`I'm ashamed to admit it but I have watched Dallas': the moral hierarchy of television programmes
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‘I’m ashamed to admit it but I have watched Dallas’: the moral hierarchy of television programmes

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Introduction

When you listen to people talking about their viewing habits and about their favourite TV programmes, their discourses on the subject of television, it immediately strikes you how profoundly moral this issue is. There are very few programmes that people will freely and plainly admit they like to watch; with the exception of perhaps the evening news, people seem to feel a compelling need to explain, defend and justify their viewing habits.

The distinct moral tone of the interviews this article is based on could of course be a peculiarity of Finnish culture and society. Let me however suggest that we are talking about a much more general modern cultural feature, even though there may be cultural differences as to the seriousness with which viewing habits and programme choices are taken and talked about. The finding about the moral character of television discourse is ‘new’ only because it has largely been taken for granted. That certain programmes or cultural products are seen to be more valued than others is so self-evident in Western culture that the whole research interest in mass communication and particularly in mass culture has been largely based upon such a presupposition. However, traditional communication research has shown no critical interest in the phenomenon per se, but the viewpoint has been guided by those very criteria and concerns that in Western culture lie behind the distinction between good, acceptable art and unacceptable cultural products.¹

It is only since the late 1970s that these concerns about mass culture have

been approached as a cultural phenomenon in their own right and worthy of serious empirical and theoretical analysis. In recent years several studies of television viewing have paid attention to the fact that the people who say they watch certain devalued TV programmes, such as soap operas, are ashamed to admit it. When commenting on their viewing habits they tend to defend, justify or excuse themselves for their programme choices (Hobson, 1982; Ang, 1985; Roos, 1989). As an attempt to explain this phenomenon, Ang (1985), for instance, refers in her study on the reception of Dallas in Holland to the ideology of mass culture, which provides a rational basis for the moral denunciation of soap operas and other similar programme types, and which people have to take into account when they discuss their own viewing habits.

In this article, I intend to analyse the moral nature of the interviewees’ television discourse by studying and classifying the discourses people use when talking about their viewing habits. As will be shown, such coding of TV discourse, presented in a table form, will reveal an underlying hierarchy of tastes, which then provides the basis for a cultural interpretation of the phenomenon. The analysis is based on unstructured thematic interviews with 90 families and 99 adult interviewees from Tampere in southern Finland. The material is very extensive (running up to about 1,800 double-spaced pages) and very rich in content. My focus here is restricted to the interviews with parents, which I will examine only from this one specific angle.

It is reasonable to assume that the way in which the interviewees were selected for this study has in part induced them to talk about their TV behaviour within the framework of a moral discourse. Since the adult interviewees were parents with school-age children, and therefore responsible for their upbringing, they have obviously felt it necessary to explain their actions from a moral point of view: this is how they want to educate their children, this is the kind of model they want to set for their children through their own behaviour, etc. But it cannot be taken for granted that the parents’ viewing habits are an important part of education, of providing models. And the situation does not produce the content of the moral hierarchy. To be sure, the interview situation does help to make it understandable why people set their discourses within a certain framework, but it does not produce that frame.

From the interviews there emerged a relatively uniform moral code in relation to which and in the context of which people spoke about their viewing habits and favourite programmes. One could talk about a moral or value hierarchy, since the discourse in terms of which a programme was talked about reflects the valuation of the programme in question. To detect that hierarchy, I developed a special method whose purpose was to make sure that I was not carried away by my own taste, presuppositions or impressions concerning the valuation of different programme types.
The moral hierarchy

The central idea in the detection of the moral hierarchy argued to be underlying individuals' comments on their viewing habits was that people tend to speak about different programmes in different ways. There is a rather uniform moral code in relation to which and in the context of which people speak about their viewing habits and favourite programmes, and that can be analysed by classifying the different types of discourse people use when reporting, justifying or criticizing the viewing of different types of programmes.

When talking about 'programme types' the concern here is not with what programmes 'really' form a 'type' or 'genre'; instead, I refer to different types of programmes as emic constructions or as cultural conventions: as concepts and typologies that people use in their discourses about TV programmes. These conventions may be more or less haphazard, inaccurate or even misleading, but they are nevertheless real insofar as they make clear to the parties involved what exactly is being discussed. For certain programme types there are common terms that are recognized by all, for others no such terms have developed. Nevertheless as concepts these different types of programmes are well known. For instance, the American term 'soap opera' is practically unknown among ordinary people, and there is no single Finnish equivalent for it, but the people I interviewed still lumped together such programmes as Dallas, Dynasty and The Colbys, as well as the German equivalent Schwarzwald Clinic and the Swedish version of soap Öhman's Varuhus (Öhman's Department Store).

Very roughly we may note that the most highly valued types of TV programme in the Finnish moral hierarchy are represented by news and documentaries, while at the bottom of the hierarchy we have American soap operas. Although large numbers admit that they watch soaps more or less regularly, this very often seems to require some excuse or justification. This is particularly the case among male viewers:

I: Are there any TV serials that you watch regularly?
R: I'm ashamed to admit it but I have watched Dallas.
I: What's there to be ashamed of? Is there anything else you like?
R: Well, not really. There's nothing on right now that's interesting.

