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Chapter 5

Television as a Moral Issue

Pertti Alasuutari

Introduction

When television came to Finland in the late 1950s and spread throughout the country in the early 1960s, one of the Finnish Protestant revivalist movements, the Laestadians or, to be more precise, the main fraction of the movement, the Old Laestadians, banned it. After informal discussions on the subject, the annual Laestadian board meeting in 1963 decided that 'television with its programmes does not belong to the Christian home'. In this extremist Protestant sect, a total ban on television was maintained until the 1980s (Melkas, 1985).

Does the case of the Laestadian movement show that Finns have a particularly critical relation to television? There does seem to be an air of morality surrounding television and mass culture programmes. It is even in the interest of the state-owned broadcasting company to encourage certain kinds of cultural criticism, to defend 'good taste' and 'quality television' against commercial competition[1]. However, Finns are hardly exceptionally concerned about television. The Laestadians are a small religious minority who reside mainly in northern, rural parts of Finland. They are often made fun of and ridiculed by other Finns (it was said, for example, that the Laestadians also banned front-loading washing machines because you might see women's underwear through the window). American serials and soap operas, such as *Peyton Place*, *Dallas*, and now *The Bold and the Beautiful*, have been very popular in Finland. In March 1993, when Joanna Johnson, alias Caroline, from *The Bold and the Beautiful* paid a visit to Finland, she was welcomed as a big star. Pleasantly surprised by her popularity, she compared the positive response in Finland to the United States where soap operas are generally scorned and nobody cares (or admits to care) about them.

Are Americans even more critical of television and mass culture than Finns? That is hardly the case. Several decades of commercial broadcasting have adapted the American public to the mundane, ongoing flow of mass entertainment; the flow that may be ritually criticized but mostly left unnoticed. Although the Laestadians are an extreme example, the changes in their attitudes toward television from a total ban in the 1960s to a more liberal-minded, permissive, and only selectively critical attitude in the 1980s, reflect changes in attitude among ordinary Finns as well. In previous decades critical discussion of television revolved

around commercial television and mass entertainment. Now also public television is under fire for its elitist paternalism. In the spirit of postmodernism, even the intellectuals can proclaim they watch television serials.

The stereotypical anthropological approach to television as a moral issue among Finns would be to construct a 'Finnish case' of morality regarding television. Particular features of that case would then be explained by showing how they reflect other, also particular, features of 'Finnish culture'. Let me suggest, instead, that when we are talking about television as a moral issue we are dealing with a more general Western cultural phenomenon, even though in some countries television and viewing habits may be taken more seriously than in others. As I discuss the ways in which moral concerns surrounding television are seen in my data, the 'Finnish case' is only used as an example. My intent is to show how the different moral aspects of television are related to a Western 'culture of modernity'. The recent relaxation of moral concerns seems to reflect a 'postmodern' cultural change and, intertwined with it, the European trend of deregulating public broadcasting.

The Moral Hierarchy

As the case of the Laestadian movement shows, television may be banned altogether as a medium, regardless of programme contents. However, criticism toward television—and shame for watching it—mostly revolves around particular programmes. Even the Laestadians, when justifying their ban on television, referred to sinful programmes, particularly sex (Melkas, 1985). It was through underlying notions of valued and less valued programmes that the moral aspects of our relation to television came to my attention in a recent study (Alasuutari, 1992) where people were interviewed about their viewing habits and programme choices. I realized that Finns have a compelling need to explain, defend, and justify their viewing habits. In this sense it can be said that television is indeed a moral issue.

I do not mean to blame the people, the informants, or to accuse them of being moralists, obsessed with fears toward television, or hypocritical of their viewing habits. The informants were treated as barometers to sense the dominant moral discourse on television, and especially television fiction. The accounts they gave about watching certain programmes certainly often were honest and truthful.

