinate, and which values do they prioritize in acting as they do? (*conduct analysis*)

There is a difference, however, between the last chapter and the present one, as the practice of identifying these subjective elements does not need to be performed without also thinking about the objective dimensions of the contextual field. The fact that we've already been introduced to the objective dimensions in Chapter 2 means that the two dimensions can be looked at together, with an eye trained on how they interact and interweave with each other. The nuances of this social-theoretical approach to the contextual field, with its clear interweaving of explicitly defined objective and subjective elements, should be contrasted with the broad-brush categories of *media frames*. It should be thought of as a benchmark against which to judge the imprecise categories of the latter, which are self-consciously designed to draw attention to the rhetoric of the text, rather than to assess its substance.

The social-theoretical frame and the contextual field

The ethos of a *social-theoretical frame* is one of precision when thinking about the four main operations that the *media frame* literature suggests are performed by news, namely: (i) the definition of the problems to be addressed; (ii) the diagnosis of causes; (iii) the making of moral judgements; and (iv) the suggestion of remedies or solutions.⁷ A social-theoretical frame on the contextual field allows one to locate problems within a specific terrain of actors, powers, pressures and forces, and to think of *causation* in these

terms, situating identifiable actors within a particular network of relations. Possible *solutions and remedies*, including pragmatic compromises, can most adequately be reflected upon once they have been located in these networks of relations, with as clear a sense as possible as to what the consequences of proffered courses of action are likely to be given the configuration of forces.

Moral judgements, likewise, are best approached once the actions being judged are positioned within the contextual field. This is the case whether one is thinking about the moral deliberations of *involved actors-in-situ*, or one is making a moral judgement as an *external observer*, who may or may not be attempting to understand the viewpoint of the actor *in-situ*. Moral judgements are best approached in this way because the pursuit of 'pure' moral principles, without heed to circumstance, can lead to disastrous consequences in many situations. Such 'pure' principles therefore often need to be trimmed or attenuated in order to avoid unwanted negative outcomes. The renowned German sociologist, Max Weber, long ago made a key distinction between the 'pure' ethics and politics of conviction, and the ethics and politics of responsibility. In the latter case, the need to cut and trim pure principles in order to avoid unacceptable dangers and risks is brought to the fore.⁸ At the same time, the sustained presence of principled conviction acts as a fortification against the narrow, callous pursuit of self-interest. Both principled conviction and responsibility about *in-situ* circumstances are necessary. We shall see that the prime minister in the *Borgen* episode is faced with a moral conflict framed by these kinds of concerns as a direct result of the particular context in which she finds herself.

Let me say a little more about the second aspect of social-theoretical frames, that of causation, before we move to the direct analysis of the 'State Visit' episode. Given that we are deepening media frame analysis through a more elaborate, conceptually refined, grasp of the mechanisms of causation, we need to be careful about how we think about what causation is and how we gather evidence about it. That is, it's important to begin to be self-conscious and reflective about what we should look for in order to demonstrate that precise combinations of objective and subjective factors have been involved in producing a particular outcome. Examples of outcomes that could be useful to keep in mind range from physical clashes on the streets of a capital city, through the nightmare of genocide, to a seemingly mundane political decision on trade or human rights. In this and future chapters we will sometimes be interested in *single causation*, where just one social force or process has played a particularly powerful role in bringing something about.⁹ We meet an example focused around single causation at the beginning of the next chapter. That case involves a High Court decision instructing the Israeli Government to arrange the bulldozing of Israeli settlements on the West Bank within 45 days of its judgement. The focus here is on the

effects it makes sense to attribute directly to this court order, and so the account can be usefully thought of as focusing on single causation. This is so notwithstanding the reality that many other factors and social entities will clearly be involved in the processes relevant to the carrying out of this order, or in the failure to carry it out.

Another possible example of single causation might be if we wanted to look at the impact of the decisions of international financial institutions, rather than any other set of institutions, on political events in, say, Greece, in the wake of the global financial crisis. We might want to try and trace the impact of their decisions on different moments in Greek politics. Of course, we are actually talking about more than one financial institution, so already, in this sense, we should be couching our discussion in terms of *plural causation* unless we have a good overriding reason for treating all financial institutions as one causal entity. At other times, however, we will be interested in conceptually more complex plural causation, where our focus is on a number of quite different kinds of actors, sets of relations and processes that have come together to produce a set of events. The conception of the contextual field, with its various interlocking networks, and its temporal depth, makes it more natural, and easier than it otherwise would be, to think of social causation in terms of many contributors, each adding something to a consequence or outcome that gradually emerges. This is the strategy to be adopted in this chapter in looking at the configuration of forces in the 'State Visit' episode.

This emphasis on identifying the practical-institutional pressures exerted within a configuration of forces at any one time, and on following through the processes affected by these, needs to be complemented with an additional awareness of the potent role that cultural ideas and values can play. Cultural ideas can travel across different contextual fields in a way that can be less 'anchored' in the immediate situation than other ways in which the external is internalized by actors. Two key types of such roles played by cultural forces appear in this book. The first type of such cultural influence is where a distinctive set of ideas is seen to play a significant role in the production of the form taken by the forces, pressures, obligations and duties experienced by actors. The onus here is on recognizing the significance of the history by which this configuration of forces came to be suffused and animated with a certain set of ideas, and to try and grasp how this history is working within the present. We have already seen this type in Chapter 2, where we noted the deep impact of neo-liberal financial ideology on the practices of the Danish system of care for the elderly. And we will meet this form again in Chapter 5 when looking at the Mid-Staffordshire case in the National Health Service of the United Kingdom. In these cases, the cultural habitus of relevant institutions has been moulded over time according to the texture and priorities of this ideology. The consequence is that the subjective dispositions of actors

within the institutions now take it for granted that neo-liberal forms of financial criteria have a dominant position within their hierarchy of concerns.

The second type of such cultural influence will be seen at work in Chapter 5 in looking at recent events in Thailand. The emphasis here is on symbolically channelled rituals that speak to disparate groupings with the effect that they transform diversity, disunity, and even antagonism, into powerful forms of social solidarity. In the Thai case the symbolism is focused around tropes of nationalism, religion and monarchy, but these are historically and societally specific, so the key meanings can differ from place to place, and from historical period to historical period.¹⁰ This power of cultural ideas to seep across the borders of particular situations, uniting diverse political groupings or different organizational units under one cultural umbrella, adds a further layer of complexity and interest to the idea of the contextual field. Although the meanings established by such cultural movements are not always as closely entwined with specific contextual fields as many other factors are, one should never lose sight of the relationship between the two, which is almost always significant.