People talk about different programme types in different ways, but the boundaries between these different types are not absolute but relative. Therefore it is necessary to take a closer look at the Finnish moral hierarchy: how often do people mention different types of programme and how often do they employ different discourses in connection with these different types. For this purpose we need to develop a typology of discourses based on the way in which interviewees spontaneously refer to a
certain programme or respond to a question by the interviewer regarding a certain programme or programme type.

People talk about their viewing habits and favourite programmes within the framework of different types of discourse. First of all there is the laconic statement that one watches or likes a certain programme. The second, opposite type is represented by the equally straightforward statement that one does not like a certain programme or never watches it. The third type of discourse may be described as reflective. Here the speaker comments in one way or another on the fact that he or she watches a certain programme. For instance, the interviewee may explain why or in what frame of mind he or she watches a certain programme, or analyse the programme itself and its attractions. Analogous to this is the reverse case where the individual explains his or her reasons for not watching a certain programme; this type of discourse occurred only in the category of documentaries. Finally, I have distinguished as a separate discourse the statement that one used to watch a certain programme but that one has 'given it up' or lost interest.

Table 1 shows how often different types of discourse were employed in connection with different types of TV programme. The analysis is based on the discourses of 99 interviewees. The percentages given below the absolute figures indicate percentages of the number of references to the programme types concerned.

Let us first look at the absolute figures. The last column, which gives the number of people who have not mentioned the programme type, shows that different programme types were discussed by the interviewees to different extents. This is true even though references to a certain programme type were counted only once.4 In other words, all of the interviewees did not talk about all programme types. The reason lies in the nature of the unstructured interview method: the questions were so formulated that the interviewees were asked to state what sort of programmes they watched. It was only occasionally that the interviewer followed up by asking specifically whether they watched this or that particular programme.

One might assume that this type of unsystematic material does not give a very reliable picture of the valuation of different types of TV programmes. Reliability is of course always relative, but there are also ways of adapting the method according to the nature of the material. In this case it means we should not give too much weight to the absolute figures in our interpretation of the results.

That most of the references in this interview material were to two programme types — current affairs and documentaries on the one hand and soap operas on the other — suggests that these two categories play an important part in the characterization of one's taste. For instance, criticism of soap operas may serve as a reverse strategy of communicating one's
### TABLE 1
Discourses by programme types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Watches</td>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explains why does not watch</td>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not like the programme</td>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Given up or lost interest</td>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective</td>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No mention</td>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Programme types:*
- A = Current affairs and documentaries
- B = Nature programmes
- C = Sports programmes
- D = Situation comedies (*Golden Girls, Kate and Allie, Bill Cosby Show*)
- E = Detective serials (e.g. *Murder She Wrote, Agatha Christie serials, Bergerac, Hill Street Blues*)
- F = Soap operas (*Schwarzwald Clinic, Dallas, Dynasty, Colbys, Öhman's Varuhus or St Elsewhere*)
- G = Action serials (e.g. *Spencer for Hire, A-team, V, Miami Vice, Hammer, Magnum, Benson, McGyver*)

values, whereas documentaries are mentioned frequently because of their highly valued position.

The relative breakdown of references among different programme types gives a clearer picture of the meaning of these figures. Analysis of these percentages allows us to read from Table 1 the moral hierarchy of TV programmes: what we need to do is examine how large a proportion of the references to different programme types consists of either ‘watches’ or ‘explains-why-does-not-watch’ statements. These discourses are indicative of a high valuation of the programme type in the sense that either the interviewee does not consider it necessary in any way to explain the fact that he or she watches the programme, or that he or she feels it is necessary to have some excuse for not watching it. The moral hierarchy that emerges from this analysis is as follows: (1) current affairs programmes (85 percent), (2) nature programmes (86 percent), (3) situation comedies (72 percent), (4) sports programmes (58 percent), (5) detective serials (33 percent), (6) action serials (29 percent), and (7) soap operas (7 percent).
Class, gender and good taste

The moral hierarchy of programme types described above is relatively independent of the preferences of individuals in the sense that although different individuals say they watch different programmes, their discourses can be interpreted within the same collective moral hierarchy. Although there is inter-individual variation, this is confined within the limits of the said hierarchy. No-one, for instance, explains why they are interested in current affairs programmes, and no-one has excuses for not watching a certain fictional serial.

However, this moral hierarchy is not independent of people’s viewing habits. This is clearly evident when we examine programme favourites by gender and educational level. In other words, in this analysis we ignore the way in which people talk about different programmes — whether they reflect or do not reflect upon their viewing habits, whether or not they have excuses and explanations for watching certain programmes — and simply infer from the interviews whether the individual watches different types of programme. Here the data produced by an interview study are not, of course, as reliable as the results of audience ratings, but they certainly do give a sufficiently accurate picture for the present purposes.

Let us begin by taking a closer look at gender differences. They are here analysed by counting the proportions of women among those who in the interview, in one way or another, reported that they watch different programme types. In that way, since there were 60 women and 39 men among the 99 interviewees, the percentage numbers themselves are not that important. It is rather the gendered preference order of the programme types achieved that way.

