

Unconscious Class Awareness? The reception of class dimensions in television fiction and news

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Abstract

Television depicts people from different social classes, with middle class characters often dominating. How do television viewers receive this? This article discusses the reception of social class dimensions while watching television, drawing on a reception analysis conducted in Sweden in the early 1990s. The aim was to analyse if and how Swedish television viewers perceive the social class position of characters and persons in different kinds of television fiction and news. Both qualitative reception interviews and a questionnaire were used. One main conclusion was that informants usually can give some classification of social position when asked about it but this was mostly not something that they reflected upon while watching. It is argued that this result can be understood as an outcome of both cognitive processes and class embarrassment. However, attention for social position was somewhat higher when watching fiction and lower when watching news.

Keywords: Social class, class awareness, television, reception, cognition

Introduction

This article is about the reception of social class dimensions of television. It can be related to at least four theoretical and empirical contexts. On the one hand content analyses from USA, Sweden and many other countries have shown a biased class and occupational structure of television characters, where the middle class dominates, the upper class is most overrepresented and working class occupations are clearly underrepresented compared with the class structures of the studied countries (Greenberg 1980; Signorelli 1984; Feilitzen et al. 1989). Content analyses have also found heavy stereotyping, with professional middle class characters given the most positive pictures and working class characters getting more negative stereotypes (Butsch 1992). One question that could be posed in this context is how television viewers perceive this content. Second, the concept of social class has been both questioned and defended within sociology and media research during the last decades. The class concept has repeatedly been declared dead or on the wane (Pakulski and Waters 1996) only to be defended and re-established by others (Goldthorpe and Marshall 1992; Heider 2004). Third, during the same period the field of reception research emerged, with a radical renewal of audience research (Hall 1980; Morley 1980; Radway 1984). Since the start intensive debates have been going on about the nature of media reception, the appropriate methods

used, the relation of reception to media discourse and the political implications of this. Questions have been raised about active or oppositional readings, identification and polysemy (Fiske 1987; Morley 1992; Philo and Miller 2001). These questions can all be related to debates about media and ideology that have been going on for even longer time

One dimension of ideology is the image people have of the social structure of society. And one important source of such images is the mass media. For example we can ask to what extent and how television viewers perceive the social class of television characters in fiction and news? This descriptive question has relevance both for discussions of the ideological influence of television, for debates about social class in late modern society and for discussions about the nature of reception processes.

The aim of this article is to analyse if and how Swedish television viewers perceive the social class position of characters and persons in different kinds of television programmes.¹ The findings raise questions about the character of TV viewing, audience activity and class awareness.

The study has, for different reasons, turned into a study of media history. The data collection was conducted 1991 to 1993, so the results express how Swedish television viewers perceived social class of television characters and newsmen² in television fiction and news at that time. But the results will be related to more recent theories of class and cognition. To answer the research questions both qualitative reception interviews and a representative questionnaire have been used.

There are few reception studies about how social class is perceived by television viewers. Some of the studies conducted indicate that class may not be so visible for viewers, or that class may be conflated with other divisions (Lewis 1991; Press 1991; Livingstone 1998). Research also suggests that there are some differences between viewers from different classes, but there is also evidence that the specific contexts and discourses that viewers are living their daily lives in may be even more important.

The debate about class

Many sociologists have questioned the concept of social class during the last decades. The critique can be summarized as following two lines of reasoning. The first line says that the explanatory power of class, understood as economic position, for other factors like values, identity, voting and lifestyle has declined (Pahl 1993; Pakulski and Waters 1996). One version of this is the theory of individualisation where class relations are seen as less important because individuals are getting more loosely connected to different collectives in society (Beck 1992). Another version argues that classes no longer can be seen as organised

¹ This study is more fully presented in Ross (2008). The research was originally conducted together with Kjell Nowak and Birgitta Höjjer, and funded by HSFR. See Höjjer et al. (1992).