By volunteering to explain why they watch low brow programmes they simply wanted to point out that they used these programmes for particular purposes such as relaxation. Likewise, although some informants admitted they watched a serial, it was not because they thought it was a good serial or liked it. Instead, they said they watched it to keep company with their children or spouse. Television is most of all a family medium. Indeed, several empirical studies show that people seldom watch television attentively and are often critical of the programmes they watch (Abrahamsson, 1988; Ang, 1991; Hermes, 1991; Kytömäki, 1991). To be critical and reflective of the programme one watches is part of the adult fun of watching

television. According to Abrahamsson's (1988, pp. 34-35) study, children only watch their favourite programmes, whereas the age group 25 to 44 often report watching programmes that they grade quite low.

The explanations people gave for watching certain programmes were probably good and fairly honest, not just excuses. Or to be more precise, we can say that without careful ethnographic participant observation we cannot make proper judgements of the validity of the informants' accounts. But that was not important for my purposes. I was only interested in the relative differences in the respondents' references to different programme types as a reflection of a moral or value hierarchy.

People often gave a spontaneous account of watching a programme. I named this type of reference 'reflective'. They could also say that they do not watch a programme. Third, they could say that they have given up watching a programme. These three types of talking about a programme show that the programme type in question is not graded high in the speaker's value hierarchy. On the other hand, some people simply announced that they watch a programme, without volunteering to give an account of it. They did not feel obliged to justify or to give an account for watching the programme. This reveals that they place it high in their moral hierarchy of television programmes. Another discourse type also reflects high value placed on a type of programme. On two occasions, dealing with the news and current affairs, individuals explained or commented on their reasons for *not* watching a programme. To get at the moral hierarchy of television programmes I counted all references to a programme type and calculated the percentage of the last two types of discourse. The larger the percentage of those references that were either of the type 'watches, no elaboration', or 'explains why does not watch', the higher the programme type is situated in the general value hierarchy. The percentages varied considerably among different programme types. News and current affairs (89 %) were at the top and soap operas (7 %) at the bottom. This is how different programme types ranked in the hierarchy[2]:

   (1) news and current affairs
   (2) nature programmes
   (3) situation comedies
   (4) sports programmes
   (5) detective serials
   (6) action serials
   (7) soap operas

When this general moral hierarchy was compared to the actual programme choices of individuals according to gender and education, it could be seen that the general moral hierarchy grants legitimacy to the typical viewing habits of highly educated men. It turned out that one of women's top favourites, soap operas, ranks as the least valued in the general moral hierarchy. And the less-educated men's

top favourite, action serials, ranks second to lowest in the general moral hierarchy. As is the case with many other areas of life, whatever the women or the less educated do is less valued.

In an earlier study (Alasuutari and Kytömäki, 1986) we discussed the class aspects of taste in television fiction by asking why a particular German detective serial, *Der Alte*, was at that time the most popular fiction programme among the Finnish upper middle class. There seemed to be two reasons for it. On the one hand, in the ten episodes we analyzed the murder always originated in the family. Seven murder stories were variants of the triangular drama, and the other three had to do with contradictions between parents and children. It could be reasoned that they interested upper middle class viewers because divorce rates are higher among this group. But *Der Alte* also represents the classic detective story genre. The gist of watching—or reading—a detective story is to identify with and to 'accompany' the main character in trying to solve the case by weighing the clues gradually revealed to the viewer and the investigator. This is in sharp contrast to a Western or an action serial, where the 'bad guys' are revealed right at the beginning, and the viewer identifies with an active character, changing the state of affairs with his or her own action. A person doing manual or otherwise practical work is more likely to identify with an active main character, whereas a person doing mental work, solving 'cases', more easily identifies with a similar character in fiction. Indeed, statistical comparison of the proportions of different social strata among the viewers of different serials showed that the upper middle class favoured the classic detective story. In addition to *Der Alte*, there was, for example, the series based on books by Agatha Christie. At the other end of the continuum, the series most favoured by the lower social strata were pure action series, such as *Knightrider.*