When we read Figure 1 as a gender-based preference order of different programme types, it is worth noting that we should mainly pay attention to the programme types in which the proportions of men and women are highest in the audience. We could fairly safely infer that women are particularly interested in nature programmes and soap operas, whereas action serials and sports programmes are especially favoured by men. A comparison of this ranking list with Table 1 clearly indicates that women’s favourite programmes are much more problematic in moral terms than men’s programmes. Only 21 of the total of 50 references to sports programmes were apologetic or statements that one does not watch sports, whereas in the case of soap operas only 6 out of 69 references were plain statements that one watches or likes this type of programme. Among the references to detective serials plain statements accounted for 6 out of a total of 18 references.

Let us now move on to examine how the audiences of different programme types are distributed between different educational levels. In this analysis a sub-group of 39 people with a high educational level
FIGURE 1
Proportions of women and men among those who report watching different programme types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme Type</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action serials (N=28)</td>
<td>33+67</td>
<td>63+37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soap operas (N=45)</td>
<td>67+33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detective serials (N=16)</td>
<td>62+39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situation comedies (N=18)</td>
<td>67+33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports programmes (N=40)</td>
<td>40+60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature programmes (N=36)</td>
<td>72+28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current affairs (N=50)</td>
<td>63+37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 2
Proportions of those with high and low education among those who report watching different programme types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme Type</th>
<th>Low Education</th>
<th>High Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action serials (N=28)</td>
<td>28+72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soap operas (N=37)</td>
<td>35+65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detective serials (N=15)</td>
<td>54+46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situation comedies (N=18)</td>
<td>44+66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports programmes (N=40)</td>
<td>33+67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature programmes (N=36)</td>
<td>38+62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current affairs (N=50)</td>
<td>41+59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(matriculation examination, college, university) was separated from the total sample of 99 interviewees.

On the basis of Figure 2 we could infer that there are more highly educated people in the audience of detective serials and situation comedies than in the audience of other programmes, whereas those with a low educational level are particularly interested in sports programmes and action serials. Let us now compare the results of Figures 1 and 2 with the
general moral hierarchy by transforming them into ranking orders of women and the highly educated (which, read from the bottom to the top, show the ranking orders of men, and those with low education).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The highest in general moral hierarchy</th>
<th>Women's favourites</th>
<th>Educated viewers' favourites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>current affairs</td>
<td>nature programmes</td>
<td>detective series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nature programmes</td>
<td>soap operas</td>
<td>sitcom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sitcom</td>
<td>sitcom</td>
<td>current affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sports programmes</td>
<td>current affairs</td>
<td>nature programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>detective series</td>
<td>detective series</td>
<td>soap operas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>action serials</td>
<td>sports programmes</td>
<td>sports programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>soap operas</td>
<td>action serials</td>
<td>action serials</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The lowest in general moral hierarchy</th>
<th>Men's favourites</th>
<th>Uneducated viewers' favourites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

From this comparison we can see that one of women’s top favourites, soap operas, ranks as the least valued in the general moral hierarchy. Likewise, less educated men’s top favourite, action serials, ranks second to lowest in the general moral hierarchy. Looking further at the respective list for viewers with a high educational level, we see that their top favourite, detective serials, comes third from last in the overall moral hierarchy. Does this mean that the preferences of highly educated viewers do not necessarily represent good taste after all (see Bourdieu, 1984)? The explanation here lies in gender: detective serials are favourites above all among highly educated women; all of the 15 people in the sample who reported watching detective serials were highly educated women. All in all, we could conclude that the general moral hierarchy is particularly favourable for the taste and viewing habits of highly educated men.

**Excuses, justifications and viewer attitudes**

Our interview material confirms the common wisdom that different people watch different programmes, that people have to some extent different tastes. But why are some people’s preferences and tastes with regard to television programmes considered as better than other people’s? One way to deal with the question of what makes some programmes more compatible with ‘good taste’ than others is to take a closer look at the content of people’s explanations and justifications. From this we can proceed to identify the criteria upon which the moral hierarchy of TV programmes is based.
Above we used the term ‘reflective discourse’ to describe the different ways in which people analysed their viewing habits and favourite TV programmes in the unstructured interviews. In a more detailed analysis that discourse actually breaks down into a whole range of different ways of speaking. Let us now look more closely into these different ways in which our interviewees analysed the various types of fictional programmes.6

The ways of explaining and justifying one’s viewing of a certain TV serial can be divided into two main categories; these can both be further divided into two types, giving a total of four different variants. The viewer’s analysis may focus either on the content of the programme or on the act of viewing. There can be distinguished two types of discourse that focus on content. We shall call the first one of these analysis of realism, where the speaker evaluates the programme on the basis of whether or not its world is truthful or at least plausible:

I: Are any of these programmes that you no longer watch?
R: There’s plenty, erm, what were they called these . . . well, you know, Dallas and Falcon Crest and what have you . . . that sort of thing I just can’t watch them any more.
I: What’s wrong with them, why these?
R: Well somehow they’re just, they’re so far removed from the ordinary world even more than those violence things, I mean really [laughter] . . . even the wife no longer watches them.

The other discourse which concentrates on the content of the programme is here described as analysis of representation. In this type of discourse the speaker evaluates what the film was like as a performance, how well it was produced, directed, or how the characters played their roles. Here is an example:

I: Hm, what was it in this Australian series, why did you watch that, I mean why did you like it so much that you watched it?
R: I would say that it was mainly the high quality of these Australian series generally, the ones we’ve seen earlier I mean, but I must say that this was a disappointment.