To repeat, the key point about this additional layer of complexity is that – in some ways but not in others – the dissemination of culture and ideas can be less anchored to, less restricted by, social structural location than most *in-situ* interactional practices. That is, within a contextual field it is useful to be aware of the relative fluidity with which cultural ideas, impressions and value-judgements can ‘leak’ from one institutional site to another – through direct techniques of persuasion or through routine cultural osmosis. This possibility is inherent in the configurational nature of causal processes within contextual fields. This means that the influence of single powerful actors, or a coalition or bloc of actors with similar ideologies and interests, can often permeate beyond their immediately obvious direct actions, commands, orders and so on. For if one of these mega actors or macro coalitions¹¹ has a particular ideology or set of goals, which is made known across configurations of networks, then other actors, many steps removed, can be influenced by this. Distant or external actors may be influenced because the ideology strikes a chord with them and they enthusiastically embrace the ideology, as can happen through the influence of a charismatic figure, the messages attached to an inspiring cause, or the eloquence of ideas that seem to articulate feelings that previously had no voice, no vocabulary.

On the other hand, people may be influenced in a more negative fashion, fearing the consequences of not being seen to support an ideology that is clearly on the ascendant or whose dominance has already been established. Something of this kind, according to academic historians, was the case with Hitler within the institutional power structures of Nazi Germany, with people further down the hierarchical chain ‘working to Hitler’ in the

sense of second-guessing what would receive his approbation rather than following direct orders.¹² On a similarly banal level, but with less dramatic consequences, a fear of the consequences of going against the prevailing orthodoxies, against the current taken-for-granted ways of doing things, can have powerful causal effects on people in their everyday occupations. Such fear can inhibit people from engaging in critical analysis once ideas have started to find a foothold in a given institutional setting.¹³ Once a tipping point is reached, moral dissatisfaction with such ideas is silenced as individuals consider their priorities, and weigh up the chances of success against the possible impact idealistic resistance might have on their candidacy for increments or promotion, on their job security and pension prospects, on the quality of their personal working conditions or on the kind of references they might receive when moving on. The advent of new ideologies or cultural movements – such as neo-liberalism and new management orientations, both aided by computer-assisted business models¹⁴ – often, in fact, develop incrementally and organically, and without us being able to point to any one group to say that their input was decisive. In any event, both individual and collective actors, variably positioned in segments of contextual fields, will contribute to such movements of ideas, inhabiting them and helping them to emerge, and deploying the ideas, intentionally and unintentionally, in their direct and indirect influence on others.

Twenty-first century television drama and audience capacities

The minimal conceptual repertoire of the contextual field that I've listed as objective and subjective elements in this and the previous chapter (**see boxes 2 and 3**) can be used as a basic set of benchmarks against which to map out news and current affairs accounts. When television news bulletins are assessed in this manner, it is their thin, sparse, quality that stands out, as we shall see in the next chapter. By way of contrast, what is striking about such mapping when it's applied to a political drama such as *Borgen* is that so many aspects are in fact covered, and are covered in a way that is almost entirely adequate. We get to know the main characters, together with their relevant relationship to the primary collective actors, such as the Cabinet or Ministry, and we get a sense of the duties and obligations attached to their role, and so on. The drama very quickly positions these actors in networks of relevant relationships, building up a keen sense of shared and opposing ideologies, of their various principles, goals and objectives, of the intractable and possibly malleable constraints that confront them, of the variously easy

and strained relations between individuals and groupings, and a key overall sense of the configurations of power and interdependence. The kind of fictional drama that *Borgen* represents does this because its *raison d'être* of successful storytelling means that it must provide the context within which that story will make sense. It won't be good enough, as it is thought to be with television news, to be left with just a vague, desultory, sense of what is going on. Much could be gained through more reflection on the reliance of many kinds of drama, and novels even more so, on the capacity of their audiences to draw on quite complex understandings of the relevant contextual field.

It is not insignificant that *Borgen* belongs to a new generation of original television dramas that have emerged from around the turn of the century.¹⁵ *Borgen* sits alongside other political dramas such as *West Wing* and *House of Cards*, as well as alternative or overlapping genres of drama such as *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Breaking Bad*, as well as other Danish series such as *The Killing* (*Forbrydelsen*). Each of them draws from art cinema in being able to develop storylines at varying speeds, with some unfolding very slowly over several episodes or series, in being able to present complex, reflective and conflicted characters, and to place greater trust in the audience to work out what is going on than would be the case in some more traditional film and television genres.¹⁶ This more recent kind of drama series provides the opportunity to construct a quality of knowledge analogous to that which we would ideally want to glean from news and current affairs. It provides audiences with enough substance to be able to situate its rich, developed characters in their social and institutional contexts, including many of the elements of the contextual field I've set out as objective and subjective factors. Set within this perspective, one can see why it can be unrealistic to expect too much from television news, which doesn't have the same advantages of these television dramas. The positive message, however, is that television news bulletins are just one source for the information required to grasp what is happening within current affairs processes and events. This means that the ways in which capacities of audiences are implicated in the understanding of television drama series can be transposed to the realm of current affairs if audiences can manage to sustain their attentiveness towards particular stories and themes across items and genres of news and current affairs in a creative, systematic fashion.¹⁷

There is a fairly conventional, realist, dimension to the storytelling in all of the drama series mentioned, however they might otherwise depart from tried and tested formulas. In most of these series, for much of the time, there is a dynamic of equilibrium driving the story, with the disturbance of this equilibrium marking the beginning of a narrative, which then makes its way through various twists and turns, with a denouement of some kind establishing a new state of affairs, a new equilibrium.¹⁸ This new situation is either a return

to the previous status quo or marks the establishment of a new order. The story dynamic, which is known to the authors and directors in advance, or at least before the final edit, guides what is shown and what doesn't need to be shown. Much rests on the authors of the production having a clear sense of 'the point' of their story from the start. This means the writers and directors can be parsimonious and highly efficient in what they show and tell, thus allowing them to get across all, or almost all, of the background information required to make sense of what is going on.

This is clearly not the case in news and current affairs, where there usually isn't an undisputed 'point' of the story, and where much less is known about the unfolding events or their probable future trajectories, especially when the news is about a country, region or subject matter about which the news team knows relatively little. It is because of this difference that it is particularly useful to draw on *Borgen* as a benchmark. First, it allows us to see what the contours of a more or less fully fleshed-out contextual field would look like. Secondly, it reveals just how necessary it is to locate individual events and interactions within this frame in order to truly understand what is going on and why. And finally, analysing *Borgen* by means of a social-theoretical awareness of the contextual field provides a guide to how current affairs' audiences should begin to build up analogous fields by *combining* the information they receive from different sources and genres.

A One billion euro contract for wind turbines

Audiences for 'State Visit' know that they need to make sense of the action by trying to follow 'the point' of the story. I want to argue that audiences for current affairs need to find similar 'points' to their readings of current affairs events and processes. This will involve them constructing accounts that amalgamate information from a range of available texts, and doing so with a clear goal. The goal is to create the account that is most appropriate to their concerns and questions, and which is most adequate in terms of providing substantiated knowledge relevant to these. They can do this by using the four broad dimensions of a text identified by media and communications scholars as their starting point, and interrogating these on the basis of social theory. The four dimensions have a close parallel to the point of a political drama. For in the latter, too, there is: a definition of the situation and problem to be solved; a focus on the relevant causal processes; moral dilemmas and judgements to be made; and a sense of appropriate strategy aimed at a satisfactory resolution of events. Because of this close parallel, the project of bringing social theory to bear on current affairs can profit a great deal from an explication of the

kinds of skills audiences of *Borgen* bring to their construction of the most appropriate and adequate versions of a story.

