

Pertti Alasuutari

**„I'M ASHAMED TO ADMIT BUT I HAVE WATCHED *DALLAS*”
THE VALUE HIERARCHY OF TV PROGRAMS**

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, several studies of television viewing have paid attention to the fact that the people who say they watch certain devalued TV-programs, 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 program choices¹. In this sense viewing habits is a profoundly moral issue.

That certain programs or cultural products are seen to be more of higher value than others is so self-evident in Western culture that the whole research interest in mass communication and particularly in mass culture has largely revolved around these differences in valuation. However, traditional communication research has shown no critical interest in the phenomenon *per se*, but the focus has been on those very criteria and concerns that in Western culture lie behind the distinction between what is regarded as good, acceptable art and cultural products and unacceptable works of art. For instance, people have been very much concerned about the impacts on the general public of violence and other unacceptable models of behavior in mass culture. Marxist scholars², in turn, have been chiefly concerned with mass culture as a medium

¹ D. Hobson, *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera*, London 1982; I. Ang, *Watching „Dallas”. Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, London 1985; J. P. Roos, *Television – arkielämän hallitsija, uhka ja erottelija* (Television as a Dominating, Threatening and Distinctive Device in Everyday Life), [in:] *Elämää kuvavirrassa. Televisio suomalaisissa elämäntavoissa* (Life in Moving Pictures. Television in Finnish Ways of Life), ed. K. Heikkinen, Helsinki 1989, p. 36–93.

² T. Adorno, M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London 1979, p. 120–167; H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, London 1968, p. 56–83.

of ideological indoctrination, but this line of criticism can be seen as an extension to the aristocratic tradition of mass culture critique³. It is only since the late 1970s that these concerns about mass culture have been approached as a cultural phenomenon in its own right and worthy of serious theoretical analysis. I. Ang, 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 program types. So when people talk about their relationship to *Dallas* or when they watch the program, they must also make clear their relationship to the relevant discourse⁴.

These are the main questions I intend to address in this article. I will analyze TV-viewing as a moral issue by studying the discourses people use when talking about their viewing habits. I will make inferences from the underlying hierarchy of tastes. At the end I will discuss the relation of the Finnish value hierarchy of TV-programs to the history of Finnish Broadcasting Corporation. The analysis is based on unstructured interviews with 89 families 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.

What people say about their viewing habits and about their favorite programs does not always exactly correspond to their actual behavior. What they say and how they say it is in turn largely dependent on the situation in which they are speaking. 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 behavior within the framework of the 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 behavior, etc. Why, then, is this so obvious? Why it is taken for granted that the parents' viewing habits are an important part of education, of providing models?

The explanation cannot be fully reduced to the situation. To be sure, the interview situation does help to make understandable why people set their discourses within a certain framework, but it does not produce that frame. From the interviews I conducted there emerged a relatively uniform value hierarchy or moral code in relation to which and in the context of which

³ A. Swingewood, *The Myth of Mass Culture*, London 1977.

⁴ I. Ang, *op. cit.*

people spoke about their viewing habits and favorite programs. I assume that there must exist a specific set of reasons that explains the development and reproduction of this Finnish TV morality which seeks for excuses or justifications for viewing habits. The purpose of this article is to try to identify and analyse those reasons.

2. THE VALUE HIERARCHY OF TV PROGRAMS

Attitudes and opinions are always to some extent individual. This is also the case with TV programs: people like different types of programs, they have different views on their „quality”. However, behind individual and group differences in taste it was possible, in this material, to detect a rather uniform moral code in relation to which and in the context of which people spoke about their viewing habits and favorite programs. They explained and had excuses for watching certain types of program, but for others they didn't. Also, people justify and criticize the viewing of different types of programs on different grounds.