A completely separate type of reflective discourse is represented by those interviewees who analysed their viewing of TV programmes. I call the first sub-type psychological interpretation. In some cases this strategy of explanation could actually be described as diagnosis. The person interprets his or her own behaviour, tries to make it understandable to himself and to other people as well.

I: What sort of programmes do you like yourself?
R: I watch all the sloppy stuff. I don’t know, like Dallas, I always watch it, even though it’s stupid really, but every time it’s on I watch it.
I: Well why do you bother then?
R: [raises voice, speaks faster and faster] I can't really say, somehow I, I mean I think it's so stupid that I have to watch it, it goes beyond that limit and it makes you laugh. We always say with him that, yeah, of course, this is what this or that character had to do. That somehow, I suppose it annoys me somehow, annoys me and interests me, that it's a tightrope situation.

In most cases, however, the psychological interpretation appears in a less diagnostic form, so that the person simply explains for what purpose he or she uses a certain programme. A typical statement is that people watch light programmes because 'you don't have to think about anything'.

The last of these four types of reflective discourse is moral reference. Here the interviewee makes clear in one way or another that he or she is aware of the place of the TV serial in the moral hierarchy. Here, too, the analysis concentrates on the viewing of the programme rather than on the programme itself, but there is no excuse or any psychological explanation. Typically the interviewee will plainly and briefly admit that he or she is a bit ashamed, or in a few words justify his or her choice to watch a certain programme: 'I'm afraid I do watch it'. Sometimes the identification of a moral reference from speech required of me the courage to rely on my cultural competence, on my inherent ability as a member of Finnish culture to understand even the most subtle kind of messages. Sometimes they appear in the form of understating the frequency of watching a certain programme.

In most cases this type of justification does not occur alone or independently but is embedded in the reflective discourse. This applies to all the four types of reflective discourse outlined above: they are by no means mutually exclusive, but appear side by side and sometimes even in the same sentence. For instance, a person may say that he 'is afraid' he watches *Dallas* 'for the sake of relaxation'; that even though it represents an 'unreal and imaginary world', it is nevertheless a 'well-produced programme'. In the analysis presented in Table 2, I have marked down which of the four forms of reflective discourse an individual uses when talking about a programme type. So the example of an account of watching *Dallas* would produce a mark in each of these four 'boxes'.

So let us now, on the basis of this classification, see whether there is any clear-cut pattern in the way viewers talk about different types of TV serials.

There are only relatively few cases in this table, and no far-reaching conclusions with regard to their breakdown into different sub-types of reflection can be made. However, Table 2 does give us some clue as to what makes soap operas and action serials the least valued types of programme: these were the only categories in which the interviewees considered TV programmes from the point of view of their (lack of) realism.

The way in which people talk about realism in connection with soap
### TABLE 2
Forms of reflection on different types of TV serials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Serial</th>
<th>Realism</th>
<th>Representation</th>
<th>Psychological</th>
<th>Moral ref.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soap operas</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action serials</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situation comedies</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detective serials</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

operas and action serials explains why it is the former that occupy the lowest position in the moral hierarchy. Let us first take an example of analysis of realism in the case of soap operas:

_I_: What is it in this serial that you find so interesting that you watch it all the same?
_R_: Well, I don’t know, you just watch it, you know . . .
_I_: Is it a bit the same as browsing through a woman’s magazine?
_R_: Yeah, I suppose so. Now that, if there’s nothing else on, you might just as well watch it. But I mean this has been going on for years now. I haven’t, I mean I’ve only started watching it a couple of years ago. I suppose it becomes a habit, doesn’t it, it’s on so you watch it.
_I_: Hm, I see. Erm, what would you say are the bad sides about the serial.
_R_: Er, it’s . . . what would I say, well I mean it’s all so unbelievable everything, isn’t it? It can’t really be true, can it? I mean if you look out there in the real world.

This was the only interview in the category of reflective discourses commenting on the process of viewing where the interviewee referred to the lack of realism in soap operas. However, if critical comments of those who do not watch or like soap operas are included, then analysis of realism emerges as a central form of criticism. The imaginary world of soap operas is criticized above all by men, but in many cases highly educated women are also sharply critical. A rather common situation could be one where a school-age child says that the mother watches soaps, she understates the frequency of her viewing or explains why she watches them, and the father passes his moral judgment.

In her study of _Dallas_ viewers, Ang (1985) proposes a distinction between two ways of understanding the realism of the programme: an empiricist and an emotional concept of realism. In the empiricist conception of realism the focus is on whether the representation corresponds to external reality. In the emotional conception the focus is on whether the characters, models of action and conflict situations appearing in the story are ‘identifiable’, i.e. whether they are believable within the context of one’s own life-experiences.
Examples of both these conceptions of realism can be found in the present material. For instance, some of the people who watched action serials explained this by reference to their empirical realism. They pointed out that in spite of all the violence the world that is depicted in action serials or action films is quite realistic: the real world is violent.

There are also examples of justifications based on the emotional conception of realism. In these cases it was pointed out that there is a clear logic of action in TV serials and that the underlying motives of action are recognizable. Some of these explanations should perhaps more appropriately be described as references to 'technical realism': while the content of the programmes was not considered to give a truthful representation of reality, it was added that the stunts that are performed in the programme must in principle be technically possible.