In searching for the point of a *Borgen* storyline, competent audiences will take it for granted that the authors and director of the episode have provided them with the scaffolding and the details they require to find and follow it. They know, however, that they have some work to do themselves to identify both scaffolding and local detail, and to bring them together. They employ the kinds of general guidelines that we've made explicit, above, in order to create the scaffolding, employing the general categories and parameters of the contextual field. The general categories are the skeleton on which producers and audiences flesh out the more detailed, substantive, content of the forces, pressures, constraints and negotiated opportunities that weigh down on the Danish Prime Minister, Birgitte Nyborg, and which provide her with her specific dilemma, whose climax is conveyed in consecutive scenes towards the end of 'State Visit'. The audience needs to understand these forces in order to understand the equivalent background knowledge possessed by Birgitte, which is the source of her disquiet and sense of impasse as the pace of the narrative slows. A tense meeting of a sub-group, the Security Council, draws to an end, people leave, doors close and the prime minister is left alone with her thoughts, with a dossier from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, and with a dilemma whose resolution will be all but settled in and around the press conference, live to camera, to take place in a few moments' time.

We will return to this dilemma below, but before doing so it is necessary for me to map out, explicitly, the key actors and their objective and subjective relations forming the contextual field, which, in turn, provides the basis for the relevant background knowledge possessed by both Birgitte and the audience. It is best to begin this mapping out by drawing on relevant aspects of the *objective* elements of the contextual field we outlined above. I will present this network of relevant relations in two parts, in order to show how one set of contextual relations provides the field most relevant for one of Birgitte's goals, while another set of relations, overlapping in some key areas, provides the field most relevant for another goal. The dilemma for the prime minister and her government is that these two goals end up being in conflict with each other. The first set of relevant actors and relations are illustrated in **Figure 3.1**, below, and are described in greater detail in what follows.

In mapping out these parameters one quickly understands that a key player in this contextual field is the government of the (fictional) nation state of Turgisia, founded in 1991, bordering the Ukraine and Russia, and represented in the eponymous visit by its head of state, President Alexander Grozin, who is in Denmark for the formal handing over, from Denmark to Turgisia, of the chairmanship of another key actor, the supranational body of the OSDD, the Organization for Security, Democracy and Development (represented later,

FIGURE 3.1 Borgen 1: The wind turbine contextual field.

in Figure 3.2). A further key individual actor within this emerging web of relationships is the Minister for Climate and Energy, Amir Diwan, a member of the coalition Government as leader of the Green Party, who announces to Birgitte and other colleagues within an inner circle that Turgisia is set to buy wind turbines worth one billion euros from the Danish company North Wind. With Russia said to also be a possible buyer in the wake of the deal with Turgisia, the combination of both sets of sales would make Denmark the largest exporter of green energy in Europe. Other actors likely to benefit if and when *the consequences* of this deal were to make their way through into the contextual field are varied and many. They include those who could find employment from the jobs that would flow from the deals, those who would benefit from the increased taxation revenue, from the improvement in the balance of payments, and from the less tangible impact on general economic confidence.

The emphasis on the pursuit of interests, political goals, and on the potential or likely future consequences of these pursuits, makes clear the requirement for audiences to quickly develop an approximate sense of the power resources and the authority actors can draw on within the contextual field. It also indicates that the mapping of the field requires a temporal, dynamic, aspect oriented to the future. This latter point is highlighted in Figure 3.1 by shading and by self-consciously dividing moments within a sequence into times 1, 2 and 3, which provides a sense of how the contextual field is adjusted, in sequence, as the action unfolds. This draws attention to objective, clock or calendar, sequential time, but also to actors' subjective orientations to the future – to consequences in the future – and the ways in which these subjective projections enter into calculations within the present. Realistically contemplating the future takes up a good deal of space in Birgitte's head as she tries to decide what practical actions to take in the present.¹⁹ Figure 3.1 clearly also conveys an approximate sense of some of the power resources and the authority that actors will be able to draw on in pursuing their goals, together with a sense of what these goals are.

Kasper Juul, the prime minister's press secretary, immediately sees the gains in the Government's popularity that would result from signing this contract with Turgisia, and self-consciously changes his earlier tune, which had counselled caution and as little media exposure as possible given Grozin's reputation for 'being a brutal leader'. Kasper proclaims that the wind turbine contract is a 'great story': 'the cabinet creates more jobs, a greener environment, *and* embarks on an export adventure in the former Eastern Bloc'. Whereas before he'd recommended aloofness and reserve, the directive now is: 'all smiles for the press conference'. The developing story within this overall configuration of positions and interdependencies – the desire to see the potential sale of the wind turbines consummated – means that a new power dependence is set up in which something of the fortunes of the Danish

Government are now tied to the continuing desire and intent of the Turgisian Government to invest in Danish green technology. This is a dependence that, we will see, leaves Birgitte's Moderate Party, and its coalition Government, highly vulnerable to political blackmail.

The essential point made by Pierre Bourdieu about television news, which we discussed in Chapter 1, is that to truly understand an individual scene, to make it genuinely meaningful, one has to be able to place it within a network of relevant relations. So it is that to be able to truly understand what is happening when Birgitte is left alone with the reports from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch a few minutes before the end of the 'State Visit' episode, one needs to place this scene within the relevant networks of social relations. Part of this network is the configuration represented by Figure 3.1, a configuration that Birgitte has knowledge of, and which informs her thinking and her strategic calculations. This contextual field is not, needless to say, visible on the television screen, in the frame of the camera, as Birgitte opens the dossier.

Interpretive, conceptual, skills are required to bring these currently invisible, but causally significant, dimensions into play. A key aspect of this reality that social theory insists we take very seriously is that what goes on in the heads of actors – specifically in the mind of Birgitte in this case – is closely linked to relevant configurations of actors and forces of the kind mapped out in Figure 3.1. We are now deeply in the realm of subjective factors, but these are interwoven with objective relations. For decisions are not taken in a solipsistic way, where an individual would ruminate about things that only exist in their own head, without any reference to the world-out-there. Rather, parts of the world-out-there enter in-here, into the minds of human actors. *These social configurations are internalized* in particular ways by different human beings situated in specific positions within them. These individual actors will have particular sets of cultural understandings and moral values, and will have their own goals, mediated by these cultural values but also by personal and collective principles and ambitions, and by group and institutional affiliations. In other words, parts of the world-out-there are internalized by people in particular social locations, who care in particular ways about those parts. These individuals don't function as islands unto themselves, but typically work within their institutions with colleagues who will often have internalized social configurations in very similar ways. In order to understand what happens in any news and current affairs event we need to know about relevant aspects of the cultural, interpretative, inner worlds of key actors and about the ways in which these are intimately related to the external configurations of forces.