² By 'newsperson' is here meant all persons appearing in the news, both reporters, news anchors and anyone interviewed or depicted in news items.

collectives or conflict groups (Holton and Turner 1989; Pakulski and Waters 1996). Decline in class voting is one example mentioned. The second main line of reasoning is the thesis that other social divisions have become more important than class, like gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality and consumption (Crook et al. 1992). However, critics of the class concept like Beck or Pakulski and Waters do not mean that modern societies have become equal. They argue that the class concept has become less useful for understanding the social inequalities that still exist.

The class concept has been strongly defended by class researchers. The most common type of defense points to empirical studies that shows the continued influence of class on life chances, values, identity, voting etc and that this influence is important also in comparison with other factors as gender, ethnicity and consumption (Goldthorpe and Marshall 1992; Milner 1999; Svallfors 2006). In media research too it has been argued that researchers have downplayed class. However others have tried to revive the concept in media studies (Rowbotham and Beynon 2001; Heider 2004).

Since the 1990s some theorists, often drawing on the work of Bordieu, have tried to find a third road in class theory, emphasising questions of culture, identity and recognition, mostly using qualitative methods (Skeggs 1997; Reay 1998; Savage 2000, Savage et al. 2001; Devine et al. 2005). I will return to this body of research in the concluding discussion.

Sweden was for a long period regarded as a stronghold of social democracy. Studies on class in the 1970s and 80s found a relatively high level of class awareness and degree of a reformist class consciousness compared to eg Great Britain (Scase 1977; Stephens 1979), USA and Japan (Wright 1985). However, Swedish studies also showed a decline in working class identification and class voting from the 1970s towards the end of the 1980s (Cigéhn 1990; Oskarsson 1994). Class identity then grew somewhat stronger during the 1990s according to Cigéhn (1999). At year 2000 class awareness were still widespread in Sweden according to Karlsson (2005). Since 2000 the social democrats has lost its hegemony in Swedish politics even if popular support of the welfare state is still strong. While no recent studies on class identity or awareness have been published there seems to be a widespread belief that Swedish society to a growing extent has been permeated by middle class values.

Reception theory

This study was inspired both by reception analysis within cultural studies like Morley (1980), Lewis (1991) and by more mainstream audience research like uses & gratifications, but also by cognitive psychology (Höjjer 1992). In that sense, and methodologically, it follows the integrated approach to reception advocated by eg Schröder (1999). The theoretical tools regarding reception are basically two: Hall's

encoding/decoding model (Hall 1980) but with a radically modified typology of decoding positions, and schema theory from cognitive psychology. I will not discuss Hall's model or my modification of the typology further here.

Hall's model does not specify how reception works as an internal process of the viewer. However, most reception studies are built on assumptions of reception as some kind of constructionist process, but the specific version can vary between e.g. semiotic, hermeneutic or cognitive frameworks. Here I will follow the cognitive route, and more specifically schema theory. Schemas are mental constructs used for perception, memory, inferences and evaluation processes. The schema concept was here used first at the planning phase of the project, influencing the formulation of interview questions, and secondly as a way of interpreting the findings. The general assumption is that we perceive the world, including television programs, with the help of schemas (Fiske and Taylor 1991). This shall not be understood as implying that people always are completely directed by their schemas. Information that is in conflict with a person's schema can sometimes force changes in the schema rather than reconstructing the observation.

Reception theory is sometimes equated with 'active audience theory'. The approach is assumed to imply that viewers normally are active, either in some unspecified sense, or in the sense of being reflective and critical. Regarding the issue of 'the active viewer' it can be argued, in line with Biocca (1988), that the concept of activity is too vague to be of much use without further specification. It must be divided into separate dimensions. All media reception is active in the basic sense that some meaning construction is taking place in the receiver's brain, but this does not in itself imply that the receiver is very reflective or critical, or even attentive. It is a task for investigation to analyze what kind of activity is taking place in each case.