„Program type” is of course in itself a very difficult concept. The seemingly straightforward category of „current affairs and documentaries” may include a wide variety of different types of programs; some of them might even belong more appropriately under the category of „entertainment”; and *vice versa*. The situation is even more complex in the genre of fictional programs. In principle all of these programs or TV series can, to a certain extent, be regarded as individual. However, the concern here is not with what programs or types of programs types „really” are like; that would involve a close reading of the programs themselves rather than interviews with TV viewers. I refer here to different types of programs as *cultural conventions*: as concepts and typologies that people use in their discourses about TV programs and TV viewing. 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 program types there are common terms that are recognized by all, such as „documentaries” or „detective serials”, for others no such conventions have developed. Nevertheless as *concepts* these different types of program are well-known. For instance, the term „situation comedy” was used very rarely in the interviews to describe this particular genre of American TV series, but the relevant programs (*Bill Cosby Show, Kate & Allie*) were often mentioned in the same context when people talked about their favorite programs. The same applies to „soap

operas"⁵: the American term is practically unknown among ordinary people, and there is no single Finnish equivalent for it, but the people I interviewed still lumped together such programs as *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, and the *Colbys*, as well as the German equivalent *Schwarzwald Clinic* and the Swedish version *Öhman's Department Store*. So in this sense of cultural conventions the program types we will be discussing below are real. This is also obvious from the fact that people characterize them in different ways and talk about watching them in different ways.

In a very rough description we may note that the most highly valued types of TV program in the Finnish value 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:

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

So people talk about different program types in different ways. However, the boundaries between these different types are not absolute but relative. Therefore it is necessary to take a closer look at the Finnish value hierarchy: how often do people mention different types of program 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.

The following typology concerns the way in which interviewees spontaneously refer to a certain program or respond to a question by the interviewer regarding a certain program or program type. It does not take into consideration responses to follow-up questions.

People talk about their viewing habits and favorite programs within the framework of different types of discourse. First of all there is the laconic statement that one watches a certain program or likes a certain program. The second, opposite type is represented by the equally laconic statement that one does not like a certain program or never watches it. The third type of discourse may be described as reflective. Here the speaker comments in one way or

⁵ By the term I here refer to prime time programs, 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 programs were formerly sponsored by big soap companies. *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, for example, differ from traditional soaps in the sense that they are primetime programs, but in terms of theme construction they are considered to represent a direct extension to the soap tradition (I. A n g, *op. cit.*, p. 54-60).

another on the fact that he or she watches a certain program. For instance, the interviewee may explain why or in what frame of mind he or she watches a certain program, or analyse the program itself and its attractions. Analogical to this is the reverse case where the individual explains his or her reasons for not watching a certain program; 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 program but that one has „given it up” or lost interest.

Table 1 below shows how often different types of discourse were employed in connection with different types of TV program. 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 program types concerned.

Table 1

Discourses by program types

		Program types						
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Statement: watches	(N)	45	32	29	13	6	6	10
	(%)	85	86	58	72	33	7	29
Explains why does not watch	(N)	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
	(%)	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
Does not like the program	(N)	1	1	10	0	2	24	6
	(%)	2	3	20	0	11	35	18
Given up or lost interest	(N)	0	0	0	0	1	8	0
	(%)	0	0	0	0	6	12	0
Reflective	(N)	5	4	11	5	9	31	18
	(%)	9	11	22	28	50	45	53
No mention	(N)	46	62	49	81	81	30	65
	(%)	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total	(N)	99	99	99	99	99	99	99
	(%)	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

A – Current affairs and documentaries; B – Nature programs; C – Sports programs; D – Situation comedies (*Golden Girls, Kate & Allie, Bill Cosby Show*); E – Detective serials (e.g. *Murder she wrote, Agatha Christie's serials, Bergerac, Hill Street Blues*); F – Soap operas (*Schwarzwald Clinic, Dallas, Dynasty, Colbys, Öhman's Department Store or St. Elsewhere*); G – Action serials (e.g. *Spencer for hire, A-team, V, Miami Vice, Hammer, Magnum, Benson, McGyver*).

Let us first look at the absolute figures. The last column, which gives the number of people who have not mentioned the program type, shows that different program types were discussed by the interviewees to different extents. This is true even though references to a certain program type were counted only once⁶. In other words, all of the interviewees did not talk about all program 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 programs they watched. It was only occasionally that the interviewer followed up by asking specifically whether they watched this or that particular program.

One might assume that this type of unsystematic material does not give a very reliable picture of the valuation of different types of TV programs. 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 this 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 program 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 values, whereas documentaries are mentioned frequently because of their highly valued position.