What we have before us on the screen, visible within the camera frame, is naturally much more circumscribed than what can be represented or 'thought' as a contextual field. Let's consider in a bit more detail the scene referred to at the beginning of this section. About a minute before we see Birgitte left alone

with the documents, she has just said out loud, with an air of authority, that *she* was going to have to make a decision. She had then, gently, and with an air of quiet despondency, held her head in her hands. Recovering her poise, she announced, 'let's sign the extradition agreement after the ceremony. And now I want to be alone'. This is a cue, a heavy one, for the end of the meeting. The camera pans back, allowing us to see two coffee pots of sleek, modernist design, one light, one dark, an array of white cups and saucers on ceramic trays, and croissants, mostly left untouched. Three men in ties and suits sitting opposite Birgitte, ranging in ages from late 30s to early 60s, gather up their papers from the beech coloured conference table, one of them sweeping his jacket off the back of his chair as he turns to go. They all leave the room, we hear the door close, Birgitte is left alone, phones ringing faintly in the background. She sits perfectly still, except for one finger tapping on her other hand. She moves aside her meeting papers to reveal the 'Report on Violations of Human Rights in Turgisia' that we know has been given to her earlier on in the episode by Anne Sophie Lindenkroner, the leader of the Solidarity Party, a minority coalition partner. These are documents from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The camera angle is such that we view the pages through Birgitte's eyes, seeing, as she sees, bloodied corpses, scarred legs, and communal graves, with, in the latter case, uniformed soldiers standing by, leaning against an armoured vehicle, indifferent.

A viewer who had just entered the room in which the episode was showing, seeing just this scene, could quickly rustle together some interpretations. They may well intuitively conceive a sense of some of the types of general interdependencies that *might* be involved in Birgitte's palpable dilemma, and could try to look for signs that might confirm these suppositions. However, their understanding of the situation would naturally be severely impaired by having had no access to the details of the story so far. Any understanding would only be vague: the latecomer wouldn't know about the plural character of the interdependencies involved, and they wouldn't know any of the specific shapes and details. The more committed viewer, there for the duration of the episode, would have a much clearer picture of the general aspects of the configuration of forces mapped out there, and also of the details the episode has provided thus far.

Vladimir Bayanov: Poet, dissident and political activist

It's clear from the documents Birgitte is looking at that the aspects of the contextual field outlined in Figure 3.1 only provide part of the structural

context relevant to her dilemma. Accordingly, the figure provides only part of the context internalized by Birgitte as she deliberates on what to do. It is only one part of the network of relations relevant to that dilemma. To more fully understand the dilemma, this part needs to be complemented by other relevant aspects of the contextual field, by a second configuration to complement the one represented in Figure 3.1. As the narrative of 'State Visit' had continued beyond the moment of elation and shared congratulation resulting from news of the potential sale of the wind turbines, another set of actors, powers and relations entered into the field of concern. Their entrance darkened the mood considerably. We've seen that the Danish Prime Minister had been advised very early on in the narrative that Grozin had a reputation as a brutal leader, and we've seen that Lindenkrone had handed documents to Birgitte from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. These reports, Lindenkrone insisted, described crimes 'committed by Grozin's Turgisian security services', against minorities and dissidents. We need to understand more of these aspects of the contextual field in order to genuinely understand the meaning of Birgitte's dilemma, to put ourselves in her shoes, understanding the structural context that she experiences, as she experiences it.

The first appearance of these documents in the episode cued the imminent introduction into the narrative of a key actor from the second configuration of forces. This is Vladimir Bayanov, a poet, dissident and political activist who is said to be the leader of the Sarkesian minority in their struggle for independence from Turgisia. Turgisian authorities claim that Bayanov has been responsible for a long list of crimes warranting charges of Terror and High Treason, most prominent of which is his putatively central role in the recent bombing of Turgisian Police Headquarters in which eight Turgisian policemen, including the Chief of Police, were killed. Whether or not Bayanov was involved in the planning of this act of violence is left unclear, although he doesn't overtly deny it, and even intimates it might be true, responding to a question in a TV interview on whether he feels that violence is sometimes necessary with the words, 'Yes violence is necessary because Grozin is trying to destroy my people. Should we not defend ourselves?' The testing ethical question of whether it is ever justifiable to use the techniques of terror against a regime based on terror is raised in the episode, but left hanging. Instead, the rhetoric of the text is directed towards the Turgisian regime's alleged violation of human rights, which is juxtaposed with intimations of Bayanov's basic decency through the sensitivity to language, art and human experience expressed within his poetry.

Birgitte's father, Per, a former University Professor, visiting his daughter in Copenhagen, is an admirer of Bayanov and attends a public reading of his poetry. Per Nyborg stands in, emblematically, for Birgitte's ideal principles,

the ones which he, Anne Sophie Lindenkrone, and others who are positioned differently in the contextual field than Birgitte, explicitly avow and steadfastly adhere to. They can do this, however, without having to personally confront the consequences that would flow from the structured dilemma facing Per's daughter, in her role as prime minister, as the Turgisian Embassy contacts the Danish Government and asks them to arrest Bayanov. The script makes it clear that Birgitte feels that, as someone committed to democratic principles, she needs to rise above sectionalism, even when this might be in tension with her own individual principles. Although there would always be limits to how far she would compromise or adjust the latter, she is clear that she needs to be a prime minister who represents all the Danish people, including those who didn't vote for her.

Birgitte's initial response to the Turgisian demand to arrest Bayanov, is to say to her colleagues that the Turgisian Government had presented a long list of accusations but no evidence. To hand over Bayanov to a regime charged with having little regard for human rights and the due process of law conflicts with her values. She knows that Bayanov has been living in exile for the last 10 years and that Grozin and the Turgisian authorities had tried to have him extradited many times: 'And now he's trying again. We won't comply'. But this resistance is played out behind the scenes, as she is aware that a blunt refusal to hand over Bayanov would jeopardize the wind turbine deal.²⁰ So she plays for time, and indicates that Danish intelligence should put pressure on Bayanov to flee Denmark at the same time as she uses delaying tactics with the Turgisian Government. The structural context, however, is not always easy to control or second-guess, replete as it is with human actors. On this occasion it transpires that Birgitte's manoeuvre conflicts with Bayanov's own values, as he wishes to stay in Denmark to publically challenge the Turgisian Government and also to test the Danish Government's resolve to stand up for the principles of human rights.