Reception research has changed emphasis during its short history (Alasuutari 1999). Originally it was much influenced by Hall's encoding/decoding model and focused on questions of ideology and resistance. But quite early focus was also expanded to questions of media use in everyday life (Morley 1986). In the last decade attempts have been made to replace, or go beyond, Hall's approach by turning to concepts like the larger media culture, spectacle and audience performance (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998). The rise of Internet and digitalisation undoubtedly raises new questions for reception research, like interactivity and prosumption (Livingstone 2004; Bolin 2010). However, questions of interpretation are still important and addition of new questions and approaches does not necessarily make older ones obsolete.

Methods and data

Reception analysis is usually conducted with qualitative methods, but some reception theorists have asked

for more combinations of qualitative and quantitative methods in the same study (Barker 2006: 133; Morley 2006: 106). This is such a study. Both qualitative interviews and a quantitative survey were used in order to give both a detailed picture of the reception and in order to identify patterns and carry out some generalizations.

The study uses two kinds of television genres: news and fictional serials. Both are among the most popular types of programmes in television, and have a central place in television discourse.

The reception interviews

The programmes used for the interviews were the Swedish social realist serial *Three Loves*, the US prime time soap *Falcon Crest*, and two news items, one about economic problems in the corporation Electrolux, the other about problems in the Swedish elderly care system. Out of practical necessity somewhat abbreviated segments of the two fictional serials were used.

Open-ended interviews were conducted spring 1991 via screenings of programmes immediately followed by reception interviews, and some days later another interview (generally in the informant's home) about the informant's social background and personal experiences and attitudes (the 'personal interview'). Informants³ were residents of Stockholm, aged 30-50, both women and men, with manual or middle-class occupations. These selection criteria produced a sample of four distinct categories: male and female manual workers and middle class women and men. Each category consists of five or six persons. 22 persons participated in this study.

After screening informants were interviewed individually about their reception. First the viewer was asked to relate how he/she perceived and interpreted the stories as a whole, and then each scene/sequence. In the second part of the interview the viewer was asked about the subjects of social class⁴ in the narratives. The aim here was to determine how, and to what extent, class aspects serve as cognitive perspectives for interpretation.

The interview transcripts were analysed in two ways. One approach was, inspired by grounded theory, to describe in some detail how informants see the programmes in terms of certain research questions, like involvement, appreciation, views on realism, perceptions of class structure or how they describe the characters in terms of social position or class. The other approach was to conduct a kind of quantitative content analysis of the interview transcripts in terms of the salience of class for informants and what kind

³ The term 'informant' is used for the interviewed viewers, and 'respondent' for those who answered the questionnaire.

⁴ *Social class is here regarded in a general structural way, as a variable defined by the position in the division of labour and ownership of resources in society. But this 'objective' class concept has to be complemented by related concepts, like status, strata, occupation, and class identity and consciousness. I will use the term 'social position' as an overall concept including class and the other related concepts. Social class is relevant in several different contexts within this paper.*

- The social class of the informants in the interview study. Here a simple dichotomy, based on occupation, between working class and middle class is used.

- The social class of the questionnaire respondents. A classification based on the official Swedish socio-economic partition (SEI) is used, distinguishing between entrepreneurs, upper managers/professionals, middle white collar, lower white collar and workers.

- The class and stratification concepts used by informants when describing television characters.

of concepts the informants used to describe the social positions of characters.

The survey

A questionnaire was constructed after the interviews were completed. The idea was to both complement and validate the interviews. The ambition was to compensate for the major weakness of the qualitative study, the problem of generalization. One obstacle was that it is hard or impossible to measure exactly the same aspects with the two methods. For example, in the interviews we asked about specific episodes and news items. This was not possible in the questionnaire. But the questionnaire was constructed to make it as comparable with the interview study as possible. The age range was the same, 30-50 years. The two fiction serials used in the interviews were also included in the survey. Because not everybody in the sample could be expected to have watched these two serials some other popular serials in the same genres were also included in the questionnaire. Questions measuring the extent to which respondents used to think about class and occupation while watching the same genres as used in the interviews were included. The questionnaire was divided into different sections, dealing with foreign fiction serials, Swedish fiction serials, and news. For each fiction section the respondent were asked to indicate how much of some given serials they used to watch and then answer some specific questions, eg how often they paid attention to class, occupation or other themes, about the serial they used watch most within the category. The Swedish fiction was afterwards divided into 'popular' (here soaps) and 'realist' subgenres. The same kind of attention questions were posed in relation to news in general. A detailed measurement of social class was also included, as well as both open-ended and closed questions dealing with class identification and class awareness. The questionnaire was distributed fall 1992 to a random sample of 2000 Swedish citizens in the same age group as the informants, 30-50 years old. Reminders were sent out during the spring 1993. Nearly 1200 usable questionnaires were answered, so the response rate was about 60 %.

