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The changing local community of Finnish drama and comedy series

The series of the public service YLE TV2 channel representing the town of Tampere and constructing the model of local community in 1965-2003

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to sketch the theoretical framework of my PhD research. It should be the tentative basis for the comprehensive analysis of the research material - the working phase that I am launching next. In my research I will analyse the ways of representation of Tampere in drama and comedy series from 1965 till today. My main question is: what kind of communities is constructed in the series? What kind of people do the fictional communities include and what kind of roles the characters have in these communities? Are their roles tightly connected to their social class, gender and age (etc.)? Of what kind of settings does the Tampere of the series consist? What causes conflicts in the community and how are they solved? To whom are the audience invited to identify with? Are there to been seen some chronological changes or trends in these fictional communities that discuss and comment the "real" development of the society and/or the town?

Through answering these questions I hope to get hold on the changing cultural values and the ideological trends of the society, or even mentalities. I am especially interested in the stereotypical or mythical concept of Finnishness in the series. This does not mean that I would understand the series as a reflection of the society. On the contrary, the vital aspect of my research is to analyse how the series of the public service company YLE have contributed to the public formation and discussion of these values.

I concentrate on the series of YLE TV2 because of the channel's profile. When Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE) founded TV2 in 1965 from the remains of Tamvisio, the Programme Council of YLE decided to keep the channel in Tampere and not to transfer it to the capital. Along with the channel's geographical situation the Programme Council

obliged the channel to highlight the regional and local issues, both in fiction and in current affairs programmes. This way the Programme Council wanted to make use of the resources of the provinces and diminish the domination of the capital in the television production. Thereby Tampere was not the only Finnish place that represented the “localness” in TV2 series. But as it was the most common setting for the series, its representation gives an opportunity to examine the historical change of the image of the local and national community.

My research material consists of ten to twelve series. Their length varies from six to sixty episodes and they also represent different genres: serious and humoristic drama as well as outright comedies. This starting point means a great challenge for the research. How can I compare or even find any kind of interfaces between the series so different from each other? My preliminary insights of the series and their critiques and also the research of Liris Ruoho tell that the generic elements have not been so significant in the series production of YLE TV2. In her research Ruoho illustrates how the serial drama of TV2 has been marked by a lack of format; stylistically it has included information, fantasy and comedy. But on the other hand almost all of the series have represented the convention of social realism. (Ruoho 2001, 35 & 149)

The research also investigates how the local representations have been interpreted by the critics and viewers. The sources here are the reviews and the audience feedback that has been published in the newspapers and magazines. Their role is to help my interpretation of the series; to help in identifying the possible ideological and cultural frictions or, on the other hand, the ideological and cultural self-certainties when analyzing them as products of certain historical period.

The research is part of the discussion on the role of the public service broadcasting. Traditionally the European public service broadcasting has been regarded as a vital element in strengthening the national and local community. But lately the aims and methods of the public service broadcasting have been seriously questioned all over the Western Europe. The objective of this research is to clarify how the public service television company of Finland has taken part to producing the cultural and social values

and ideologies of the Finnish society and how it has typified Finnishness in the serial dramas and comedies.

2. Television as a cultural forum

The fundamental assumption of my research is the ritual model of communication. In the ritual model the central role of communication is not to relay information but to present shared beliefs; not to extend messages in space but to maintain the society in time.