In other words, the interviewees in this study discussed and called into question the realism of two types of programmes, i.e. soap operas and action serials. People who like to watch action serials may argue that these are realistic, but the important point to note here is that the issue of realism is raised in the first place. Soap operas occupy the lowest position in the moral hierarchy because they are regarded as the least realistic type of TV programme. This same principle explains why quite a number of interviewees said they preferred certain Finnish series which describe the life of ordinary people.

This emphasis on realism helps to explain why current affairs and nature programmes rank at the very top of the moral hierarchy of TV programmes in Finland: they are not fictional but describe reality itself. But what about the most highly valued type of TV serials, situation comedies and detective series; why are they so highly valued?

The fictitious element in situation comedies and detective serials is sufficiently obvious; they are unadulterated fairytales for adults and so nakedly so that there is no need to discuss the question of whether or not they reflect reality in a truthful way. To be sure, some interviewees said of the Bill Cosby Show that its portrayal of family life is too idyllic to be believable, and some people said they liked to watch the show because sometimes it deals with problems that are directly relevant to their own life. However, analysis of realism is not central to such comments; it is all too obvious that situation comedies are fictional.

There was also no discussion of realism in connection with detective serials; again it is too obvious that these programmes are not intended to give a truthful picture of reality, and therefore it is unnecessary to raise the issue. Reflective references to detective serials were chiefly evaluations of the quality of the programme.

A psychological interpretation can be roughly defined as an explanation by the individual concerned as to why or in what 'frame of mind' he or she watches fictitious programmes. People make it clear that they are not
misled into believing that the world depicted in the film is real, but that they watch the programme as a story. Sometimes this type of viewing is described as a sort of mental idling, of whiling away the time. Some of the interviewees say they watch fictitious programmes with an analytical eye, trying to find out what it is in them that makes them so attractive and exciting, while others stress that mass entertainment is great fun because you don’t have to think about anything. These different, even opposite psychological interpretations do not, however, divide the interviewees into different camps, but they may even appear in one and the same interview.

Whatever the discourse in which the psychological interpretation is embedded, people use this strategy to convince others that they are not naive in their attitudes toward fictional programmes. They either make it clear that they enjoy the freedom of movement between two different levels in viewing these programmes, that they can analyse the narrative means, or they emphasize their conscious use of mass entertainment as a drug, as a momentary escape from everyday life and critical thinking.

Analysis of the different types of reflective discourse and their mutual relationship gives a clear indication as to where we might find the sources of the moral and moralistic attitude to viewing habits and preferences. Through their explanations and justifications people want to dissociate themselves from the specific kind of attitude toward television which is regarded as injurious or shameful. These explanations are premised on the assumption that a person may fall under the spell of television. It is not that the conscious consumption of entertainment and the whiling away of time by watching TV entertainment is regarded as particularly injurious or demoralizing; in fact, as we have seen, it is precisely by reference to this sort of consumption that many people justify their TV viewing. The danger lies deeper: in the risk of losing one’s sense of reality, the ability to see the difference between real life and the imaginary world of TV programmes. The person who has fallen under the spell of television would regard the imaginary TV world as real, would live in that world and identify herself with its characters.

Do such viewers really exist? Or could we assume that there are at least two different ways of understanding TV programmes, the ‘analytical’ and ‘referential’ (see Liebes and Katz, 1990)? According to this assumption some people take a critical and analytical position; they are always well aware of whether they are watching a ‘current affairs programme’ or ‘entertainment’. Others only understand and accept programmes that give a truthful description of the real world, and disapprove of programmes that portray an ‘unreal’ or imaginary world. People representing this hypothetical type of viewer only like to watch fictional programmes that they feel are realistic — and it is here that we might expect to find the real risk we mentioned above: the risk of a false world depicted by realistic means being able to seduce this type of viewer. All this is purely hypothetical, but
is there any empirical evidence to support our analysis? One way to move forward from this point is to take a closer look at the 'exceptional cases' in our material, i.e. the six women who said they watched soap operas and had no excuses.

Discourses, values and power relations within the family

These exceptional cases told us quite plainly and without any excuses that they liked to watch soap operas.

I: What kind of TV serials do you like to watch and TV programmes in general?  
R: Well, I don't really... I don't know... there are some music programmes and nature programmes and the news and then some of these serials are sometimes, I like watching them. Like the Swedish serial that was on some time ago...

R [daughter]: Öhman's.

R: That right, Öhman's, every now and again there are some good series on.

These interviewees were not of course as straightforward as this throughout the interview; if and when the interviewer later asked them to specify why they liked or disliked certain types of programmes, they would go ahead and explain. The issue of TV morality just didn't happen to be one of the most important things in their lives; they felt no compelling need to make excuses.

It would seem that these six women either could not care less about the low value ranking of soap operas or that they are not aware of it. Could this mean that they have taken the imaginary world of these serials for real? This assumption does not seem to receive support from an analysis of how these women talk about TV programmes in general. For instance, they say that they have told their children not to take TV programmes too seriously:

R: Well mostly for me the things I'm not too keen on is all the fighting and shooting... somehow... when my daughter was younger she was quite frightened so I told her you know that this is not how it is in real life, that there's not so much violence really, that if you hit someone like that it may be terribly... you might kill someone... so that I don't really... I don't like violence... and I think that there's too much of it in those detective series... that I don't like.

