Research on television has, during the last decade, put special emphasis on the competence of the audience. The viewer is no longer seen as passive but, instead, active, free to choose what he/she wants to see, and competent to read televisual texts and construct his/her own meanings.

This optimism has marked a clear shift in critical communication studies. Whereas the 'old' critical tradition of the 1960s and 1970s seemed to emphasize the top-down power of media institutions, or 'culture industries', the 'new' flagship of the critical school, cultural studies of the 1980s, has preached a new doctrine of bottom-up resistance by the audience.¹

This shift has, indeed, also appeared in the Nordic countries, together with a revival of ethnographic research methods. In Norway and Denmark, the impetus to textual and, later, reception analysis was provided by the humanities; the academic departments involved were, for example, literature, film or English studies. In Sweden and Finland, for their part, it was
mostly within media studies or sociology that the new interest in cultural studies first appeared.

The three books at hand illustrate the state of cultural studies on popular media in three Scandinavian countries, Denmark, Norway and Finland, documenting as well the ethos of pluralist voluntarism, propagated perhaps most clearly by John Fiske (especially Fiske, 1987), as well as the new, politically more concerned 'revisionist movement' (see Curran, 1990) that has challenged the cultural relativism typical of the recent mainstream of cultural studies.

As far as the optimistic bottom-up approach is concerned, it is elegantly expressed by Kim Christian Schröder and Michael Skovmand in their 'Introduction' to Media Cultures. Their aim is to 'promote a less prejudiced understanding of our audio-visual culture' (p. 1). Indeed, the book with its ten essays tries to shake down the typical European middle-class/intellectual panic over all the easy thrills and general Americanization of popular media. Unfortunately, the results too often appear to be too obvious. And what is even more surprising, approaches ranging from historical to textual analysis don't include reception studies, although Schröder, for example, is known for his work on the pleasures of Dynasty (see, e.g., Schröder, 1988). A reception perspective, I believe, is necessary for the anti-prejudiced ethos of the volume.

Michael Skovmand, for example, compares different nationally syndicated adaptations of the American game show Wheels of Fortune. According to him, the Danish version Lykkebjulet, is very game-orientated and participatory, and with a 'genuine sense of constituency' (p. 98), which could explain the programme's exceptional popularity in Denmark compared to the success of a more consumerist German version, called Glückrad, among its home audience. After a careful analysis of the structural elements of the programme in four different countries, it is somewhat disappointing to find Skovmand's scant conclusion that 'popular television is not a stable entity, geographically or over time' (p. 100). Indeed, here it would have been illuminating to hear the voice of the viewers and to learn something about the meanings and pleasures inspired by the game show. Textual analysis, clearly, is not enough.

In his comparison between the newscasts of CNN and the Norwegian Broadcasting Company NRK during the Persian Gulf War, Peter Larsen seems to point to some fundamental differences between the two channels. While the viewers of CNN are 'placed in a position similar to that of the reporters, i.e., they are confronted with an unstructured mass of information and statements' (p. 135), the NRK audience is mostly addressed by an organizing, uniting and mediating 'master discourse' (p. 132). While the viewers of the NRK newscasts are 'participating in a daily ritual through which they reaffirm their position as members of the national community' (p. 132), the CNN audience 'consists of individuals connected by the fact that they are television viewers tuned in to this particular channel' (p. 132). This sounds reasonable, but here again, analysis of reception would have brought the essay beyond mere, although sophisticated, speculation. We are
still looking forward to a qualitative empirical analysis of businessmen watching CNN in their hotel rooms or conference hall lobbies!

In the concluding lines of his essay Professor Larsen predicts that the drive for high audience shares will force even the public service companies to adjust themselves to the international pattern of ‘more headline news, updates, visual entertainment’ in their news services. As a more reasonable solution, he presents an alternative pattern: ‘To meet competition by concentrating on reports, background material, analyses, and so on, i.e., by emphasizing precisely those forms of presentation which are the backbone of the traditional public-service programmes’ (p. 141).

And Larsen is not alone in his ‘anti-relativism’; he is well accompanied by Graham Murdock and David Morley, who both avoid the paternalism of the ‘old’ radical top-down criticism but, at the same time, point to important (media) policy questions and social tasks of the media as purveyors of citizenship. This reflects the inner family connection between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ approaches within the critical school of communications studies.

The thin volume Reality and Fiction in Finnish TV Viewing approaches television in the family context. The three approaches employed are anthropological, sociological and social psychological, but the general organizing methodology is provided by qualitative audience analysis and the frame of discourse by cultural studies. The three essays of the collection are all based on the same empirical data, interviews of 89 families in Tampere, an industrial town in Southern Finland.

The general finding, proposed especially by Karen Armstrong and Pertti Alasuutari, is that the Finns are very ‘realistic’ in their TV viewing: they may even rationalize watching a foreign-language soap opera by claiming to do it ‘in order to improve their skills in the language’, as Armstrong remarks (p. 18).