The relative breakdown of references among different program types gives a clearer picture of the meaning of these figures. Analysis of these percentages allows us to read from Tab. 1 the value hierarchy of TV programs: what we need to do is examine how large a proportion of the references to different program types consist of either „watches” or „explains-why-does-not-watch” statements. These discourses are indicative of a high valuation of the program 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 program, or that he or she feels it is necessary to have some excuse for not watching it. The value hierarchy that emerges from this analysis is as follows: 1) current affairs programs (89%), 2) nature programs (86%), 3) situation comedies (72%), 4) sports programs (58%), 5) detective serials (33%), 6) action serials (29%), and 7) soap operas (7%).

⁶ In cases where people spoke about several different serials belonging to the same type of program, 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.

3. CLASS, GENDER, AND GOOD TASTE

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

However, this value hierarchy is not independent of people's viewing habits. This is clearly evident when we examine program favorites by gender and educational level. In other words in this analysis we ignore the way in which people talk about different programs – whether they reflect or do not reflect upon their viewing habits, whether or not they have excuses and explanations for watching certain programs – and simply infer from the interviews whether or the individual watches different types of program. 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.

Table 2

Proportion of women in the group of interviewees who admit to watch different types of program (%)

	Program types						
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Viewers	63	72	40	67	62	67	33

A-G – as in Tab. 1.

From Tab. 2 we can see that, since women represented 60.6% of all the interviewees, women are particularly interested in nature programs and soap operas, whereas action serials and sports programs are favored especially by men. On the basis of women's preferences we can construct the following value hierarchy: 1) nature programs, 2) soap operas, 3) situation comedies, 4) current affairs and documentaries, 5) detective serials, 6) sports programs, and 7) action serials. A comparison of this hierarchy with the previous Tab. 1 clearly indicates that women's favorite programs are much more problematic in moral terms than men's programs. Only 21 of the total of 50 references to sports

programs were apologetic or statements that one does not watch sports, whereas in the case of soap operas only 7 out of 69 references were plain statements that one watches or likes this type of program. Among the references to detective serials plain statements that one likes or watches this type of program accounted for seven out of a total of 18 references.

Let us now move on to examine the statistical connections between program choices and educational level. In this analysis a subgroup of 39 people with a high educational level (matriculation examination, college, university) was separated from the total sample of 99 interviewees.

Table 3

Proportion of those with a high educational level in the group of interviewees who admit to watch different types of programs (%)

	Program types						
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Viewers	41	38	33	44	54	35	28

A-G – as in Tab. 1.

Here the ranking list of favorite programs is as follows: 1) detective serials, 2) situation comedies, 3) current affairs and documentaries, 4) nature programs, 5) soap operas, 6) sports programs, and 7) action serials. These figures indicate that people with a high educational level are underrepresented in all other program types except as viewers of detective serials and documentaries. They stress that they rarely watch fictional programs, and communicate their preferences mainly by means of negation, by saying that they do not like a certain type of program or that they do not watch it⁷. Let us now compare these lists side by side.

⁷ It should be noted here that these „ranking lists” for women and highly educated people are not reliable in all details. It is quite likely that „taken-for-granted” program types, such as documentaries and current affairs, will easily remain without mention in an unstructured interview where there are no specific questions concerning the viewing of this or that type of program. Likewise, it may be assumed that people will not necessarily mention less valued program types unless specifically asked by the interviewer to state their opinion; and even in that case the interviewees may fail to tell the truth and say that they never watch any of these programs. 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 that people spend watching a certain type of program during, say, one week, for different types of program have very different relative shares in one week’s viewing. Even if the individual watched all the nature programs shown during one week, that would probably represent only a small proportion of his or her total viewing. Nevertheless it must be repeated that these results provide a sufficiently accurate picture for the present analytical purposes.

General value hierarchy	Women's favorites	Educated favorites
current affairs	nature programs	detective serials
nature programs	soap operas	situation comedies
situation comedies	situation comedies	current affairs
sports programs	current affairs	nature programs
detective serials	detective serials	soap operas
action serials	sports programs	sports programs
soap operas	action serials	action serials

From this comparison we can see that one of women's top favorites, soap operas, ranks as the least valued in the general value hierarchy. Looking further at the respective list for viewers with a high educational level, we see that their top favorite, detective serials, comes third from last in the overall value hierarchy. Does this mean that, contrary to Bourdieu's assumptions⁸, the preferences of highly educated viewers do not necessarily represent good taste after all? The explanation here lies in gender: detective serials are favorites above all among highly educated women; 16 out of the 26 women in the material say they watch detective serials. So from this we might conclude that even education does not help to make women's viewing habits compatible with „good taste”.