The prime minister learns from her Minister of Justice, Troels Höxenhaven, that she is further constrained by new domestic 'terror' laws that give the police wide powers of arrest and extradition. The Danish Government would find it difficult to ignore, for very long, legal obligations that it has imposed on itself. The Minister of Justice is clear in his advice: 'It's a serious matter not to act.' In terms of the contextual field, this is a form of constraint inherited as a legacy, one put in place by past actors and upheld by current actors positioned within the legal system who have duties and obligations to uphold the norms of that system. While the sense of identification with individual pieces of legislation will be variable, and it is significant that the Moderate Party voted against the 'terror' laws while in opposition, the Government has a strong normative commitment to the rule of law as a principle. This means that the legal norms are more than just an externally imposed constraint on

the prime minister, as the idea of the rule of law and the role it plays within the democratic framework are foundations stones of her own values and beliefs. Now that these particular laws are in place as part of the constitutional landscape they are experienced as a powerful set of injunctions that must be adhered to. They must be adhered to, that is, unless there are exceptional reasons, based on legal or moral principles of equal or superior force, for not abiding by them. In a move of some sophistication, which would probably be reflected upon by some members of the audience and not by others on a casual viewing, such an exceptional reason slowly emerges. The background dilemma concerning the law is due to the fact that impartial adherence to Danish law would aid and abet the disregard for the application of the rule of law in Turgisia. In choosing between the two, the fact that the moral claims of human rights are held to be universal, and have been translated into international law, arguably provides them with a force transcending the practices and whims of individual nation-states. This set of meanings and motives has a perpetual presence, sometimes fading into the background and at others looming large, as the plot of 'State Visit' unfolds. We will see how this plays out.

In the short term, there is no doubt that the presence of the domestic 'terror' laws, combined with the desire to secure the wind turbine contract, considerably narrows the Government's options, and greatly strengthens the hand of the Turgisians. President Grozin soon explicitly foregrounds the power balance put into play by these factors, using them as leverage as he refuses to confirm that he has yet placed the order for the wind turbines. He goes on to issue a blunt warning: 'a lack of goodwill on your part must force me to reconsider my investment in Danish wind energy'. The Justice Minister and the Minister for Foreign Affairs push towards ameliorating Grozin, with Höxenhaven angrily countering claims that Bayanov would be dead within 24 hours if returned to Turgisia, responding with the dismissive statement that 'they abolished the death penalty six years ago'. It seems to the audience at this point that Höxenhaven's declaration is at worst entirely cynical and instrumental, and at best the consequence of a narrowness of vision arising from his current institutional role and the internalized pressures and goals that are part and parcel of it. From the perspective of these narrow commitments it is in his interests to overlook the claims of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch – already communicated to viewers – that in the last 3 years 71 political dissidents had disappeared in Turgisia. When these facts are pointed out by Amir Diwan, the Minister for Climate and Energy, during the Security Council meeting, the Foreign Minister, Bjørn Marrot, contests the veracity of the information – 'or so Amnesty International claims'.

What should be done? The contextual field and strategic judgements

A narrative tension is set up within the episode, one that is based on these two structural configurations, but which has its own inflection and inner-logic. On the one side there is the public tenor of the news coverage of channel TV1 on the events, which is one of threatening to expose the prime minister as putting economics before the principles of human rights, and even a man's life. On the other side, reinforced by the figurative role of her father, there is our sense of the private Birgitte who wants to achieve the just balance between principles. Even while she wrestles with the quandary, we never lose the sense that she is indeed personally, individually, committed to the values of human rights. More specifically, in this case, she is committed to human rights perceived as civil rights, a cornerstone of democracy, applying equally, universally, to both citizens and 'guests' such as Bayanov. However, we also see her trying to take into account the other forces pressing on her in her role as prime minister.

At a certain point in the narrative, with Birgitte positioned at the junction of such forces (see **Figure 3.2** below for the configuration of the contextual field relating to Bayanov), it becomes clear she feels she has to act to arrest Bayanov. She makes this decision in the heat of the unfolding situation – this is dramatically staged, with all present in evening gowns and tails, as the bell sounds for the end of the interval during a gala performance of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* at the Royal Danish Theatre, hosted by the Queen as part of the state visit – with little time for detached reflection. The context is one in which the balance of power within and between the two sets of contextual forces is shifting as sequences of action and interaction subtly reconfigure the field. She feels she has no option but to arrest Bayanov while contemplating her next move.

The immediate context for this decision is one in which the Foreign Minister has suggested that perhaps the Government could order the arrest of Bayanov but subsequently release him before he is extradited. The idea is for the arrest to buy time without leading to any harm to Bayanov, an avenue that wouldn't permanently compromise the Government. The most immediate pressures on Birgitte's decision to arrest Bayanov seem to come from international forces as it has emerged that the Russian Foreign Minister, then the German Chancellor, and then all the OSDD countries except France, have fallen in behind the Turgisian demands for arrest and then extradition. The motivation of these international forces isn't spelt out explicitly. There is a vague sense that the OSDD must be seen to trust that all its member states genuinely

FIGURE 3.2 Borgen 2: The human rights contextual field.

adhere to its constitution, which requires an implicit trust in their commitment to democratic mores. There is a sense, also, that all the member states must play their part in a public performance conveying staunch mutual confidence in this trust. While the sense of this is vague, present only through fragments of hints and cues, the script also provides us with little to go on in considering what the other interests of the various OSDD countries might be. So, we find ourselves working hard to fathom these countries' perspectives on, and strategic calculations with respect to, the field of mutual interdependencies and potential risks, sanctions and so on, implicated in the affair.

The silences and resulting ambiguity at the international level signal those inevitable grey areas at the boundaries of a story, meaning that even a political drama with a tight narrative script cannot provide all the information one might need to truly weigh up the balance of forces and to seek out possible avenues of strategic manoeuvre. On the other hand, the role of the OSDD, and of Germany and Russia within it, in asking for arrest and extradition, is quite central to the narrative. One ultimately assumes – although one doesn't really know – that *realpolitik* is at work, that there is mutual interest with respect to the functions of international cooperation in the realms of economics and security, and therefore in the role – whose specifics we aren't privy to – that Turgisia plays in this. There is a certain public legitimacy given to the OSDD position by Denmark's apparent unwillingness to apply its own supposedly impartial laws to a particular case, a reluctance that suggests it doesn't completely trust Turgisia's commitment to due process and human rights. The fact that Turgisia is just about to take over the Chair of the OSDD will naturally inform and heighten the diplomatic positions adopted. Without knowing more about the strength of feeling within the different national diplomatic camps, or about the range and intensities of the interdependencies of the relevant parts of the contextual field, it is very difficult to know what the consequences would be for Denmark of refusing to listen to these international admonishments.