According to James Carey "*Communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed.*" Therefore reading newspaper is not an act of receiving pure information but of following the contesting forces as if observing at a play. It is not essential to ask how the messages affect the people; essential is the role of presentation and involvement in the structuring people's life and time. (Carey 1975/1989, 20-23)

Grounding strongly on Carey's thinking Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch have presented an idea of television as a cultural forum. Newcomb and Hirsch claim that television possesses the role of a national medium after taking it over from film, radio, picture magazines and newspapers. According to them, television is central to the process of public thinking i.e. the social construction and negotiation of reality. In television the prevalent concerns and dilemmas are discussed and different point of views are examined, maintained and transformed. Newcomb and Hirsch emphasize that television does not present firm ideological conclusions but comments on ideological problems from separate perspectives: "*the rhetoric of television drama is a rhetoric of discussion.*" (Newcomb & Hirsch 1983/1994, 505- 507)

Even if Newcomb and Hirsch are talking about United States and though it might be that television is at the moment losing its status to newer media such as Internet I still strongly believe that during my research period (1965-2003) television has still had a role of central, if not the most central, medium in Finland on discussing the topical social and cultural issues. But it has to be asked, if television or any medium has now or ever been capable of discussing dilemmas that could be described as *prevalent*? In recent decades most media researchers have stressed that publicity is either dominated by the hegemonic

ideology of the ruling social groups and/or that there are also counterpublics of subcultures.

In compared with United States, the cultural forum of television can be presumed to be different in European system labelled by public service broadcasting. In Finland, YLE's programme service has had, by its code of practice, a duty to promote objectivity in its programmes. This kind of *informational program policy* was launched in the late sixties and its main objective was to offer a view of the world which is based on correct information and facts. YLE was not to promote any particular world view but diverse ways of thinking. Many researches have seen that although the spirit of informational policy has changed, it has never vanished. (Ruoho 2001, 28-29) As to idea of a cultural forum, this does not mean that a public service broadcasting television would be more unbiased than its commercial counterparts. Instead I presume, by adapting the idea of Newcomb and Hirsch, that the Finnish television has been as pluralistic cultural forum as Finnish politics has been. (cf. Newcomb and Hirsch 1983/1994, 508)¹. Furthermore, I am interested in the series *because* they were made to instruct and appeal to the average citizens. For me it is interesting, what are the limits of normality, the norms of the Finnishness, gender, age etc. that the series offer for the audience (see Morley 2005, 422-424).

However, the public service system has affected on the reception of the television programmes. Especially in the sixties and seventies most Finnish critics also expected the YLE's programmes to be neutral and impartial and many of them find fault with YLE for not presenting different political views and social groups in an equal way. Since television series was not so much thought of drama but as a portrayer of the present, this kind of critique was applied as strongly to fictional as factual programmes. In the fictional programmes, like the drama and comedy series, this meant that both politicians and critics expected the series to represent 'reality' and bring up social issues. Though the concept of realism has altered in the critiques, its reading has been important criterion until today. (Ruoho 2001, 28-29, 236-252) So through reading the critiques I expect to get a view about the public discussion concerning the true 'reality' of Finnish society.

¹ "We recognize, of course, that this variety works for the most part within the limits of American monopoly-capitalism and within the range of American pluralism. It [television] is an effective pluralistic forum insofar as American political pluralism can be." (Newcomb and Hirsch 1983/1994, 508)

As to the pluralism and its limits in the television as cultural forum, Newcomb and Hirsch stress that only television as whole system can present the variety of ideologies and ideas of the culture. According to them, concentration on individual genres misses the central point of cultural forum as the variety of rhetorics is lacking. As Newcomb and Hirsch have pointed out, "*When similar topics are treated within different generic frames another level of discussion is at work*" (Newcomb & Hirsch, 508-509). Therefore I believe that the fact that my research material consists of series that represent many genres is an advantage rather than a weakness. As the different genres approach the same social issues with a different tone and daring, they together give a richer insight about the public negotiation of the cultural values and the conception of the 'reality' than programmes of one genre.

3. Place as a representational space

Because of the YLE TV2 channel's profile, regionalism has been an important factor of the channel's drama production. A regional or local point of view has not been merely been an instruction from above i.e. from the politically formed Programme Council of YLE. Already the serial drama of Tamvisio (the private predecessor of YLE TV2) had oppositional attitude towards the capital of Helsinki and its supposed elite culture. The TV2 inherit much of that attitude from Tamvisio along with the staff. The sense of place has therefore been an essential feature of the storylines of TV2 series from its beginning. (Ruoho 2001, 32) On the consequently, the town of Tampere has had a dual function in the series of TV2. On one hand, it has been a characteristic local place - on the other hand, it has been a representative of the "rest of the Finland".