4. EXCUSES, JUSTIFICATIONS, AND VIEWER ATTITUDES

Our interview material confirms the common wisdom that different people watch different programs, that people have to some extent different tastes. But why are some people's preferences and tastes with regard to television programs considered as better than other people's? One way to deal with the question of what makes some programs 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 Finnish value hierarchy of TV programs is based.

⁸ P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Cambridge 1984.

Above we used the term 'reflective discourse' to describe the different ways in which people analysed their viewing habits and favorite TV programs 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 genres of TV serials⁹.

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 program or on the act of viewing. There are two types of discourse that focus on content. We shall call the first one of these an analysis of realism, where the speaker evaluates the program on the basis of whether or not its world is truthful or at least plausible:

- Are any of these programs that you no longer watch?
- 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 no watch them any more.
- What's wrong with them, why these?
- Well somehow they're just, they're so far removed from the ordinary world even more than these violence things, I mean really (laughter)... even the wife no longer watches them.

The other discourse which concentrates on the content of the program is here described as an 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:

⁹ The following typology comes quite close to the one proposed by Richardson and Corner in their analysis of people's different ways of speaking about a documentary that they focused on in this study (K. Richardson, J. Corner, *Reading Reception: Mediation and Transparency in Viewers'Accounts of a TV Programme*, „Media, Culture and Society” 1986, vol. 8, p. 485–508). They 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 program as an performance. From the third discourse it is impossible to infer whether the reacting is transparent or mediated. Richardson's and Corner's typology is in turn closely related to the distinction by Liebes and Katz (T. Liebes, E. Katz, *The Export of Meaning. Cross-Cultural Readings of „Dallas”*, New York 1990) between referential and critical framing, which comes from R. Jakobson. Referential framing corresponds to transparent and critical framing to mediated reading. The discourse we have here described as reflective largely corresponds to a „mediated” description and „critical” framing. The only difference is that in the above-mentioned studies the interviewees analysed only the content of the programs, but did not justify their viewing habits or explain in what frame of mind they watched TV programs. Therefore in these typologies there are no distinctions between different ways of analysing the actual act of viewing.

– 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?

– I would say that it was mainly the high quality of these Australian series generally, the one's 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 programs. I call the first subtype *psychological interpretation*. In some cases this strategy of explanation could actually be described as diagnosis. The person interprets his or her own behavior, tries to make it understandable to himself and to other people as well.

– What sort of programs 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, 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 program. A typical statement is that people watch light programs 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 that TV serial in the value hierarchy. Here, too, the analysis concentrates on the viewing of the program rather than on the program 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 program: „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 program.

In most cases moral references do not occur alone or independently but are 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 program”. In the analysis below of the use of

different types of reflective discourse in connection with different types of program and by different individual speakers, I have chosen to characterize the speech of individual interviewees by just one of these four categories. The discourses have been organized hierarchically according to how frequently they are used so that an excuse or a justification is coded according to the most rare type of reflective discourse used. At the very top we have analysis of realism, which is followed by psychological interpretation, analysis of representation, and finally by moral references. In other words if someone comments on the fact that *Dynasty* is unrealistic and at the same time says that he or she watches the program because it is relaxing, then this case is classified under the category of analysis of realism.