The viewing habits of these six women may perhaps be characterized as more strongly biased than average toward entertainment, but otherwise their attitude to mass entertainment is rather similar to that which emerged from the reflective discourses: they watch certain programmes for the sake of relaxation and as a form of light entertainment. They are no more 'unreflective' than anyone else. It would seem that in these families television is a way of bringing the family together, and that attitudes
towards its entertainment are very down to earth. Television is neither a threat nor a serious medium of education, but simply one way of spending leisure time among many others.

Why did these six women not feel any need to justify their liking for soap operas? One way to tackle this question is to look for reasons for this discourse rather than assume automatically that these discourses reflect essential differences in individual ways of life or ways of ‘reading’ television programmes. In the present case it seems that these women’s ‘uncritical’ way of telling about their viewing habits had to do with their life situation.

Of these six women four were sole providers at the time of the interview. We have to remember that soap operas are above all women’s favourites and that the criticism comes mainly from male viewers. It would seem that assurances to the effect that one’s own attitude and relationship to television is of the ‘harmless’ kind are not necessary in families where there is no man around to criticize soap operas.

Why, then, do men criticize their wives for their viewing habits? There are probably several reasons. First of all soap operas are primetime programmes. The viewing of soap operas is very often something that the whole family does together. Therefore there is also often discussion within the family about these programmes; and if the husband does not happen to be interested in soap operas, this will usually mean criticism by the husband of the wife’s taste. In addition, making a choice between two different programmes that are shown at the same time on different channels reflects the family’s internal power relations. In the light of our interviews it seems that if and when the family disagrees on what they want to watch, it is usually the father who gets his own way (see Morley, 1986). However, this sort of right to decide on what the family is going to watch has to be justified; otherwise the male dominance is all too naked. Therefore men have to try to convince themselves and others that their programmes are better; and one strategy in this is to emphasize the unrealistic element in soap operas.

Debate about which programmes are better than others is probably less relevant in one-parent families. In the four families concerned the mother can watch what she wants to, without anyone criticizing her for her bad taste. Therefore these women were simply not prepared to explain to the interviewer why they like soap operas. The remaining two cases of ‘uncritical discourse’ may have to do with other factors. In one of the families the husband never watches any fictional serials; what is more there are two televisions in the family, so that if there does happen to be disagreement then that is easily solved. In the other family television was largely a background noise and picture; the television is usually turned on for the best part of the evening, and family members also spend a considerable amount of time watching it. Possible disagreements have
been avoided by the purchase of a video recorder; the party who loses the
cight for priority can record the programme and watch it later.

These six exceptional interviews can thus be explained by reference to
the fact that these women have not had to defend their choices and
preferences in the context of normal everyday life nearly as much as the
other interviewees. The interpretation suggested here is of course hypo-
thesitical, but so is an alternative interpretation where discourse on viewing
habits is simply thought to reflect an individual’s ‘reading’ of television
programmes.

Everyday realism and models of life

The unanimous denunciation by public opinion, and particularly by men,
of soap operas does not explain why these series occupy the lowest position
in the moral hierarchy of TV programmes. It would also be too simplistic
to argue that men have defined soap operas as worthless in order to justify
their power position within the family; we must remember that in most
cases women, too, speak about soap operas in a reflective manner. Rather,
it seems that men use the poor valuation of the wife’s favourite pro-
grammes and the higher valuation of their own programmes to their own
benefit. However, differences in valuation cannot be explained directly
from the vantage point of power differences, because even those who
represent ‘poor taste’ believe at least partly in this same hierarchy of tastes.

So what does explain the moral hierarchy of TV programmes? On the
basis of our interview material the factor that makes a certain type of
programme poorly valued is its problematic relationship to reality. All
fictional programmes rank among the least valued programme types, and
analyses of those ranking at the very bottom often refer to their ‘lack of
realism’. One might say that those programmes are valued least which
describe the ‘unreal’ world by realistic narrative means. It is with this type
of programme that people typically associate the risk that someone might
take them too seriously and lose their sense of reality.

What are people actually saying when they describe the world of a TV
programme as ‘unrealistic’? They are not actually presenting an empiricist
interpretation of realism, that is of how realistically a series portrays, say,
the life of oil millionaires in the United States. They are also not presenting
at least pure emotional interpretations of realism. The characters in these
series and their models of action are certainly identifiable, but nevertheless
the world that is represented in these series can be regarded as ‘unreal’
because it does not give a truthful picture of what everyday life is really
like.

The criticism of such ‘unrealistic’ programmes — and the respondents’
willfulness to excuse themselves for watching them — is due to their failure
to give a true representation of what life is really like for ordinary people. This involves a certain presupposition of what is regarded as the chief function of fictional stories: they should provide ethically sound models of life. This requirement of realism could be described as ethical realism.

R: Well yes of course I think that very often the value system in these programmes is not necessarily suitable for children, for a growing child, it’s not a model you’d like them to follow. No . . . I mean I’ve seen enough of Dallas, I’ve earlier seen the odd episode and these other series, and I think the model they provide is just not good enough.

Television morality is thus more or less directly bound up with general conceptions of morals and morality. People are genuinely concerned about TV viewing because the models of life that are conveyed through TV programmes are often considered to be at sharp variance with the ethical principles of the Finnish way of life.