Our lack of knowledge about the international context in this case, and consequent uncertainty about the extent of international power, and of what the consequences would be of resisting external pressures, reflects a very common position of audiences when facing news concerning international diplomacy. For example, in a *Washington Post* story of 4 July 2013, about the ousting of democratically elected Egyptian President, Mohamed Morsi, head of the Muslim Brotherhood, a subsection is titled 'Complications for the US'.²¹ It details President Obama's previous urgings of the Egyptian military 'to avoid any arbitrary arrests of President Morsi and his supporters', and points to how the US had refrained from criticizing the Egyptian military, and particularly from calling the ouster of Morsi 'a coup', as this would legally require the US Government to cut off financial aid to the country. The story went on to point to issues of putative control through interdependence, noting that while the

White House tacitly accepted Morsi's removal, it retained powerful leverage, 'including \$1.3 billion in military aid – to help guard against a power grab or the excessive use of force'. The extent to which this amount of military aid could, in fact, on its own, guard against continued, democratically illegitimate, military involvement in politics, or against the excessive use of force, was actually much harder to say than is implied by the confident tone of this statement. Other reports at the time mentioned other powers in the Middle East sympathetic to the new regime, including Saudi Arabia's willingness to finance the Egyptian military to levels that dwarfed the US contribution.²² And there were also the many different factors in the micro dynamics of politics within Egypt that could possibly militate against the success of any leverage the US desired to exert. We have little sense, for example, of what might follow for the military's position on the Muslim Brotherhood from, for example, the military's staggeringly vast business interests, which made up around 40 per cent of the domestic economy, employing half a million workers.²³

One of the key lessons to take from the counsel to place issues within their relevant contextual field is that it draws attention in a more precise way to what is *not* known, and also to what would *need to be* known if a more adequate assessment was to be made of the likely consequences of particular courses of action. Taking this on board means adopting an intellectual disposition to ask how much is known or not known by significant actors situated within the field, such as by the Obama administration in the Egyptian case, and to ask questions about the ways in which their strategy is related to that knowledge. As we've noted, key actors are very often positioned in such a way that they have more 'insider' knowledge than audiences, but the knowledge they have about a strategic terrain will still be highly variable. It is important to ask probing questions about the quality and extent of *knowledge* held by both audiences and key actors.

Similar questions should also be asked regarding what we know about the *values* and *motivations* key actors bring to strategic judgements. One could wonder what was the most important determining influence on Birgitte's judgement at the point when she decides to give the order to arrest Bayanov. Was it the desire to avoid alienating international opinion and the negative consequences that would flow from this, or was her decision informed just by the desire to secure the wind turbine contract, with all its perceived benefits to the economy and the government of the day? These kinds of questions go to the heart of both drama and current affairs issues. They mark the point at which the objective factors out-there are internalized within the minds of key actors, and where decisions and strategies reflect a subjective 'ordering of concerns', or 'hierarchy of purposes'.²⁴ We want to know what is at stake for key actors, and to understand which balance of principles come to the

fore when they take their decisions. It would be impossible to even begin to consider such questions without some conception of relevant contextual fields. The point is that the competency of both audiences and players rests on their self-awareness of how much they know about contextual fields, and so being able to reflect on such knowledge, subject it to scrutiny, and make a judgement on its adequacy to the tasks at hand.

In the field of constraints and possibilities facing the Government in 'State Visit', both major configurations of external pressures – clustered around the wind turbine contract and international pressure to respect Turgisia's wishes – were pushing in the same direction, towards the arrest and extradition of Bayanov. However, and this reinforces even further the significance of the contextual field, to genuinely understand the character of the play of forces at work it's often important to also ask what would happen if one of two (or, often, in fact, several) sets of pressures were removed.²⁵ In the case of 'State Visit', the dilemma would be clearer if one could know what the Danish Government would do if it could somehow assuage the international community. Would it then choose, on human rights' grounds, to protect Bayanov from arbitrary punishment, and to safeguard his right to speak openly against atrocities committed by political dictators? Or would it still go ahead with the arrest of Bayanov? Further, if the Government did go ahead with the arrest in a situation where they were unafraid of international opinion, would this be because of the desire to secure the wind turbine deal, or because domestic law was understood to brook no other outcome.

The answer to this last detail, regarding the technical nuance of the law, is one we don't learn from the script of 'State Visit', which brings it in this respect closer to a typical non-fiction account of government activity, where we often can't fully disentangle the various hierarchies and intensities of commitments. In most cases, there are all kinds of gaps in accounts with respect to what we'd need to know in order to address such questions. Moreover, the kinds of questions we want to ask of current affairs accounts are different from those we typically ask of political dramas. For in watching political drama we attempt, from the start, to decipher a narrative that has artfully guided what we have been told. In approaching a current affairs account, there can be a plurality of possible avenues we may be interested in, and this is more likely to bring to the fore many more gaps in what the text provides, and so to highlight even further its partial, limited, nature.

Novels, drama and fiction film can play the kinds of role I've been emphasizing in elucidating what happens in the presentation and audience reception of news and current affairs reports. They can also add other valuable dimensions to our grasp of current affairs.²⁶ Novels, for example, are particularly good at probing the complexities of internal worlds. However, there are also limits to the role these forms can play. Even if we include a very broad

spectrum, embracing both popular and elite culture, each of the forms I mention shares some kind of combination of interest in aesthetics, entertainment and existential illumination in which sustained analytical focus is typically lower down in the pecking order of priorities. Too much careful unpacking of causes and reasons, and precise identification of relevant conditions, is often studiously avoided within such forms, even at the most serious and least commercial end of the continuum. For much of the time, I readily concede, this is a blessing. There are times and places for different modes of both presentation and reception. However, there do need to be moments within the intellectual life of civil society when we are ready to invoke and harness the genres of novels, drama and fiction film to the task of strengthening our reading of current affairs. In those moments we need to break down the walls that separate different kinds of contributions to our understanding. Bringing different genres together in our interpretation of events, harnessing the forms of the arts and humanities to the social-theoretical point of view would provide a richer, more adequate, picture of the social world.

What should be done? The inner worlds and creativity of key social actors

Combinations of genres, if marshalled by social theory, can provide powerful ways of developing the capacities of current affairs audiences. From the account of the *Borgen* episode outlined here, we've been able to not only establish the basic parameters and general significance of contextual fields, but also to breathe life into quite intricate theoretical and conceptual considerations that are much more difficult to begin to broach using other means. I now want to extend this part of the exercise by looking more closely at how Birgitte's internalization of the two configurations of contextual fields we've sketched out interact with her own active agency as the plot of 'State Visit' reaches its resolution. Each moment in the explication so far has brought out further dimensions of the overall dynamic. Judgements about future consequences were important for Figure 3.1 on the wind turbine agreement. Figure 3.2, focusing on the issue of Bayanov's arrest, was presented without this temporal element, with the emphasis, rather, on mapping the various pressures, forces and potential sanctions objectively confronting Birgitte Nyborg's government at a particular point in time. In this final section, I will focus on how the prime minister responds to these pressures and forces; including in those moments when they are mediated, in unfolding interaction, by strategically powerful individuals, such as Alexander Grozin. This focus can tell us a lot about what to look for in current affairs accounts when we seek

to understand, and to judge, the decisions of powerful actors in analogous positions to Birgitte Nyborg.