This kind of analysis makes it understandable why the aesthetic tastes of different social strata and people in different occupational positions differ from each other. The fact that the audiences of soap operas and prime time romantic fiction are over-represented by women can be explained in a similar way. The themes they deal with are closer to their life situation, and they are in a homological relationship with female forms of identity. However, it does not explain why some tastes—and fictional genres—are more valued than others.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) solution to these questions would be to say that those high in the social ladder are able to define their own preferences as 'good taste'. They succeed in doing so, because aesthetic taste is a form of capital; 'cultural capital', as Bourdieu calls it. Following Bourdieu, we cannot challenge the taste of the aristocracy, rather it is advantageous to possess or to imitate it. 'Cultivating' one's viewing habits is an attempt toward upward mobility. People imitate the 'legitimate taste', the taste of those who are above themselves in the social ladder. However, they cannot get rid of their social and cultural background, the taste they have is a reflection of their *class habitus.*

The differences of actual viewing habits between different social strata are, however, relatively small. All social strata seem to have their *taste for* '*bad programmes*', although there are relative differences in what *kind* of 'bad programmes' they like to watch. All individuals, despite their aesthetic tastes and socio-economic positions, watch programmes—or read books, magazines, or comic strips—that they recognize as 'low brow', and express this recognition by volunteering to give an account for watching them. The way in which the general moral hierarchy was detected means that those who reported watching a serial type also contributed to lowering its ranking by excusing themselves for doing so or by otherwise spontaneously commenting on it. What we have here is a discursive 'layer' of reflectivity surrounding low brow programmes, a layer that in fact constructs them as 'low brow'. What is more, it appears that the notions of what 'bad' and 'good' programmes are, are more or less shared.

There are, no doubt, class and gender differences in aesthetic taste, and also in 'taste for bad programmes'. Such differences reflect, construct and reproduce the social structure. Moreover, it is obvious that 'good programmes' or 'high brow' more or less corresponds to the aesthetic taste of those high on the social ladder. But it is interesting that even the 'aristocracy of culture' sometimes 'falls short' of their own aesthetic taste. In that sense the moral aspects of television, reflected in the moral hierarchy of programme types, cannot be reduced to class and gender. What constitutes the division between 'high brow' and 'low brow' or 'good' and 'bad' programmes? Why is it that, despite class differences, we assess our viewing habits in moral terms by referring to notions of what one 'should' or 'should not' do?

The Low Value of Television Series

As demonstrated above, when it comes to a moral hierarchy, factual programmes are at the top and fiction programmes at the bottom. People typically volunteered to give an account of fiction programmes, especially soap operas, whereas they simply stated that they watch factual programmes. We could say that fiction is generally more morally problematic than factual programmes. Only sports programmes as 'real-life drama' rank in between the highest and second-to-highest in the ranking order of different serial types.

If it were possible to treat 'good movies' as a programme type and calculate its ranking, I would assume that it would rank higher than any serial type. Yet it seems reasonable to assume that there is something morally problematic in fiction in particular.

It seems that when we watch generally less valued programmes, such as serials, we are not naive or unaware of it.

> - What sort of programmes do you like yourself?
> - 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.

- Well why do you bother then?

- (raises voice, speaks faster and faster) I can't really say, some-
how 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. (woman, age
35)

Why do we watch programmes we do not value particularly high? Why do some
of the informants express shame for watching them, or assess their actual viewing
habits by comparing them to an ideal, a normative standard they aspire to but
sometimes fall short of? The informant above talks about her television viewing
in the same way we talk about addictions. Indeed, one of the ways in which the
informants talked about low-ranking programme types was to say that they used
to watch a programme but that they have 'given it up,' in the way we would talk
about smoking or drinking.

When applied to low-brow programmes, Bourdieu's 'upward mobility theory'
of the reception of cultural products simplifies the multi-layered nature of televi-
sion viewing. Some people, or in fact many people on certain occasions, have a
taste for 'bad programmes', which is not the same as saying that some people
have bad taste. Criticizing, ridiculing, and commenting on the format and conven-
tions of a television serial is part of the fun of watching television. One could of
course argue that such reflective discourse about a 'bad programme' is the intel-
lectuals' way, that the common people get naively immersed in the events of a
serial, and identify with a leading character. However, that is partly true of all
viewers. If a viewer is not carried away by the story, or if he or she cannot reiden-
tify the characters' dispositions, as evidenced in their outlook, mimics, or the
logic of their actions, the series has failed to correspond to the viewer's personal
taste for 'bad programmes'. This is supported by the fact that women are more apt
to watch soap operas and romantic series, whereas men more often prefer action
programmes.