Results

In the first two sections the results are mainly drawing on the reception interviews. In the third section this is compared with the survey results.

The (non)salience of social class

Do the viewers perceive, and pay attention to, the class affiliation of the principal characters in the television programmes, and if so in what way? First, the viewers can often make a classification of the characters' social position when asked about it. The classifications are of different kinds, like mentioning

specific occupations, or more general socio-economic categories like 'ordinary workers', 'in the middle', in terms of wealth like 'rich' or 'poor' etc. but also in class terms. The most common kind of description was occupation followed by class, economic position and relative position (higher, lower, middle etc). Some talk about more specific classes like 'politicians class' or 'farmers class'. Sometimes it was obvious that the informant regarded the occupation as a full description, which made other classifications unnecessary. The word class could for example be used for some of the wealthy characters in *Falcon Crest*.

Q: Yes, OK. If we take her social class. Is that something...?

A: Yes, she belongs to the cream, the upper class there in Falcon Crest then. (Nora, female worker, about Angela Channing)

Economic resources and education were also used as indicators of class. Often multiple descriptive terms were used for the same character. In the following quote both occupation, authority, class and way of talking, which may be regarded as an instance of Bourdieu's concept of habitus, is used.

A: Yes, it is a little, he was a sort of... he maybe was not first... was he managing director? No, I don't remember. He had some kind of occupation which was... some kind of authoritative position anyway, I think he had. It was in any case higher social class than her.

Q: ...mm.. Did you see it then, so to say?

A: Yes, yes... maybe not directly when he came with the towel around himself, or what he had, but as soon as he opened his mouth one would understand. (Karin, female middle class, Three Loves)

However, these classifications do not generally seem to be very salient for the viewers. It is mostly something that is evoked by the posed interview question. The informants typically say that they did not think about it while looking but first when probed about it. This is not the same as that they did not notice the class dimension at all, but that it is soft perceived at a pre- or semi-conscious level, or as some informants say, they see it automatically, without reflecting on it.

A: Yes if you compare them. He was manager of the factory so he was somewhat upwards as a director. I mean, you see it at once from the clothes.

Q: Did you think of that when you saw it or is it now when I sit here and ask?

A: No, it is often kind of self-evident in a program like this. There they are on the factory floor in their overalls and then comes the boss and he has a suit. It is kind of... the hierarchy in general. The one who is higher up usually has somewhat fancier clothes. But it is something that just is.

Q: Yes, maybe that is something that you don't think of.

A: It is like subconscious in that case. It is not something you think about. I don't think so at least. (Johanna, female worker, Electrolux)

In the cases where informants said that they actually thought about the social position while watching they often could give an explanation for that, e.g. that the representation was unusually clear, or that it violated the expectations in some way. E.g. there was a scene in *Three Loves* when a couple quarreled about an apartment, which could be interpreted as depending on their different class backgrounds.

A: Yes, he came somewhat from under upwards, and she somewhat from the upper side and downwards if you say so. That she comes a little... a little of upper class girl which not really... understands his situation and how he feels and... she is somewhat self-centred and... he comes from this farmer family.

Q: Is this something that you somehow reflected upon or thought about when you saw this scene?