But what does the sense of place consist of? According to Inka Moring the concept of place differs from the concept of space in a way that a place means a space that people attach meanings to. People's attachment happens through living in the space, through familiarity and routine that turns space from an abstract environment to a subjective place. Therefore locality means involvement to the inhabited surroundings. (Moring 2000, 87-88). Could these same definitions be useful when applied, not for a real living environment, but to its representations?

Henri Lefevbre has divided space to three intersections: 1) spatial practices, 2) representations of space and 3) representational spaces. *The spatial practices* produce

the perceived place. They associate the daily routines with the physical infrastructure. *The representations of space* are conceptualized spaces produced through a system of signs that describe and mark the space. *The representational spaces* are spaces that are lived through images and symbols associated to them. They overlay the physical space, making use of its objects. (Lefebvre 1974/1991, 38-39) Applying this categorization I presume that the television series can be understood as representations of space which identify and mark their setting (Tampere) and its people, especially to the people that are living there. But more importantly they are representational spaces that make use of Tampere's physical appearance to construct an imaginary space of Finnishness and (typical) Finnish community.

In order to be credible to the audience the series have to form a coherent representational space. At YLE TV2 channel the coherence has been tried to achieve through the convention of social realism. According to Iiris Ruoho realism of the TV2's serial dramas "... is associated not only with the carefully shot milieus but also with the physical credibility of the characters and ever increasingly the mythical images connected with Finnishness (such as the internal morals of small communities or groups and internal loyalty, hatred or the gentry and nature mysticism) (Ruoho 2001, 30). As the credibility stems from identifiability, from the repetition and familiarity, the representational spaces of the series turn to a characteristic place.

Furthermore, when the representational spaces of the series are understood as social spaces that consist both the physical infrastructure in the sense of the setting as well as the *social relations* of the story and the narrative, the concept of community is connected the concept of representational space. However, the different levels of community have to be separated. First, there is the community of the series that is written to the story and the narrative, the community in the representational space. This is the level that my research questions directly refer to. Secondly, there is the community (or communities) that the series discuss, produce and renew. That is the model of a social community in the Finnish society of their historical period. Through analysing the communities of the first level together with their feedback I hope to grasp the discussion of the second level's community with the cultural values it includes.

4. Television series as a part of the history of mentalities

It is a matter of course that the television series are part of the cultural history as art or entertainment. But they can also be research material for the research of the history of mentalities especially when they are combined with the texts related to them (critics and audience feedback). The history of mentalities come close to the history of thought but is broader in its field of study. Mentality means the entirety of the ways of thinking and feeling that is a characteristic for a certain community in a certain time. The research of the history of mentalities can also be understood as research of culture. Culture then means system of signs that is characteristic for certain groups of people and which gives meanings and constructs reality. These systems of signs come out in many phenomena and associations, as texts, norms, symbols, art, oral heritage and rituals that produce and reproduce the system. (Hyrkkänen 2002, 30 & 76-79)

The route between the historical research of mentalities and the culturally oriented media research is surprisingly short. For example James Carey has pointed out that study of communication is studying of social process where symbolic forms are created, apprehended and used. Through construction of symbol systems in media our knowledge and attitudes toward reality are created and expressed. *“Our attempts to construct, maintain, repair and transform reality are publicly observable activities that occur in historical time.”* (Carey, 1975/1989, 30) Also according to Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch the history of social discussions might be traced in the rhetorics of television. (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1983/1994, 510)