That there are differences in the way series are viewed by different audiences
and individuals is not the point. Despite the differences, both between individuals
and moments of viewing, all viewers are able to distinguish serials as a particular
genre. From very early on children are socialized to recognize a particular serial
format. In the same interviews that my analysis is based on, school children aged
10 to 13 were also interviewed. Many of them gave an insightful and sharp
description of the 'meta-narrative' of a serial they were in the habit of watching.
When my own son was four years old, I used to tell him tales I invented (Alasuu-
tari and Kytömäki, 1991). Mostly they represented the fairy-tale type: I would tell
about a walking flower, a walking house, or a speaking dog. Fairly soon my son
adopted the format. He would order a new tale with detailed instructions, "Tell me

about a speaking car that could drive by itself and took a boy to the grocery store". If inventing the tale seemed to be difficult, I would suggest that he tell the tale himself since he knows so well how it goes. "I cannot tell a tale, I can just tell you what kind of a tale you have to tell", was the answer.

Adults adjust to television serials—or popular movies—in a similar vein, only they are even more aware of the formats and conventions than children. Serials are modern tales. When we decide to watch a film belonging to a particular genre, or an episode of a serial, we do not immerse ourselves in the events of a totally unpredictable story. On the contrary, it is a safe choice in its familiarity. We know what kind of people the main characters are, how they behave, and more or less how the story ends. We decide to watch a serial because it fits in with our present frame of mind. It has a particular function as such. If a serial fails to keep its promises, given by advance publicity for example, it is a disappointment, no matter how 'artistic' the programme turns out to be. An 'art film' requires a different frame of mind.

Indeed, the informants are able to give elaborate accounts of the particular ways in which they use television serials and mass culture in general:

> It was a simple murder story ... erm ... Something happens in the beginning and one person dies. An eyewitness unexpectedly claims himself guilty, so that they did not even start looking for the real murderer. Then the story rolled on to the happy ending, everything was solved and ... In other words a very simple story that fits into a Saturday evening, and always when you have had a half bottle of wine and you don't bother thinking any more.
> (man, age 39)

But why do the informants repeatedly state the obvious, for instance tell the interviewer that they use serials for relaxation? After all, they do not give a comparable account why they watch the news or current affairs programmes.

The moral denunciation of serials and 'mass culture' seems to be closely linked with the basic values and ideals of modernity and the Enlightenment, a body of thought that both condemns 'mass culture' and produces it as a social construction. The central characteristic of a 'high culture' artifact, such as a novel, is its expected novelty of form. As soon as a story form is identified as a recognizable genre, it is on its way to becoming 'mass culture'. A modern author who wants him or herself to be taken seriously as an artist is not supposed to repeat old forms, and the story lines of high cultural narratives are supposed to be surprising, unpredictable. Over and over again high culture should question old forms and ways of thinking. How well high culture actually lives up to its ideal, succeeds in endlessly surprising its consumers, is a different question. In its endless quest for novelty and individuality high culture is a modern art form. That is where it derives its value: it is supposed to enlighten its consumers, to teach new things, create new forms, or at least to question old ones. In the modern, 'pure'

aesthetic disposition, form becomes more important than content or function. Any object—for instance a photograph of an old woman's wrinkled hands (see Bourdieu, 1984, p. 45)—becomes an art object when it is perceived from the pure aesthetic point of view, when form takes over from function. But, unless it is presented in a new light or from a new angle, it can be done only once. Simple repetition of old forms makes it mass production and mass culture.

Modern art has provided the mental horizon for assessing traditional art or mass culture. For instance, folk tales belonging to a particular tale type consist of the same abstractly defined narrative events, or 'functions' as Vladimir Propp (1975) called them, in the same chronological order, forming a 'meta-narrative', the variants of which are individual tales. Similarly, individual episodes of a television serial are variants of a serial format, a concept that defines the meta-narrative and the properties of the leading characters. Since the narrative structure repeats a familiar format, from a 'high culture' perspective they are of minor value or quality.