What are these principles? First of all TV programmes should not give an overly romantic picture of life. Second, fictional stories should not lead us into believing that life is too easy. In real life we must be prepared for unhappy endings. Fictional programmes that are considered realistic are such that describe modest, simple life. In this emphasis on the hardness and harshness of everyday life there are certain traces of the Protestant religion and its puritanism. The world that provides an acceptable model for life is often found in films that portray old country life. It is also an ethical principle of the Finnish mode of life to stress that life is hard, because that is the best way to avoid disappointments. Life is hard, and if it’s not, it’s not good for your character, seems to be the guideline.

These basic principles of TV morality make understandable the paradox that violent action serials are regarded as more 'realistic' than the fantasy world of soap operas; action serials after all make no secret of the conviction that life is hard and even violent, at least in America. At the same time, however, we can see that the image of good and virtuous life which is mediated through Finnish TV morality is very profoundly a male image. That life could be romantic is less 'realistic' than the expectation that life is hard and violent.

**Television as a moral issue**

Why is it that people often justify and excuse themselves for watching television, especially TV fiction? On the basis of this study, let me suggest some answers to this question. One reason is that certain programmes are generally thought to represent 'bad taste'. Practically all TV serials are considered 'low brow' in terms of a general moral hierarchy, and people seem to be reluctant to admit that they 'really' belong to the audience of
such programmes. Yet many of these shows gather big audiences. Is it simply that people would like to present themselves in a good light, as more cultivated than they actually are?

There is probably some truth in this. In Finland, as in many other countries, the dominant values favour ‘quality television’, high-brow films, education and high quality factual programmes. From the very beginning of national broadcasting in Finland, it has been thought that the function of the state-owned broadcasting company is to enlighten and educate people. Even before the establishment of the Finnish Broadcasting Company (FBC) in 1925, Radio Tampere declared that its chief goal was to keep its listeners up to date and to disseminate ‘educational information’ (Tulppo, 1976: 27). Similarly in FBC’s articles of association it was stated that the company should aim to promote popular education (Tulppo, 1976: 39). In the 1960s the FBC carried on this tradition by what was called an ‘informative programme policy’, according to which ‘the primary goal of broadcasting must be to provide a world-view that is based on true information and facts, a view that changes with the world and with our increasing and changing knowledge’ (Tulppo, 1976: 287). As a consequence of this ideology of popular education and quality television, the FBC has, in its own TV programme production, mainly concentrated on ‘quality production’, and taken care of the ‘necessary’ popular entertainment by buying TV serials from abroad, or it has left it to commercial television (at present, there are two commercial companies). This ideology of the establishment has not been challenged. On the contrary, it has been backed and perhaps initially produced by a strong heritage of everyday realism (Eskola, 1987) or a special kind of ethical realism in Finnish culture. Consequently, although people do watch ‘soaps’ and other ‘low-brow’ programmes in the interviews they seemed to be obliged to excuse themselves for doing so. Or they wanted to assure the interviewer that they are not carried away by the programmes and do not take the imaginary world of serials for reality.

However, when the interviewees wanted to explain why and how they watch certain programmes, they were not simply making excuses. Juha Kytömäki’s article (Kytömäki, 1991), based on the same research material as this article, highlights the fact that television is, in a fundamental way, a family medium. In a family, all members typically watch the same channel, and so there are often situations where individuals watch a show they are not particularly fond of. At least in Finland, the parents often seem to let their school-aged children watch their favourite shows, and parents keep them company by more or less attentively watching them as well. This explains why the interviewees, when asked about their viewing habits and programme choices, wanted to elaborate on the fashion in which they watch certain programmes, such as soap operas.

‘Watching for the sake of company’ may of course be just another form
of excuse. Interestingly, however, the interviewees did not actively use it. That people actually watch for the sake of the company could only be read ‘between the lines’, as Kytömäki did. When explaining their viewing habits people resorted to other forms of discourse, which described their individual motives or ways of viewing ‘low-brow’ serials. That seemed to be more important for the interviewees than to use other family members’ programme choices as an excuse or explanation.

It appears that when talking about their viewing habits people had to take into account the cultural frame in terms of which watching television is talked about. According to it, individuals are only supposed to watch their favourite programmes. This conception, according to which individuals’ consumption of cultural goods reflects their personal taste, identity and habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), is a modern phenomenon. Second, it is supposed that fictitious stories should have a moral, or that they should teach us something about reality. This conception dates back to Aristotle and the Greeks, who already were concerned with the ‘double difficulty’ of drama and poetry. On the one hand it was emphasized that the poet is a moral teacher whose work must fulfil a moral purpose. Others, on the other hand, took the position that art’s function is the revelation of reality (Carlson, 1986: 15–16).

Let me suggest that modernization and the domestication of the consumption of fiction has meant a development by which the moral is left out of a story. In contemporary fiction bad morals do not necessarily lead to bad ends; the ‘bad’ are not punished, or the ‘good’ rewarded. Dallas, for instance, describes how individuals act for various, often highly egoistic motives. JR is a case in point. Yet the ending — which doesn’t really exist in a continuous narrative — does not necessarily punish him for his badness. JR is not a moral ideal, nor is he a warning example. Ethical judgments are left to the viewers. Along with modernization, the moral of the story is increasingly often replaced by the viewers’ and critics’ moralism — or by their willingness to explain why they have watched or read an ‘immoral’ story. Indeed, several empirical studies show that people seldom watch TV attentively, and are often critical of the programmes they watch (Abrahamsson, 1988; Ang, 1991; Hermes, 1991; Kytömäki, 1991). In that sense fiction — and particularly television as the most domesticated form of the consumption of mass communication — continues to be a moral issue.