So let us now on the basis of this classification see whether there are any statistical differences between the different types of reflection on different types of TV serials. Table 4 gives a more detailed analysis of the references to different program types than was the case above in Tab. 1 where all these references were classified under the reflective discourse. It should be noted, however, that in this one we have also included in the analysis responses by the interviewees to the interviewer's follow-up questions; for instance if an interviewee said that he or she watches action serials „sometimes, if I have the time” (moral reference), and later, when asked to specify the reason for his or her interest in this type of program, says that „it helps you to relax”, this speech will be classified as psychological interpretation. On the basis of these criteria the forms of reflection were divided between the different types of TV serials as follows:

Table 4

Forms of reflection on different types of TV serials

Program types	Forms of reflection				
	Realism	Representation	Psychological	Moral ref.	Total
Soap operas	2 6%	2 6%	8 26%	19 61%	31 100%
Action serials	5 28%	4 22%	5 28%	4 22%	18 100%
Situation comedies	0 0	1 20%	2 40%	2 40%	5 100%
Detective serials	0 0	6 67%	2 22%	1 11%	9 100%

Particularly in the case of detective serials and situation comedies the number of references classified under the reflective discourse is so low that it is impossible to draw any far-reaching conclusions with regard to their break-

down into different subtypes of reflection. However, Tab. 4 does give us some clue as to what makes soap operas and action serials the least valued type of program: these were the only categories in which the interviewees considered TV programs from the point of view of their (lack of) realism.

The way in which people talk about realism in connection with soap operas and action serials explains why it is the former that occupy the lowest position in the value hierarchy. Let us first take an example of analysis of realism in the case of soap operas:

- What is it in this serial that you find so interesting that you watch it all the same?
- Well, I don't know, you just watch it, you know...
- Is it a bit the same as browsing through a women's magazine?
- 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.
- Hm, I see. Erm, what would you say are the bad sides about the serial
- 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 explanations for not liking 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 his study of *Dallas* viewers Ang proposes a distinction between two ways of understanding the realism of the program: an empiricist and an emotional concept of realism¹⁰. In the empiricist conception of realism the focus is on whether the representation corresponds to external reality. In the emotional conception the fictional setting of the denotative level of the story is disregarded, and 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 rather realistic: the real world is violent.

¹⁰ I. Ang, *op. cit.*

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 programs was not considered to give a truthful representation of reality, it was added that the stunts that are performed in the program 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 programs, 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 value hierarchy because they are regarded as the least realistic type of TV program. This same principle explains why quite a number of interviewees said they preferred certain Finnish series which describe the life of ordinary people. These discourses clearly reflect the strong heritage of realism in Finnish culture¹¹.

This emphasis on realism makes understandable why current affairs and nature programs rank at the very top of the value hierarchy of TV programs 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 programs 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 program.

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

¹¹ K. Eskola, *Nykysuomalaisten suuret kertomukset* (Modern Finns' Grand Narratives), [in:] *Kieli, kertomus, kulttuuri* (Language, Story, Culture), ed. T. Hoikkala, Helsinki 1982, p. 134–154.

watches fictitious programs. 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 program 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 programs 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 programs. They either make it clear that they enjoy the freedom of movement between two different levels in viewing these programs, 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 anyone 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 programs. The person who has fallen under the spell of television would regard the sugarcandy but degenerative and perverted imaginary TV world as real, live in that world, and identify herself with its characters.

Do such people really exist? Or could we assume that there are at least two different ways of understanding TV programs, the „analytical” and „realistic”? According to this assumption some people take a critical and analytical position on TV viewing; they are always well aware of whether they are watching a „current affairs program” or „entertainment”. Others only understand and accept programs that give a truthful description of the real world, and disapprove of programs that portray an „unreal” or imaginary world. People representing this hypothetical type of viewer only like to watch fictional programs that they feel are realistic – and it is here that we might

assume 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 was purely hypothetical. However, the assumptions we made are interesting because they are clearly there at work behind Finnish TV morality. But are they valid? Is there any empirical evidence to support them? 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.

5. DISCOURSES, VALUES, AND POWER RELATIONS WITHIN THE FAMILY

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

- What kind of TV serials do you like to watch and TV programs in general?
- Well, I don't really... I don't know... there are some music programs and nature programs 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...
- (daughter) *Öhman's*.
- 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 programs, 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 programs in general. For instance, they say that have told their children not to take TV programs too seriously:

- Well mostly for me the things I'm not keen on is all that 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 programs 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 toward 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 explain 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 ways of life or attitudes toward television. For instance, it is obvious that even very minor details in the interview situation or in the flow of the interview may affect the openness with which interviewees describe their viewing habits. Secondly it is also obvious that the familiarity of different discourses depends on the individual's life situation. If the individual is not used to defending his or her preferences among critical friends, for instance, then he or she will also be less inclined to do so in the interview situation.