The 'high culture' notion of stories, such as novels, is only a few hundred years old. A majority of stories told throughout the world cultures are more like 'tales' or 'serials' rather than 'novels'. And even in modern western culture, dominated by high culture, tales have carried on their existence in the form of 'mass culture', and in the numerous forms in which 'high culture' stories have incorporated a degree of repetition in their narrative structures and stylistic conventions. Since such cultural products do not—and are not supposed to—surprise the reader or viewer, do not challenge old truths, or show new ways of thinking, people who consume them give a reason for it, and in that way acknowledge the value of modern ideals or at least pay lip service to them.

Fiction as a Moral Issue

From the perspective of the culture of modernity, serials as modern tales are particularly devalued programme choices. Yet all fiction deals with and reflects on moral values, and for that reason assessments of fiction stories always contain a moral element. All serials are scorned from the modern, pure aesthetic point of view because they are repetitious and thus less innovative in form, whereas the moral point of view on all fiction stories provides the framework for value assessments *between* stories.

The moral aspect of all fiction can already be seen in the fact that we speak about the 'morale' of a story. That a story should have a morale, or that it should *teach* us something about reality, dates back to Aristotle and the Greeks, who even then 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. On the other hand, art's function was seen as the revelation of reality (Carlson, 1986, pp. 15-16).

With modernization, the morale is increasingly left out of a story. In contemporary fiction bad morals do not necessarily lead to bad ends, and black-and-

white characters are replaced by morally ambiguous ones. Ethical judgments are left to the viewers. The morale of the story is replaced by the viewers' and critics' moral judgments or evaluations. More or less moral or immoral television characters are like our neighbours: we do not necessarily like them or approve of the events we see through the kitchen window, but we use them as examples for reflecting on our own life and values.

In the Finnish informants' accounts the morally problematic character of fiction could be seen in the differences between the ways in which the viewing of different serial types were explained or justified. Only when justifying watching the two least valued programme types, soap operas and action serials, did they consider the programmes from the point of view of their (lack of) realism. Through these explanations and justifications the informants dissociated themselves from a relationship to television which is regarded as injurious or shameful. These explanations are premised on the assumption that people may fall under the spell of television, lose their sense of reality, the ability to see the difference between real life and the imaginary world of television programmes. Those who have fallen under the spell of television would regard the sweet but degenerative and perverted television world as real, live in that world, and identify themselves with its characters. Even though it seems, with small children notwithstanding, that such people do not exist, the image of them is kept alive as puppets with which one's own relation to fictional programmes is contrasted.

When television serials are criticized for being 'unrealistic' that does not mean that the critics have an empiricist interpretation of realism in mind. Nor are they criticized for a lack of 'emotional realism' (Ang, 1985). 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. The criticism of such 'unrealistic' programmes—and the informants' willingness 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. In my Finnish data this implied a presupposition about the chief function of fictional stories: that they should provide ethically sound models of life. First of all television programmes should not give an overly romantic picture of life. Secondly, 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 those which describe a modest, simple life. In this emphasis on the hardness and harshness of everyday life one might see traces of Protestant religion and its puritanism. This Finnish notion of realism can be called 'ethical realism'[3].

The notion of ethical realism at least partly explains 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 a good and virtuous life which is mediated through Finnish televi-

sion morality is profoundly a male image. That life could be romantic is less 'realistic' than the expectation that life is hard and violent.

In Finland the entire history of national broadcasting, and popular theatre before that, has been characterized by a strong spirit of Enlightenment and popular education. Throughout the decades of national broadcasting since the early 1920s, its chief goal has been to keep the audience up to date and to disseminate educational information (Tulppo, 1976). Not only news, current affairs and other informative television or radio programmes, but also music on the radio and entertainment or fiction on television have, until recently, been approached from the same educational point of view by the state-owned broadcasting company YLE. YLE's long history of informative and educational programme policy certainly reflects the Finnish cultural tradition of ethical realism. And the dominance of the official 'public service' and 'quality television' ideology has probably set the frame of reference for the informants who were asked to tell about their viewing habits and programme choices.