Alasuutari, who analyses the Finnish ‘value hierarchy’ of TV programmes, goes even further. Although what people say to an interviewer does not necessarily correspond to their actual behaviour, it seems that ‘the most highly valued types of TV programme in Finland are represented by news and documentaries, while at the bottom of the hierarchy we have American soap operas’ (p. 38). For example, it was the soap operas that received almost all ‘moral references’ in viewers’ own explanations of their viewing habits. Alasuutari notes also the gender difference: of seven programme categories used, soap operas took second place on women’s list of preferences.

However, Alasuutari concludes, it is not fiction or entertainment as such that is seen as demoralizing by the Finns. Rather, it is ‘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’ (p. 52) that is the cause for this specific TV morality, which is called by Alasuutari ethical realism, proclaiming that ‘TV programs should not give an overly romantic picture of life’ and that ‘fictional stories should not lead us into believing that life is too easy’ (p. 58).

Indeed, could there be better evidence for the argument that the TV audience is not a duped bunch of ‘couch potatoes’ but instead highly
competent actors drawing on an extensive stock of practical knowledge! In his analysis of family-internal rules of TV viewing, Juha Kytömäki provides extra support for this position. Although there seem to be almost no explicit rules for children's television habits in Finnish homes, this does not mean, according to Kytömäki, that there would not be any control or parental mediation. Instead, the lack of restrictions in fact revealed that 'children's behaviour is consistent with parents' expectations as children have largely internalized their parents' norms' (p. 82).

The results of Alasuutari and Kytömäki suggest that people do control and rationalize very competently their relationship with television. However, as I see it, the results also question to some degree the claims of a general cultural relativism, the emphasis on a 'free choice of meanings' and the 'cultural connoisseurship of viewers' and instead reflect the continuing strength of the ideology of mass culture within people's heads.

The (mostly) Norwegian volume of Media and Communication is a good example of a liberal multidisciplinarity, which is one of the marks of the new and revised approach. The book itself, with its 23 essays, is too heterogenous to carry a common message, but many of its contributions do illustrate a convergence between different traditions in media studies.

Svennig Høyer's (to whom the whole book is dedicated) contribution is no exception. He specifies blind-spots as well as common grounds of different schools in an illuminating way. 'Top-down theories often end up in contradictory concepts of a passive, yet intelligent audience, or they describe the audience as a market in a terminology well removed from the imagery of audience research. On the other hand, bottom-up theories give only a loggy view of media institutions', he claims (p. 39). Selecting pieces from here and there, from behaviourists as well as functionalists, from humanists as well as political economists, Høyer is searching for a more holistic view of the communication process in a cultural setting and thus trying to "rescue" mass communication as a coherent and socially active phenomenon (p. 48).

Obviously, his intention is good. However, it is not easy to comprehend how it is possible to actually include all phases of communication process in one single holistic study - or does Professor Høyer just have a broadminded borrowing of concepts and angles across scholarly traditions in mind?

Trine Syvertsen's essay on the structural changes of Norwegian public broadcasting from 'culture' to 'business' connects historical analysis to the critical textual analysis of documents on broadcasting policy. It is an encouraging attempt to bring institutional analysis and policy questions like 'public service vs. market', largely neglected by the recent viewer-centred mainstream of cultural studies, back into the foreground in the analysis of popular media.3

Another blind-spot of cultural studies is the question of quality, which was, in a way, put aside when the political aesthetic of paternalism gave way to the popular aesthetic of relativism. However, whereas Jostein Gripnudt in Media and Communication emphasizes that analyses of quality should be based on the text and measured against standards specific to its genre, Kim Christian Schröder in Media Cultures prefers a reception-based approach,

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because 'from a taste perspective, “quality” can no longer be seen as a concept with universal application, but always as quality for someone' (p.211; emphasis omitted).

These two opposite positions show that the new revisionist movement in cultural studies is not one and uniform. There are several approaches on a multidimensional scale, each having a varying number of links with the others.

This divergence may also point to the very fact that whatever we are analysing, one approach is seldom enough. A decision about quality, for example, can be definitely resolved neither by reception nor textual analysis; we should be receptive to both of them.

Moreover, it points to the even more important fact that methodological choices carry with them, often unintentionally, political choices. Or to overstate it: emphasizing textual analysis may imply a paternalist position, whereas reception analysis may promote a populist position. Although I feel no sympathy for the elitist-hierarchical definitions of good and bad, I must admit that Grippsud is right on target when reminding us that 'if no criteria for evaluating the cultural significance or importance of texts across media can be found, it may in fact be advisable that commercialism should rule practically unrestrained' (p.229).

Notes

1 This shift from top-down to bottom-up approach has been presented, for example, by Ang (1990).
2 'This refers to Len Ang's (1985) notion of 'emotional realism'.
3 More profoundly this is done in Ang (1991).

References