For actors in seemingly powerful positions are hedged in by all kinds of structural considerations, and at the same time they can be more or less skilful in getting the best out of the situation they are confronted with.²⁷ They can also be more or less dignified, more or less informed, rash, wise, unscrupulous or honourable. Being able to analyse what they think they are doing, and what is involved in them doing it, requires the grasp and exercise of a number of concepts dealing with action and actors. These concepts need to be defined, differentiated from one another, and then combined. We've already broached some of this, and I will start by returning to what we already know before going on to make conceptual refinements that will allow us to be more precise in our judgements when approaching current affairs texts.

The notions we've already begun to discuss in quite significant ways fall into the bracket of how social actors internalize key aspects of the contextual fields they live within. A vital element of the social-theoretical frame I'm advocating is that actors hold within them, as stocks of background knowledge, pictures of – an awareness of – the contextual fields relevant to particular actions and decisions. In this sense there is social structure inside the heads of actors. As we've noted, similarly positioned actors usually have very similar 'pictures' inside their heads. Where there are subtle differences between actors, they will characteristically spend more than a little of their energies tacitly or explicitly attempting to envisage the pictures of structural fields their colleagues currently carry around with them.

Birgitte, for one, has an acute sense of the various corners of the contextual field in which the consequences of her decisions will work their way out, including a sense of the pictures of context other players are carrying around with them. This is not least because her social position as prime minister of a coalition Government with a slender majority means there is a particular onus on her being able to combine the pursuit of her own party's values and goals with the appropriate representation of a series of competing interests. Like most people working in a complex organization in which they have the responsibility for taking key decisions, the prime minister would not be able to pass herself off as a competent and skilled actor²⁸ unless she had a grasp of what was going on in a whole series of different sites within the contextual field. She needs a clear enough sense of this if she is to be capable and adept. And a key aspect of this is that she also needs to have a keen sense of how the other key people within the relevant contextual field perceive their interests within it and the various ways in which they suppose they might realize those interests. At its most basic level this means that Birgitte needs to have *internalized the social context* relevant to any decision she has to make.

If she floats too far free from an appreciation of the constraints, possibilities, and room for strategic or tactical manoeuvre afforded by that context, then the decisions she takes will almost inevitably become overly idealist, utopian and irresponsible, or a combination of all three.

It's important to grasp that there are *two different aspects of the internalization of social context* that are at work here.²⁹ This distinction was briefly introduced at the beginning of the chapter in the process of indicating that an actor's grasp of context (*analysis of context*) is only one part of what determines how the actor then behaves. Additional subjective dimensions besides their perception of the contextual field will mediate their actions, or conduct, including one that can also be usefully characterized as a form of internalization of the social context. I noted during that discussion that we would look at these aspects in more detail later. So, let us now spell out how these two components of an actor's conduct can be seen as two different aspects of the internalization of the social.

The first is the internalization of the immediate strategic terrain, the various networks of relevant relationships we've mapped out in terms of contextual fields. We can call this *situational knowledge* of the strategic terrain, and it is the basis of an actor's analysis of context. Within the present example, this would refer to what Birgitte knows about the two sets of networked configurations we've sketched out in Figures 3.1 and 3.2. The second aspect is the internalization of society as part of a longer-term socialization process, from childhood through youth and adolescence, and into the various stages and sites of adulthood. Society here – and it may be easiest to think about this in terms of the internalization of 'taken-for-granted' ways of behaving within a culture, related to one's family, schooling, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, trade, profession, sports and pastimes, and so on³⁰ – puts its stamp firmly on one's mind and one's body, and is internalized in enduring orientations and dispositions including language use, deportment, gestures, cultural understandings, values, beliefs, principles, and skills of a physical and social kind. Pierre Bourdieu gave the name of *habitus* to this kind of internalization, and the eminent Greek sociologist, Nicos Mouzelis, refers to it as the *dispositional* aspect of social actors.³¹ It is important to understand that the cultural discourses that mark an age, mediated in various ways, are some of the most powerful elements entering into the understandings, values, beliefs, and principles lodged within these dispositions of an actor.³²

These dispositions are carried around from situation to situation, job to job, contextual field to contextual field, and so they have a more transposable character than those possessed by situational knowledge, which is more restricted to particular segments of time and place. The ingrained, durable, cultural and value dimensions of a person's habitus are an important key to understanding the perspective from which that person will view a particular

situation. This means that their habitus will inform the way they see and approach contextual fields, and this is where the two kinds of internalization of the external world come together. The habitus provides 'typified' ways of seeing things, situations, people, processes, which provide an initial orientation, perspective, attitude and sensibility. One can see immediately, for example, that the internalization of a particular educational, religious or political tradition would affect the way in which many of a person's typifications would be constructed. And what is true for education, religion and politics is true for cultures and sub-cultures more generally, with their many and varied assortments of inflexions of meanings and norms, of ways of seeing.

This is what I meant earlier when I noted that in order to understand what happens in any news and current affairs event we need to both know about the relevant aspects of the deeper, more enduring, cultural, interpretative, inner worlds of key actors and the ways in which these are intimately related to those same actors' perceptions of the immediate external configuration of forces. The two forms of internalization have an intimate, overlapping, relationship with each other. In the 'State Visit' episode of *Borgen*, this is symbolized by the presence of Birgitte's father in the private space of the home, evoking the deep culture and values of childhood, the inspiration for a deeply moral political life, suggesting an authenticity beyond *realpolitik*. At the same time, the narrative suggests that too much concentration on ideal values taken out of context is also naïve and overly purist, representing a wilful refusal to internalize the constraints imposed by the current strategic terrain. Developing the skills required to attempt to ascertain the inner worlds of social actors involved in news and current affairs events,³³ and so improving one's chances of understanding what is really going on, requires a grasp of both these aspects of social being.

Just how powerful these dimensions can be in terms of a person's relationship to their context can be illustrated through the example of international migration. When people move country or continent, they leave their society behind and in doing so leave behind much of what was strictly 'useful' to them in internalizing that society within their minds and bodies. The specific knowledge they have of the contextual terrains in which they operated can no longer be drawn upon, and many of the more general dispositions they had internalized in the old country, from language and physical bearing to specific social skills, will often be as much of a hindrance as a source of strength in the destination society. From now on, many of their old, intuitive and ingrained ways of doing things will fit uneasily with the culture, norms, values and demands they are confronted with.³⁴ Something similar is true for people who don't move, who remain in the same place, but where the society around them changes. This can be seen easily for older people as they

struggle with changes in the contextual uses of technology, control, forms of communication, provision of information, and so on, so that their body and mind, moulded further back in history, no longer seem to fit, to be able to find the ease they possessed when in contact with the old social forms.