Television as Time Consumptiom

Television viewing is also a time-consuming habit, and that is one of the reasons why it is a moral issue. Some people, especially women, excuse themselves for watching television because the time spent in front of the screen is away from other activities. Women, who typically do a greater share of the household chores, more often describe their use of television as listening rather than watching; they follow the programme they watch in the midst of other things they do[4].

To be properly watched, television requires an individual's whole attention. That is why it is no wonder that in my recent study of radio listening (Alasuutari, 1993), many informants stated that they prefer the radio to television[5].

Radio listening is almost always a side-activity, a way to use the mental capacities not needed in tasks, such as driving a car or doing manual work, that do not require an individual's whole attention. Often radio listening goes routinely unnoticed. As a background voice the radio is like an extra sense through which the individual is linked with other people and the rest of the world, no matter what the person is presently doing, or where he or she is. The radio is a mobile, highly individualized medium.

The time spent on listening to the radio is not away from something else. On the contrary, by also listening to the radio when doing something else an individual may feel that he or she is more efficient and dynamic. Moreover, radio listeners are seldom accountable for their programme choices. The radio is no longer a family medium. For these reasons the radio is to a much lesser extent a moral issue. People seldom justify radio listening.

Even though an older medium, in some respects it seems that the radio is the future of television. Just consider breakfast television, MTV, or CNN. An ever greater share of television viewing has become radio-like, a side-activity amidst other activities going on in the household, at work, or other places. A growing

number of television sets per household also means that watching television is less often a joint family activity. As a consequence, individual family members do not need to justify their programme choices to others.

Television is in its own, strongest territory in programmes where both the sound and the visual aspects of an event need to be received in order to make sense of what is going on. Therefore the use of time probably continues to be a factor that links television viewing to questions of morality.

The Media in Modern Culture

Yet another reason for continued moral concerns with television is the general epistemological uneasiness of modern culture in relation to the media. The media is a culturally unconscious aspect of our culture. Several hours of daily use of the media is a self-evident, routinised part of our everyday life. Yet, and precisely because of it, the role of the media is, in terms of discursive knowledge (Giddens, 1984), a poorly and sporadically covered terrain. We are not used to reflectively monitoring our routinised media use, let alone giving accounts of it. On the one hand the media is a window to the world out there. On the other hand media use is an integral part of everyday life. Accordingly, even though people spend some three hours a day watching television, a television set is seldom seen in television fiction, and was never among the hobbies of the characters in *Dallas*.

From the vantage point of everyday life it is one and the same thing to discuss world events or national politics and to discuss media messages. Yet we tend to emphasize the difference between the two. For instance Jean Baudrillard's (1983) claim that reality has disappeared has been considered scandalous. According to him, we live in a hyperreality where the broadcasted simulation of nature in nature programmes forms the basis for our conception of it; that is what our personal experience of nature is compared to. As exaggerated as such a claim may sound, it is not new.

Often the moral aspects of the problematic position of television are reflected in the criticism levelled at the 'false' or 'unreal' world-view that television programmes convey to the viewers. In a way this can be seen in the background of the Finnish ethos of ethical realism already discussed. The Laestadian television ideology is a slightly different example. The main point of the Laestadians was not to claim that television reflects the world in a biased way. They just disapproved of showing it all. According to Melkas' Habermasean interpretation, the Laestadians' ban on television was a crisis between life and the system represented by modernization. By prohibiting television the religious organization which represents the life-world defended itself, and prevented the breaking down of a tradition.

The data of my radio research project also illustrates the sporadic nature of the way in which modern media is discursively covered. In these interviews I have paid attention to the function of laughter by the informants. Sometimes people laugh at their own or the interviewer's vernacular or otherwise funny expression.