A: Yes, you feel the contrast between those two. And she obviously don't worries about economy and costs and so on and even if she do not say it there is obviously a little of... "Daddy pays" over her so to say. It... a she makes a somewhat spoilt impression. Self-centred... somewhat self-centred like that. (Carl, male middle class)

Comparisons between programmes and informants

As seen above there is a tendency to pay attention to class in an implicit way while watching, in the sense that you can talk about it afterwards but often do not think about it while watching. The question is if this pattern is the same for different programmes, and for viewers from different social classes and genders? First, the salience of class for the informants vary somewhat between the programmes. The most obvious difference is between the news items on the one hand and the fiction programmes on the other. In the case of *Three Loves* and *Falcon Crest* the informants are somewhat more prone to think about the characters' social positions while watching than when watching news. See table 1.

Table 1. Salience of social position in the four programme sequences. Percent

	Electrolux	Elder care	Falcon Crest	Three Loves
Social position salient for informant	11	11	20	25
Undecided salient/nonsalient	5	11	22	19
Non-salient classification of social position	48	42	50	50
Informant did not make classification of social position	10	24	4	4
Did not remember character	27	13	4	1
Total	100	100	100	100

n= 526 classifications of TV characters

It is more common in the news items than in fiction that informants cannot make any social classification or that they do not remember the person at all. In both news items there is some social class variation between the persons appearing, even if the contrast seems to be more obvious in the Electrolux item. In the elderly care news item two nursing assistants were interviewed, then two elders, and last a politician, a commissioner responsible for the care. In the Electrolux item first two young workers, in risk of getting fired, are interviewed, then a union boss, a factory executive and last the CEO of the Electrolux corporation. Maybe it is not so surprising that the news item about care for old people does not to a high degree activate class schemas. There is some occupational variation in the item, but it is the elders rather than the nursing assistants that are in focus of the story. The subject touches most viewers in a concrete way because most have parents who are getting old or soon will be. Then it is not strange that attention focuses on the subject. The commissioner is mostly not classified as a middle- or upper class person but as belonging to a special category: 'typical politician' (mostly with a negative connotation).

What is more surprising is that the Electrolux item, which seems to be structured to accentuate social inequality, did not evoke more spontaneous interpretations in terms of class. One explanation is that attention is generally focused on the subject of the items while watching news. On the other hand there was an obvious contrast between the vulnerable position of the workers and a final announcement of the high salary of the head of the corporation. The male middle-class informants commented on the mentioning of the salary and were very critical of this unjust and biased turn of the item, which they deemed irrelevant in the context. Some of the viewers did not perceive the statement of the salary at all, and some misunderstood it, the sum being so large that they thought it must be something else.

The extent regarding which viewers perceive social class or position seems to hold regardless of the informant's objective social class. The pattern was very similar for the working class and middle class informants regarding if they thought about the social position when they watched or when asked about (or not at all). This was validated by the survey. However there were some other class differences in the interviews, e. g. that middle class informants used the word 'class' more often and used more terms overall to describe the social position of characters. There were also different decodings of the Electrolux news item where the middle class men focused more on the situation of the company while the working class women emphasized the troublesome situation of the employees. There were no clear gender differences either concerning the salience of class.

The influence of class identity on perception of class was somewhat contradictory in the interviews depending on how it was measured. It did not seem to matter so much which class the informant identified with. What did matter was the salience of class identity and cognitive centrality⁵ for class. If the informant

⁵ A phenomenon is cognitive central if you often think about it in your daily life (Gurin and Markus 1989).

often thought about his or her own class in daily life there was a weak tendency to think more about the class of the television characters. This was supported by the survey too (see table 3 below). Two viewers, for whom the notion of social class was especially salient in their everyday thinking, distinguished themselves by reflecting upon the class position of the characters to a somewhat larger degree. One of them, a male worker, had had many different jobs, and now worked in a job where assessment of persons was necessary:

Q: These things about social class that I ask you, do you think about it when you look or...?

A: Yes. It is like when I read books. Then I must know the characters to be able to read properly...Yes, I classify. As well as I classify...as I told you earlier....people I meet in the street.