In order to have a depth of understanding of why social actors are doing what they are doing in any situation it is necessary to be able to put oneself in their shoes, not just empathetically, with pure poetic imagination – although this can help a great deal – but by reconstructing the practical detail of what it is like to live with the two forms of internalization of society that co-exist within them.³⁵ Such reconstructions can be built up through reference to objective, factual, information given shape by appropriate concepts. For social theory, providing the appropriate mix of conceptual shape and objective information involves two things. First, an appreciation of the two kinds of social *structures* that have been internalized within the actors, and secondly, an interpretative understanding of how individual actors *experience and respond to* aspects of these structures coming to the surface as they approach a particular task, practice, problem or issue in everyday life.³⁶

Understanding this combination of internalized structures and how they are experienced and responded to in particular situations involves, however, a further element of dynamism. This element of dynamism is supplied by the social actor in the process of acting, making their actions more than just the product of the internalization of external social forces. I will refer to this here as ‘creative agency’, which refers to the many capacities actors have at their disposal to ward off a merely passive acceptance of the external forces pressing down on them.³⁷ These include the use of energy, improvisation, creativity, spontaneity, the skilful exercise of charm or persuasion, the reordering of priorities, tactical manoeuvring, vision, and the ability to respond to unfolding twists and turns in events and interaction with flexibility, reflection, ingenuity, resolve, resistance, a testing of the waters, negotiation and concession, and the use of strategic and tactical imagination. ‘Creative agency’ is an important notion to hang on to in order to avoid *fatalism* – the belief that social structures are so powerful and all consuming that any resistance to them is either literally unthinkable or so destined to fail that one simply succumbs to what seems the inevitable – and to protect a valuable space for positive political action and moral responsibility. Insisting upon the potential for this space, but also on *the need to place it firmly within the relevant contextual fields*, means that it is possible to accord great value to skilled, positive judgement and action, but without giving in to the wide-eyed idealism that can so easily get out of control, leading to unforeseen, unintended, unwanted, and sometimes deeply unpalatable, consequences.

These workings of creative agency can be seen in ‘State Visit’ in how the prime minister’s orientation to the dilemma at hand is *not only* informed

by the two kinds of internalization of external structures – that is, by certain cultural-moral orientations to the contextual fields (dispositional orientations/habitus), and by an understanding of their configuration and character (situationally specific knowledge). It is also informed by a continuing openness to any potential opportunities that might be afforded by the contextual field, whether or not they have already revealed themselves. This openness can be to new possibilities that are presented as a consequence of some changes in the contextual field as events unfold and perspectives and stances are changed, subtly or radically. But the opportunity for creativity is not necessarily reliant on change in the field itself; openness also involves gathering, investigating, searching, for new information about that field, or looking for new angles on that field, even if it stays the same. For enhanced knowledge and adaptive ways of seeing can alter the sense of what the possibilities are for action within the field.

This is what happens in the final scenes of ‘State Visit’, when after looking at the documents recording the atrocities in Turgisia, the Danish Prime Minister suddenly requests a private conversation with Grozin. This is immediately prior to the press conference in an adjoining room in which the two leaders are due to speak and answer questions, and after which Birgitte has told her Ministers that she will sign the extradition agreement. With the international pressures to trust the democratic credentials of members of the OSDD hanging in the air, Birgitte asks Grozin for reassurances that Bayanov’s case will be subject to due process in Turgisian courts: ‘what will happen to Bayanov if we hand him over?’ It is as if she wants to use this interaction with Grozin³⁸ to test out the inconsistency of the messages she is receiving from within the relevant contextual fields. That is, to test out the inconsistency between the alleged evidence provided by the documents she has just seen and the presumption of allegiance to democratic principles behind the OSDD’s ruling that Turgisia’s demand for extradition be honoured.³⁹ Much, for Birgitte, seems to rest on Grozin’s response. If he had responded by providing the reassurances the Danish Prime Minister had requested then it seems quite possible that the judgement expressed at the close of the Security Council – for extradition – would have remained unchanged. In the event, however, it becomes very clear that due process and a fair trial is not what Grozin has in mind. His words express a fickle, authoritarian, approach to the rule of law, which bodes ill for Bayanov’s chances of survival if he is extradited. Grozin’s aggressive response triggers aspects of habitus – deep dispositions – within the Danish Prime Minister, working in tandem with her awareness of the unfolding situational context.

The cathartic power of the prime minister’s equivocation and then reversal of judgement is exploited to the full in the subsequent scene of the press conference. Birgitte ignores a behind the scenes request from Grozin to veto

questions from certain journalists – more evidence, if a little heavy-handed, of his anti-democratic tendencies – and arranges for a journalist to ask him whether the contract for the wind turbine deal is dependent on the Danish Government handing over Bayanov to the Turgisian authorities. The person who asks the question is Katerine Fønsmark of TV1, one of the writers on Grozin's list. Grozin is put in a situation where he is trapped by his own hierarchy of concerns – his overriding desire not to sully his democratic credentials in front of the world's press on the eve of his chairmanship of the Organisation for Security, Democracy and Development. Needing to respond immediately, his priority is not to undermine international belief in his commitment to civil rights and the rule of law. Loss of face and respect within the OSDD would be an inevitable consequence of saying the contract did depend on Bayanov's extradition. By taking such a stance he would be openly challenging his trust in Danish lawyers to establish for themselves, on the basis of a considered interpretation of the statutes of the Danish legal system, whether an extradition order was in fact appropriate. He answers with an eye firmly on maintaining the structural conditions necessary to underpin his own foremost goals. This requires his agency, including the skill of thinking on his feet, but his agency has little room for manoeuvre in the circumstances. He replies: 'I have great faith in the Danish legal system, and I can assure you that I do not link the wind energy deal with the case against Bayanov.'

As the final photos are taken by the assembled journalists, Birgitte whispers into Grozin's ear: 'I'm glad you said that, because I'm not going to hand him over.' The episode closes with us knowing that Bayanov has been released and has flown to Paris to speak at a human rights conference. However, we are left unsure whether the North Wind deal will go through, for while it has been signed, the Turgisian government has questioned a number of the terms in the contract, leaving the outcome still uncertain. If it doesn't go through then Birgitte's moment of victory will have been short lived with respect to the wind turbine deal, with the constraints of the contextual field remaining intractable in spite of her skilful creativity, but the victory will be longer lasting with respect to the demand for extradition.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to demonstrate the subtle appreciation of the general theoretical concepts – applying to events and their contextual field – required for audiences to be able to make sense of *Borgen*. This means that audiences who can make sense of *Borgen* are already equipped with

many of the concepts necessary to make sense of news and current affairs events. This includes an intuitive sense of the ways in which key protagonists have internalized social structures, of the constraints these impose, and of the creative agency required to act meaningfully within these circumstances. It would be well nigh impossible to follow the plot of 'State Visit' without these competencies. I hope I have shown how social theory can bring the character of these conceptual and interpretive skills to the fore, making them explicit. In the process of doing this, the chapter has also, first, provided some indication as to how these skills can be transferred to the arena of current affairs, and secondly, has indicated how the concepts routinely employed by audiences can be rendered more precise, penetrating and consistent with the aid of social theory. In the chapters that follow I will apply these concepts directly to the analysis of a range of news and current affairs items, indicating what is involved, including the need to combine general categories with specific, situational details, and demonstrating more directly what audiences for news and current affairs stand to gain from a commitment to these altered ways of seeing.