Essential for the historical research generally, and especially for the research of mentalities, is the construction of the historical context. The historical context is part of the interpretation of the research material as well as the outcome of the analysis. The construction of the historical context is an interactive process where the research questions are connected to the social structures, actions and circumstances that are meaningful from the standpoint of the questions. The difficulty, of course, is to decide and limit the relevant and useful research contexts. (Hyrkkänen 2002, 200-227)

At this point of my study I can see at least two relevant contexts for the analysis of the series. On one hand, the TV2's television series that I analyse are part of the television

production of Finnish public service broadcasting company YLE. On the consequently, its productions have been regulated and supervised politically to carry out national tasks. According to Iiris Ruoho, the television has been a part of the modernization process of Finland and it has been expected to participate in constructing the welfare society. Television has been to offer information and support for people in their adjustment to nuclear family and to a modern society with its duties and regulations. (Ruoho 2001, 40. See also Wiio, 1981) Especially from the point of view of the community and its construction and representation in the series this context is essential.

In Finland the modernization process has meant a structural change in social and economical life. Its consequences have been unemployment, inner migration and urbanization. Thereby, the other relevant context for my research that is connected with urban space is the modernization and urbanization of the Finnish society. Through this context the previously mentioned theoretical framework of spaces comes useful when the spatial practices (the physical infrastructure and urban society), representations of space (television series) and representational spaces (the imaginary spaces of the series) become strongly connected. As Inka Moring has stated: *“Space as binding concept – being theoretical, historical and physical – can link interpretations of film and media texts to the ‘real’ or at least documented historical and social transformation of the nation...”* (Moring, 2001, 161)

My hypothesis at the moment is, that the series that I investigate could be historically and thematically defined as the series of 1) structural change and urbanization [1960-1970], 2) suburban life [1980's] and 3) post-industrialism [1990-2000]. This categorization stems from the development of industrial society, or rather, the development in conceptions of industrial society. On the first period the process of industrialization was continuing in Finland but its 'fruits' like economic growth, benefits of the welfare society and modernization were to be enjoyed despite of the mass migration from the rural areas after workplaces. The belief in the continuing success of industrial society was not unchallenged. In the 1980's the perspectives of the industrial society were already darker but the prospect of growth still dominated. Also the immediate experiences consisted of growing consumption and the economic boom. With the 1990's depression the industrial

society fell in crisis. Also the industrial society's reputation was scratched as the environmental and local problems were noticed. (Haapala 2003, Ruoho 2001, 109-125.) I find this categorization useful since Tampere has, first and foremost, been an industrial city which the structural changes have had a major impact on. And more importantly, the insights that I have got into the series so far support this kind of classification.

5. Further discussion

The television series are not only part of the cultural and mental history, traces of their time. They do not only represent the community of their time. They also become, more or less, part of the popular memory and in that sense *write* history. This is especially case when the series have re-runs. As working with her students Lynn Spiegel had noticed that the students often compared the series' past with their experienced present. Though they usually watched the old series from an ironic distance their perceptions of the past were very often based on the television series. (Spiegel 2001, 357-381) Should I also take into account this another historical level, level of a popular memory, in my research? Many series of my research have had several re-runs and in their later critics they are interpreted as reflections of the past. From the point of view of my research questions this could be important as the series and their critics may also produce and renew the conception of community and Finnishness of the past.

Lynn Spiegel also claims that when television recontextualizes the past in terms of contemporary uses and perspectives, it engages in a kind of historical consciousness that remembers past as a lower development phase for the present. (Spiegel 2001, 361-362) There might be a danger that I also, as a researcher born in the 1970's, analyze the series as steps to 'enlightenment', especially when I categorize them in a chronological order. Is the historical contextualizing the answer for this problem or is there more to think about? Furthermore, I have recollections of some series as a viewer whereas some of the series are new to me and I watch them for the first time equipped with a researcher's analytical tools. How should I reflect my position as a researcher in a situation where both from the historical research's standpoint and the media studies' standpoint I have a significantly different relationship to the different pieces of my research material?

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