(Fritz, male worker, about Falcon Crest).

However, it does not seem enough to think about one's own class in daily life, or to have a general perception of an unequal and unjust society to read the television programs along class lines. Some of the working-class viewers who quite often thought about their own class in everyday life did not that often pay attention to class while watching television. And some middle-class viewers who said that they never thought about their own class in everyday life nevertheless paid attention to this at least for some television characters.

Comparison with the survey results

The questionnaire did not measure exactly the same things as the interviews, even if the ambition was to make it as comparable with the interviews as possible. As mentioned earlier the questionnaire deals not with specific episodes or news items, like the reception interviews. Instead it measure the respondents own reflection about how they usually pay attention to class and occupation when they watch the same kind of serials as used in the interview study (including the two used at the interviews) and TV news in general. However, it gives some approximately comparable information regarding eg differences between genres and demographic categories concerning attention to social class in television. In general there is good consistency between interviews and the survey.

First, the lower attention paid to social position in the news found in the reception interviews was validated by the survey data (see table 2 below). The three fiction genres had between 42 and 61 percent for answers 'quite often' or 'most of the time' while only 21 percent gave these answers concerning news. One difference from the interviews is that in the questionnaire there is higher attention to class in Swedish realist fiction relative to foreign popular fiction. That is not the case in the interviews to the same degree. One explanation for the lower degree of salience of class in news may be that news items are short and viewers focus on understanding what the topic is about, rather than pay attention to structural

characteristics of the persons appearing.

Table 2 *Correlation between genre and how often respondents think about the social class of television characters/persons. Survey data. Percent*

Did You think of.. Which class the characters/persons belonged to?	Foreign popular fiction	Swedish popular fiction	Swedish realist fiction	News
Most of the time	13	9	24	3
Quite often	29	28	37	18
Sometimes	31	31	26	39
Seldom or never	26	32	11	40
	100	100	100	100
n	811	337	424	1143

Foreign popular fiction: Dallas, Falcon Crest, Eldorado, Neighbours, Glamour

Swedish popular fiction: Rederiet (The Shipping Company), Storstad (The City)

Swedish realist fiction: Tre kärlekar (Three Loves), Den goda viljan (The Best Intentions)

The lack of differences between viewers from different classes and genders were repeated in the survey. For class identity quite similar patterns appeared in the survey too. That is to say, there were no significant differences between respondents depending on their identification with different social classes. What mattered was how important class identification was for you. Class identity did matter in the sense that respondents who answered yes on an open question if they belonged to a specific class also had a tendency to pay more attention to class when watching TV. There were also significant correlations between cognitive centrality and how often respondent thought about class or occupation when watching TV. For all genres there was significant correlations (see table 3 for one example).

Table 3 - *Correlation between cognitive centrality for own class identity and how often respondents think about the social class of television characters/persons. Foreign popular fiction. Survey data. Percent*

How often in everyday life do You think about that You are
Working class/Middle class/Upper middle class ?

Did You think of.. Which class the characters/persons belonged to?	Seldom or never	Sometimes	Quite often	Daily or almost daily	Total
Most of the time	9	15	19	50	13
Quite often	26	34	33	25	29
Sometimes	31	35	27	14	31
Seldom or never	34	16	21	11	26
	100	100	100	100	100
n	427	262	70	28	787

$\tau_b = 0,20$
 $p < 0.001$

Some characteristics of the results may to some extent be comprehensible by the following table from the survey. It shows the correlation between two different dimensions of class identity, cognitive centrality and common fate, ie how much respondents think they have in common with other people in the same class notably the ability to describe the class location of the characters in one way or another while at the same time saying that this mostly was not thought of while watching. Two thirds of the respondents think they have quite a lot in common with others in their class, but very few think about their own class position in their everyday life. Almost all can locate themselves in a class, but this is not very salient for them.