From this point of view it is interesting to observe that 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 favorites; the criticism comes mainly from the 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 programs. 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 programs; 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 programs that are shown at the same time on different channels implies a form of internal power used within the family, reflecting 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 way¹². However, very often there seems to be a need to justify this sort of right to decide on what the family is going to watch; otherwise the male dominance is all too naked. Therefore men have to try to convince themselves and others that their

¹² D. Morley, *Family Television*, London 1986.

programs are better; and one strategy in this is to emphasize the unrealistic element in soap operas.

This sort of debate on which programs 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 not simply prepared to explain to the interviewer why they like soap operas.

What about the two other exceptional women who were not sole providers? To begin with it is necessary to stress that the interpretations below cannot be regarded as irrefutable evidence of causal laws which mechanically determine the interviewees' utterances. For one reason or another these women simply did not consider it important to explain to the interviewer what they felt about television. At least a partial explanation may lie in the fact that, according to the interviews, there is never any disagreement in these families about television. In one of them 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 fight for priority can record the program and watch it later.

These six exceptional interviews can thus be explained by reference to the fact that these women have not had to explain their choices and preferences in the context of normal everyday life nearly as much as the other interviewees. For family situation and other reasons, they are exceptions to the cultural rule that women are primarily responsible both for the community's and for the family's moral standards and its outward appearance. Women are responsible for the family's façade. This is also reflected in the way that women describe their husbands' viewing habits: almost without exception their descriptions give an overly positive picture which stresses the husband's acceptable preferences and understates those that rank at the low end of the value hierarchy. There is a clear difference with the way in which men characterize their wives' viewing habits or favorite TV shows; sometimes their comments may even be quite derogatory.

6. EVERYDAY REALISM AND MODELS OF LIFE

The unanimous denunciation by public opinion and particularly by the male gender of soap operas does not explain why these series occupy the lowest position the value hierarchy of TV programs. 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 favorite programs and the higher valuation of their own programs to their own benefit¹³. 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 value hierarchy of TV programs? On the basis of our interview material the factor that makes a certain type of program poorly valued is problematic relationship to reality; all fictional programs rank among the least valued program types, and analyses of those ranking at the very bottom often refer to their „lack of realism”. One might say that those programs are valued least which describe the „unreal” world by realistic narrative means. It is with this type of program 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 program 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. References in the study of literature to the strong tradition of realism in the Finnish readership is also chiefly a tradition of everyday realism.

Finnish TV morality is critical of poor programs for 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: according to Finnish TV morality they should provide ethically sound models of life. This requirement of realism could be described as ethical realism.

– Well, yes, of course, I think that very often the value system in these programs 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. (MI 37).

¹³ It is no coincidence that the general value hierarchy favors 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.

TV 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 programs 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 programs 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 programs 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 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 the fact that life is hard, because that is the best way to avoid disappointments.

These basic principles of Finnish 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 fact 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.

7. THE TRADITION OF POPULAR EDUCATION

Throughout the 1980s reception studies in mass culture have shown a growing research interest in people's discourses on TV viewing, in the way they talk about their relationship to television. The analysis has set these discourses in the context of a complex phenomenon that is now viewed in a slightly different way. At the same time there is greater sensitivity to the fact that the discourses recorded in the context of interviews with individuals or group discussions are precisely that: *d i s c o u r s e s*; that they cannot be read as descriptions of *v i e w i n g h a b i t s* or of frames of interpreting programs. Nonetheless many researchers have applied a „symptomatic” reading to these texts, trying to produce interpretations of the „black box”, of what goes on in the mind of the TV viewer during the viewing process. This reductionistic tendency to draw inferences from the viewing situation itself or from the individual's relationship to television is problematic in two different ways. In the first place it is based on a very mechanistic conception of viewing as a form of activity. It examines models of interpretation which have evolved in