In other cases laughter marks a sudden shift in the scope of the interaction, for instance from impersonal or very general to personal questions or the other way around. For the same reason a sneeze by one of the interactors may produce a laugh. In many cases laughter serves as a marker of confusion or shame on the one hand, and (an expression that can be interpreted as) pride on the other. When the interviewer asked whether the informant ever listens to the radio while television was on as well, a positive answer almost without exception produced a laugh:

> Q: Well, do you listen to the radio at home in the evening?
>
> A: Well in the evening what we do, we have developed this funny ... (habit) that we always have the radio on as well as television that ... (laughter). I often don't care about watching television, but my boyfriend would lie in front of it for ages and watch it. So I listen to the radio at the same time, and I'm not interested in many (television) programmes so that ... I'm in the habit of listening to the radio, but if there's a good programme on TV, then I reduce my radio listening in the evening. (woman, age 21)

The laughter can be interpreted as an expression of shame. It discloses the assumption that we are supposed to use the media in a concentrated, rational manner in order to get information about the world out there. From this point of view it appears to be irrational behaviour to do two (or more) things at the same time. On the other hand laughter in these cases sometimes seems to show that the informants are surprised at their own culturally unconscious routines; routines which they are not used to articulating or paying reflective attention to.

Challenging the Authoritative View

It is only since the late 1970s that an air of morality surrounding television viewing and mass culture has been approached as a cultural phenomenon in its own right, 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 television 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).

That certain programmes or cultural products are seen to be more valued than others has formed a part of the 'cultural unconscious' of western culture, so that the research interest in the media has been largely based upon such a presupposition. Traditional media research has shown no critical interest in the phenomenon *per se*, but the viewpoint has been guided by those very criteria and concerns that lie behind the distinction between good, acceptable art and unacceptable cultural products. The Frankfurt school of cultural critique (e. g. Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979, pp. 120-167; Marcuse, 1968, pp. 56-83) has been chiefly concerned with

mass culture as a medium of ideological indoctrination, but this line of criticism can be seen as an extension of the aristocratic tradition of mass culture critique (Swingewood, 1977). Ang (1985), talks about 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 take into account when they discuss their own viewing habits.

The recent change of perspective in media studies from research evaluating the effects of media messages, premised on the concerns for mass communication, to analyzing the premises themselves is not simply due to the genius of the researchers. From a sociology of knowledge perspective we can say that it reflects a cultural change. As early as 1976, a group of friends from Los Angeles started a mock-serious grassroots viewers' movement, called 'couch potatoes', that promoted the view that people should stop considering television viewing as bad and harmful, something they should be ashamed of or secretive about (Ang, 1991, p. 1). Yet, the tongue-in-cheek nature of the movement proves that not even the Americans have totally freed themselves from regarding television viewing as a moral issue.

The cultural change we are talking about has often been called a postmodernist trend in contemporary culture. Postmodernist writers are said to 'challenge the generic integrity of high culture, that integrity that had been hitherto guaranteed by its distance from the Western, the romance, the detective story' (Connor, 1989). Likewise, 'for many theorists of the contemporary, mass culture is no longer the deadening antagonist of individual creativity that it was for Queenie Leaves or Theodor Adorno, and the effort within much of this criticism is to find ways of crediting mass culture with subversive or progressive potential' (Ibid., p. 167).

In line with this effort, much of the feminist media research dealing with the 'women's world' of romantic stories and soap operas has tended to look at its ideological effects. Either the romances have been considered to repress women and to provide false models, or they have been considered as protest and resistance against the prevailing gender system (Wahlforss, 1989, p. 283).

I suggest that the present cultural trend and latest media studies go even further than that. When popular fiction is approached from the point of view of its ideological effects, negative or positive, the *ideology of mass culture* still sets the frame of reference. That is not the case with Ang (1985; 1991), who challenges the very framework in which entertainment should be perceived. Similarly, in their accounts of their viewing habits my informants pointed beyond the cultural framework dominated by an unquestioned respect for high culture, a framework that produces the ideology of mass culture as its reverse. Admittedly, they paid tribute to the culturally dominant view by referring to a normative standard of ideal viewing habits and by giving an account of watching 'bad programmes', but in the same breath they justified it by saying that they watch serials for relaxation.

The present cultural trend entails a reflective rethinking of high culture and mass culture. Serials and other mass cultural genres are no longer automatically assessed by high cultural criteria. I am not suggesting that 'pre-modern' story forms, such as tales, are coming back, or that they be rehabilitated as a valuable art form. In fact 'tales' never died out, it is only that they are increasingly judged by their own criteria, not as B-class high cultural products.