Table 4 - Correlation between sense of common fate and cognitive centrality for own class identity. Survey data. Total percent

How often in everyday life do You think about that You are Working class/Middle class/Upper middle class ?				
How much do you think you have in common with your own class?	Seldom or never / Sometimes	Quite often / Daily or almost daily	Total	
Very little/rather little	30	2	32	
Quite a lot/ Very much	58	10	68	
Total	88	12	100	

N = 1118

This pattern is similar for all classes even if the minority, which both think they have a lot in common with their class *and* often think about their own class, is somewhat larger in the working class.

Discussion

How shall these results be understood? My main focus will be on the fact that the viewers mostly could classify the social class or position of the television characters and newsmen but most often said that they did not think about it while watching. All informants have some idea of social class and social differences and can, upon request, give reasonable descriptions of television characters in terms of occupation, social class, status or the like. However, they often say that this was not something they thought of when watching. These tendencies seem consistent with the earlier findings of Lewis (1991), Press (1991) and Livingstone (1998) of varieties of 'class blindness' while watching television. I will in the following discuss some different types of explanations why the informants mostly decode social class at a semi- or unconscious level and less often as a salient quality.

First we can dismiss the hypothesis that low degree of conscious attention to the class dimension depends on any specific social class or gender being especially low in this respect. As reported above there were surprisingly little differences between working class and middle class informant's tendencies to think about social position while watching. This does not mean that there were no differences at all but regarding the main question discussed here the similarities between classes and women/men was striking. It did not matter if you identified with any specific class either. What did matter somewhat was if class was cognitively central for the viewer, ie if they often thought about their own class in everyday life.

Programme characteristics: One type of explanation could be that the programmes did not show social class in an especially visible way. Strong visual and narrative contrasts between classes ought to direct attention and mostly this is not the case. However, in this case one can argue that at least in some parts of the used programme segments class is depicted in a rather visible way. There are also some differences between different genres both in the interviews and the survey. Class or social position did activate class schemas somewhat more in the fiction episodes than in the news. One could also see that certain scenes did activate more thoughts. But even when it seems to be rather visible in the programmes' discourse many viewers still did not pay attention to class. So, content structure matters but there is still a overall pattern of more implicit reception of class aspects.

Cognitive factors: Programmes are perceived and interpreted, decoded, drawing on audiences' worldviews, knowledge, values and expectations. From research on social cognition we know that objects are salient when they somehow stand out against the context, or when they catch our attention by being unusual relative expectations (Sakamoto and Love 2004), by being goal-relevant or by dominating the visual field (Fiske and Taylor 1991). So reception works together with content variation. Regarding news the goal of viewing focuses attention towards the subject matter of items and what is said. In the case of fiction the focus is on the plot and the more individual qualities of the characters and social class is mostly taken for

granted and not consciously decoded or reflected upon. However, overall the tendency is that the more implicit way of receiving class on television dominates.

From the interviews we know that all informants have some schema for class even if it mostly was of a vague kind, but this is only activated under certain conditions. The results become understandable if we assume a latent class schema that need to be activated by quite clear content characteristics. It seems that given the class schemas of the informants the threshold seem to be rather high for evoking attention and conscious reflection upon class. But a stronger class schema, ie higher cognitive centrality, is associated with somewhat higher level of attention for class on television.

Some viewers argue that they did not think about class when the characters fit their expectations of how eg a factory worker or nurse looks like. It is when a character or situation deviate from expectations that attention is activated. This can be related to the concept of automatic processing (Hassin et al. 2004; Bargh 2007). According to this theory a big part of our mental processes is working automatically, ie without intention, awareness, but fast and efficient. In contrast controlled processes are intentional, conscious and slow. Some may argue that this unconscious or automatic processing is rather typical of television viewing in general (Wicks 2000). But obviously we sometimes are more focused and attentive. One can argue that we typically shift between automatic and controlled processing, and automatic processing is used when there is not much to care about, or when nothing goes against our expectations.⁶

From a different theoretical perspective, part postmodernist, part modernist, Bradley formulated the concept of passive identity (Bradley 1996).