a cultural process as if they were lenses ground in a specific way so that the viewer can see the program through those lenses, and pays insufficient attention to the fact that in viewing television we continuously adopt new perspectives. We become absorbed in events, we identify ourselves with the program's characters, our interest flags and begin to look at the scenery, at what sort of angles the director has chosen, we stop to think about something else because the telephone rang or because they're showing commercials. Secondly it must be noted that programs and their events are (often common) experiences that are stored in our memory, experiences we think about and evaluate afterwards, perhaps talk about them on several different occasions and from different angles with our friends. So it is clearly an artificial solution to reduce our relationship to a certain program to an ideal-type frame of interpretation. The same applies to giving the original viewing situation primacy and trying to draw conclusions regarding that situation from discourses concerning TV programs. In spite of everything it would seem that behind this kind of fixation there probably lurks the ideology of mass culture, from which reception studies are on the one hand trying to distance themselves and of which they are on the other hand trying to do a serious scientific analysis¹⁴. Behind this there is perhaps still the concern of the injurious effects of an „unreflective” way of TV viewing on the viewer's consciousness.

If the results of this study are examined within the frame of reference which is constituted by the menace of a totally uncritical viewer combined with the ideal viewer as the exact opposite of the former, then those results seem paradoxical indeed. People take a reflective attitude toward „low-quality” programs, whereas they rarely problemize the viewing of good and acceptable programs. The paradox is that the establishment has been trying to teach people, and particularly viewers who innocently become absorbed in TV programs, a critical attitude. If we interpreted discourses as reflections of people's relationship to television, then it would seem that the most critical attitude toward the programs they watch and to their viewing habits is shown by people who watch the type of programs that rank among the least valued ones; accordingly the most naive attitude toward one's viewing habits seems to occur with people who watch the most highly valued program types. Women in particular are very critical and reflective when it comes to their relationship to television; in this regard, too, they maintain the moral values of the community and the family. So if there is someone who really needs this sor

¹⁴ The ideology of mass culture still seems to have been predominantly setting the frame of reference or the criteria for analyses of entertainment. According to J. Wahlforss research which has been concerned with the various genres of entertainment dealing with „women's world” – romantic stories, soap operas, and family serials – has tended to approach entertainment from the point of view of its ideological effects: either the romances have been considered to repress women and to provide false models, or they have also been considered to include protest and resistance against the prevailing sex/gender system.

needs this sort of education, it would obviously be the „uncritical” viewer of current affairs programs and documentaries.

Underlying the concerns that are harboured about mass culture and the absence of realism in TV programs in Finland is the strong tradition of everyday realism or a special kind of ethical realism. Traditionally it is believed that theatre performances and other fictitious stories should prepare people for a hard life and provide them with ethically sound models for life. In Finland the entire history of national broadcasting has been characterized by a strong spirit of enlightenment and popular education. Even before the establishment of the Finnish Broadcasting Corporation (FBC) in 1925 Radio Tampere declared that its chief goal was to keep its listeners up to date and to disseminate „moral and information”¹⁵. Similarly in FBC’s articles of association it was stated that the company shall aim to promote popular education¹⁶. After the war, when H. Wuolijoki took over as Director General, greater priority went to education in social thinking. Wuolijoki, who represented the political left, specified as FBC’s chief aim the raising of the general public into real democracy¹⁷. The same pattern was repeated in 1965 when E. S. Repo was nominated Director General. On the political dimension the radical period under Mr Repo saw the continuation of the traditional emphasis on popular education. The new line of „Reporadio” (nicknamed after Mr Repo, whose surname means fox in colloquial Finnish) was called „informative program policy”; a social dimension was now being added to types of program which had not formerly seen this. According to Mr Repo the primary goal of broadcasting must be to provide worldview that is based on true information and facts, a view that changes with the world and with our increasing and changing knowledge¹⁸.

By this reference to the history of the FBC and its program policy I do not want to argue that Finnish TV morality has unfolded as a popular response to the FBC’s continuous efforts in the field of popular education. On the contrary, one might argue that the emphasis on popular education at the FBC has from the very outset been a reflection of Finnish and Western culture, where it is traditionally held that the purpose of fictitious stories is to provide ethically sound models for life.

University of Tampere
Finland

¹⁵ P. Tulppo, *Radioamatööreistä tajuntateollisuuteen. Puoli vuosisataa suomalaista yleisradiotoimintaa* (From Radio Amateurs to Consciousness Industry. Half a Century of Finnish Broadcasting), Porvoo 1976, p. 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 198–199.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 287.