The fact that the 'couch potatoes' movement was started in the United States suggests that the Americans are at the leading edge of this cultural change. That is probably the case, since living in a country dominated by commercial media the Americans are much less influenced by the public service ideal, and by criticism launched against commercially-motivated broadcasting, expressed and promoted by state-owned broadcasting companies so typical of European countries. The European public service ideal, however, is in the middle of a legitimation crisis. As Ang (1991, p. 101) puts it, 'a history of European public service broadcasting in general could be written from this perspective: a narrative in which the resistance of the audience against its objectification in the name of high-minded, national cultural ideals drives the story forward'. The breakdown of the legitimation of the public service ideal cherished by state-owned broadcasting companies in Finland and other European countries, the increasing national and transnational commercialization of television, sky channels, cable television, and video recorders; all these developments both reflect and enhance a cultural change whereby people challenge the authoritative view in which 'proper', civilized and civilizing television viewing is regarded as a civic duty.

If state-owned broadcasting companies lose the competition for audiences and, as a political consequence, are privatized, will television cease to be a moral issue? It is not likely, because the Enlightenment ideal, as it is employed in legitimating the public service ideal, is not the only reason for the moral concerns surrounding broadcasting. And even if all modern self-evident values reflected in moral concerns about programme contents or about watching 'low brow' programmes suffered a shipwreck, media use would still continue to be a moral issue. This far, discussion about television and the media as a moral issue has been restricted to the contents of media messages. In addition, there are at least two other ways in which media use is linked with morality. One of them is the fact that television viewing—and media use in general—is a time-consuming habit. Another one is a largely unexplored area: the media fit badly in the common-sense ontology, how everyday life is discursively shaped and reflected on. The culturally unconscious rules and logic we follow in our everyday routines are only sporadically and often misleadingly articulated as we discuss and give accounts of our conduct.

The different ways in which media use is linked with morality are of course intertwined, often in paradoxical ways. If, for instance, television becomes more radio-like, in fictional programmes this requires that a viewer is able to follow the story line by only listening or partially and occasionally watching the pro-

gramme—that is, the programme format has to be a simple one. Such a solution makes viewing the programme more acceptable as to the use of time, but makes it more viable to criticism levelled at the programme content.

Notes

1. On the other hand the situation is not as simple as it may seem. The Research and Development Department of the state-owned Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE makes and funds critical media research. I have, for instance, received grants for data collection and research from YLE. For an English language report on recent television research funded by YLE see Alasuutari, Armstrong and Kytömäki (1991). From YLE's point of view the main function of such research is internal training; to shatter old attitudes in the present competitive situation where the viewers' preferences cannot be disregarded.
2. The analysis was based on unstructured thematic interviews with 90 families and 99 adult informants from Tampere in southern Finland. In the interviews, there were altogether 279 references to different programme types. Therefore, even though the number of respondents was fairly small, the number of observational units was big enough to allow sensible use of quantitative analysis.
3. When dealing with the reception of literature, it has been noted in a similar vein that there is a strong heritage of everyday realism in Finland (Eskola, 1989). The novels that have been particularly popular among Finns often deal with common people and everyday life. The events of the favourite novels of even the city-dwellers are often located in the (past) agrarian landscape (Eskola, 1989). In connection with this realistic tradition, Kirstinä (see Eskola, 1989, p. 180; Kirstinä, 1989) even notes that Finnish readers expect to get some 'benefit' from their reading: to read a novel for *pleasure* is tantamount to committing a sin.
4. Armstrong (1991, p. 19), analyzing the same material my article is based on, notes that the women interviewed will watch television while doing something else, such as ironing or handwork. Similarly Tufte (1992), reporting on an ethnographic study of Brazilian women's use of *telenovelas*, says that many activities take place at the same time that women watch television: they cook or do the dishes, sew, tidy up or look after the children.
5. The data comprise open-ended, thematic interviews of 48 individuals, and each transcribed interview is about 17 pages long. The informants were selected so that among them there were individuals from different age groups (from teenagers to senior citizens), occupations (mental and manual work), educational levels, and both city-dwellers and rural Finns.

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