‘Passive identities’ are potential identities in the sense that they derive from the sets of lived relationships (class, gender, ethnicity and so forth) in which the individuals are engaged, but they are not acted on. Individuals are not particularly conscious of passive identities and do not normally define themselves by them unless events occur which bring those particular relationships to the fore. Class in the late twentieth century is a passive identity for many people. (Bradley 1996: 25)

That is to say that class is an identity that is not very salient in everyday life, but which can be activated under certain circumstances. It is quite compatible with the cognitive theory of a latent self-schema, and with the pattern in table 4 above, according to which most think they have a lot in common with others in their social class but they do not think so much about it in everyday life. This is not so much another explanation of the results but rather another way to express the same tendencies found here.

The idea of class as embarrassing or painful: Another explanation could be that class is embarrassing to talk about, or even to think about. One type of finding from the new class theory research from the 1990s

⁶ Newer research argues that the borders between automatic and controlled processing are not clear. The distinction contains several dimensions, some of which can vary continuously, and which can be combined in different ways (Bargh 2007).

and on is that many people prefer not to talk about their own social class but that class nevertheless is of great importance for their identity and permeates their everyday life (Skeggs 1997; Reay 1998, 2005). Another result is that people often are rather defensive and hesitant when talking about their own class or about class in general (Savage 2000, Savage et al 2001). Sayer (2005) argues that the embarrassment for talking about class is perfectly motivated and reasonable, because the existence of class differences is in itself unjust, many differences in living conditions have nothing to do with merit or effort, but rather on luck (which parents you have) and people know this. This type of explanation was also used in a Brazilian reception analysis in order to explain why the working class informants did not mention the class issue when talking about a telenovela (Leal and Oliven 1988).

So, do my informants perceive class but are too embarrassed to talk about it, or is it more a question of automatic reception, perhaps because there is little that deviates from our expectations? The two kinds of explanations are not necessarily excluding each other. But the informants *do* talk about class, albeit mostly after probing and often with some hesitation. For some of them class seemed as an embarrassing or at least very unusual thing to discuss. Other informants could talk quite naturally about these questions, but this did not mean that they necessarily thought about it while watching. And even if the reception often is automatic it can be influential. For several of the informants Sayer's point about the embarrassment of class is probably fitting, but as stated earlier some informants who seemed quite clear about both their own and others class location also easily fall into the automatic and non-attentive way of receiving class on television.

To sum up, the process of naturalisation (Thompson 1990) describes quite well what is going on while watching television in relation to social class. The social reality depicted on television is to a large extent taken for granted and not reflected on. But the picture is not homogeneous – sometimes the class or social position is paid attention to and oppositional reflections are sometimes made. However, one could argue that the naturalisation of class is the case for much of everyday life too. That is also what most of the middle-class informants in this study say. Their self-image is that they don't think about class neither in everyday life nor when watching television. As a matter of fact they sometimes do it when watching TV. And some of the working class informants say they think about their own social class quite often in everyday life but they mostly seem to watch television without activating the class schema. So in the end there is little difference between middle and working class informants regarding the extent to which they notice the social position of television characters.

Turning back to the question of audience activity one could say that the informants oscillate between passive and active modes of viewing. They are mostly 'passive' in relation to the implicit class structure of the programmes, but they can at the same time be 'active' in the sense of having critical views about

specific events, characters or programme production aspects.

One important question is, since the data is quite old, if these results would occur today also? We have no proof of this but different presentations to both researchers and lay audiences have not evoked any divergent picture of these processes.

In the end I would agree with some of the new class theorists that our relation to social class is often ambiguous. On the one hand everybody is aware that there are social inequalities in society and that different people live under different conditions. Most people can also classify themselves in class terms if asked to do so. At the same time we are so used to it, it is so natural that we forget it or succeed not to think about it both when we watch TV and other times. The reception findings discussed here does not per se imply that class is not important as an explanatory factor in society, but it seems that most of us are quite skilled at avoiding thinking about class both in everyday life in general and when watching television, even if there are some variations in this respect.

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