By taking TV morality as its object of research, rather than treating it as a culturally given frame of reference, reception and audience research is challenging the prevalent conceptions of TV viewing as an activity. Instead of studying the effects of TV programmes on the individuals, the world view they reflect, or the behavioural models they give the viewers, television could be compared with incidents on the street or the people living next door. We do not necessarily like our neighbours or approve of the events we see through the kitchen window or hear through the walls. It
is only that sometimes we cannot help hearing and seeing because we live there. In a similar vein, the TV programmes we see are part of the world we live in. The stories, events or characters are not necessarily 'good' or even interesting, but they are nonetheless part of our shared experience. They give us topics to talk about and examples from which we can reflect on our own lives and values.\(^9\)

**Notes**

An earlier version of this article has been published in Alasuutari et al. (1991). I also presented a version of this article as a paper at the Fourth International Television Studies Conference, July 1991, London.

1. For instance, people have been very much concerned about the impact on the general public of violence and other unacceptable models of behaviour in mass culture. The Frankfurt school cultural critique (for instance Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 120–67; Marcuse, 1968: 56–83), in turn, has been chiefly concerned with mass culture as a medium of ideological indoctrination, but this line of criticism can be seen as an extension to the aristocratic tradition of mass culture critique (Swingewood, 1977).

2. In nine families both of the parents were interviewed. Additionally, a schoolchild aged 10–13 was interviewed in every family. The families were randomly sampled from the school pupils’ lists from various residential areas of Tampere, a city of approximately 170,000 inhabitants. The themes of the adult interviews covered viewing habits and preferences, the life story of the interviewee, hobbies and lifestyle, and they were also asked to tell the plot of a fictitious programme they had recently watched on TV.

3. By the term ‘soap opera’ I here refer to primetime programmes, although originally this term referred to low-budget, daytime series produced with the housewife viewer in mind. The term ‘soap’ comes from the fact that the programmes were formerly sponsored by big detergent companies. *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, for example, differ from traditional soaps in the sense that they are primetime programmes, but in terms of theme construction they are considered to represent a direct extension to the soap tradition (Ang, 1985: 54–60).

4. In cases where people spoke about several different serials belonging to the same type of programme, attitudes toward this type were coded on the basis of the serial that was rated most favourably. For example, if the interviewee said he or she watched *Dallas* if there was ‘nothing else to do’, but said that he or she liked and regularly watched *Schwarzwald Clinic* (without in any way explaining why), this discourse would be coded as alternative no. 1. If, however, the same person elsewhere in the interview stressed that he or she watched this type of serial only in order to relax, the discourse would be coded under type 3.

5. These ‘ranking lists’ give only a rough picture of actual viewing habits. First, it is quite likely that ‘taken-for-granted’ programme types, such as news, will easily remain unmentioned in an unstructured interview. Second, it may be assumed that people will not necessarily mention less valued programme types unless specifically asked by the interviewer to state their opinion or, when asked, they may fail to tell the truth. Also it is probable that some people are more inclined than others to make this kind of understatement. Finally, these lists say nothing about the amount of time people spend watching a certain type of programme during, say, one week,
for different types of programmes have very different relative shares in one week's viewing. Nevertheless it must be repeated that these results provide a sufficiently accurate picture for the present analytical purposes.

7. The following typology comes quite close to those proposed by Richardson and Corner (1986) and Liebes and Katz (1990). The former make a distinction between three different discourses, which they consider to reflect different types of frames of interpretation. They call the first discourse a transparent 'reading', in which it seems that the evaluation is based on the speaker's own values. The second type is referred to as a mediated description: here the individual analyses the programme as a performance. From the third discourse it is impossible to infer whether the reading is transparent or mediated. Liebes and Katz make a distinction between referential and critical framing. The discourse I have here named 'reflective' largely corresponds to a 'mediated' description and 'critical' framing. However, the present study also analyses the ways in which people justify or comment on their viewing habits or the actual act of viewing.

7. It is no coincidence that the general moral hierarchy favours men and the highly educated. The situation is very similar in other spheres of life as well, for instance in working life, where female-dominated occupations are almost without exception poorly valued and poorly paid.

8. The same phenomenon was found in a Swedish study (Abrahamsson, 1988: 34–5), according to which children only watch their favourite programmes, whereas the age group 25 to 44 often report watching programmes that they grade quite low.

9. Marie Gillespie (1991) develops this idea further by analysing 'soap talk' among Punjabi youth in Southall as a continuation of their everyday verbal discourse, in which gossip is turned into rumours. She also points out that, in the domestic context, family members use Neighbours to compare and contrast their own social world and values with the world represented in the soap. In this way, young people may challenge parental values while they, on their part, may exploit the situation for didactic purposes.

References


Gillespie, M. (1991) 'Soap Viewing, Gossip and Rumour among Punjabi Youth in