

# Arts and Advertising: Aesthetics of Early Commercial Television in Finland

Heidi Keinonen

University of Tampere, Finland  
E-mail: heidi.keinonen@uta.fi

**Abstract.** Finnish television was launched by a commercial company in 1956. TES-TV, the first television station, was later followed by a programming company called Tesvisio and joined by the television channel of YLE, the Finnish Broadcasting Company. The TES-TV/Tesvisio years are a unique period in television history, since they witnessed the creation of a connection between commercial television and the arts. In this article I aim to study early Finnish television aesthetics by analyzing television as art and also the relations between television and other art forms. My focus is on the representations of high and low culture and the search for a television style. TES-TV aired both popular programmes and high culture, like ballet, while on Tesvisio, these cultural extremities were gradually replaced by a middle-brow culture. The early programming included both filmed and live material, which had a contribution to the evolution of Finnish television aesthetics. The television style was further developed by Tesvisio's first professional set designer and his experimental work. Therefore I claim that in these commercial companies television was seen as an art form in its own right, not only as a mediator of art.

**Keywords:** history and aesthetics of Finnish television, advertising style in television, set design in TV.

Television broadcasting began in Finland in 1956 as radio engineers and other enthusiasts were keen to experiment with the new technology. The first television station was managed by the Foundation for Technology Promotion and funded by advertising, programme sponsors and donations. In 1960, a company called Tesvisio started to provide programming for the channel which developed into a network of three stations. Only four years later Tesvisio was sold to YLE, the Finnish Broadcasting Company. YLE had also launched television in 1958 together with another commercial company, Mainos-TV (now MTV3), which was leasing air time from the YLE channel. With the merger, the

TES-TV/Tesvisio channel became the second public service television channel in Finland and the duopoly of YLE and Mainos-TV was established.<sup>1</sup>

The presence of commercial television and two competing channels makes early Finnish television history a deviant case among other Nordic (and even European) television histories. The TES-TV/Tesvisio period (1956–1964) also provides an interesting case for the research of television aesthetics. As a small, experimental and flexible television station, TES-TV (and later Tesvisio) was able to search for the limits of a new medium, in terms of both form and content. During these years, the television pioneers created a versatile connection between commercial television and popular culture but also between commercial television and the arts. While popular culture and entertainment remain essential categories in the programming of Finnish commercial television, the connection between commercial television and high culture was irrevocably severed by the Tesvisio/YLE merger. While YLE adopted the Tesvisio network along with many of the programme titles and members of programming staff, it also established itself as the main mediator of arts and high culture. The remaining commercial television company, Mainos-TV, was to assist by providing entertaining content for the two YLE channels.

As Sarah Cardwell states, television has been studied primarily in terms of its communicative, not artistic, functions. But as an art form, television has a specific history and particular and unique forms (Cardwell 2006, 76). In this article I aim to study the early Finnish television as art but also the relations between television and other art forms. My analysis will cover the thematic, formal and stylistic qualities of the programming as a whole. Since most of the domestic programming was broadcast live, I am unable to analyse individual programmes. Instead, my empirical material includes programming data, interviews, documents and a television documentary on TES-TV and Tesvisio (*Täällä Tesvisio*, YLE 2004).

As my analysis suggests, the aesthetics of early commercial television was characterised by several parallel or contradictory features: live vs. filmed material, domestic vs. foreign programming, high vs. popular culture and lack of resources vs. professional ambition. The domestic programming was mainly live, stressing the immediacy of the new medium, whereas foreign programming, shot on film, represented quality in terms of production values. The genres of early commercial television draw both on popular culture and high culture, thus engaging the on-going discussion on cultural definitions. The aesthetic ambitions of the production personnel, for their part, would collide

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1 See Keinonen 2012 (about the beginning of Finnish television in the political context of Cold War); Salokangas 1996; Hellman 1994.

with the lack of technical and financial resources. These characteristics represented different, even competing, values thereby drawing attention on two, more theoretical points of inquiry: that of the relationship between television and other, established art forms and, secondly, the conditions behind the emergence of television as an art form. I will answer these questions by focusing on the representations of high and popular culture and the search for a television style. But first, I will outline the production practices and programming policy surrounding the first programmes.

## Production Practices and Programming Policy in TES-TV and Tesvisio

As the first television station was launched by volunteers instead of an established broadcasting institution, the production practices and programming policy had to be created from scratch. The Foundation for Technology Promotion had to apply regularly for a broadcasting licence, but the licences did not at this point determine the programming in any way.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the television pioneers were free to create the policy they wanted. The state authority continued along these lines with Tesvisio until 1963, when the new licence included instructions on Tesvisio programming. The programmes were to be diverse in content and dignified, accurate and balanced in form. Appropriate entertaining was not supposed to be forgotten, although the main aim was to educate and inform.<sup>3</sup> These definitions refer to the public service ethos, and were actually used word for word in the first contract between YLE and the state of Finland as early as in 1927 (Suomi 1951, 57, 90 ).

During the first years, the definitions of policy were not documented. Most decisions concerning programme planning were made *ad hoc* by individual employees, mainly the head of programming. According to the second manager

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2 The National Archive Service of Finland, Television alku Suomessa [The Beginning of Television in Finland Collection], documents, 340 Tekniikan edistämissäätiön aineistoa – MU Muuta, TES:n 1. toimilupa [Materials from the Foundation for Technology Promotion – the 1<sup>st</sup> licence of TES]; The National Archive Service of Finland, Television alku Suomessa [The Beginning of Television in Finland Collection], documents, 340 Tekniikan edistämissäätiön aineistoa – MU Muuta, TES:n 2. toimilupa [Materials from the Foundation for the Technology Promotion – the 2<sup>nd</sup> licence of TES].

3 The National Archive Service of Finland, Television alku Suomessa [The Beginning of Television in Finland Collection], documents, 340 Tekniikan edistämissäätiön aineistoa – MU Muuta, TES:n 4. toimilupa (jäljennös) [Materials from the Foundation for Technology Promotion – the 4<sup>th</sup> license of TES (copy)].

of TES-TV, the main strategy was to broadcast whatever was available.<sup>4</sup> Although the programming was financed by advertising revenues, the production budgets were minimal and free films and live performances were warmly welcomed. There were, however, some guidelines on programme planning. The first manager of TES-TV mentioned, when interviewed, that the programming had to be attractive, innovative and varied. Light and entertaining programmes attracted viewers and consequently, advertisers. The innovative nature of the programming referred to piloting in terms of technology and content, like school television. Additionally, the television pioneers aimed at generically diverse programming.<sup>5</sup>

As the foregoing shows, the television pioneers were professionally ambitious in creating Finnish television, although the lack of technical and financial resources imposed constraints on the programme production and programming policy. Tesvisio continued by following the programming policy created in TES-TV, only with a bigger volume. As the number of personnel and programming hours rapidly increased, the amateurism was replaced by more professional and more business-like production practices. In 1960, the company even created official programming principles. These included stipulations about providing information, education and entertainment, serving different age groups as well as Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking viewers and addressing party political questions only if all the parties represented in the Parliament of Finland were represented in the studio.<sup>6</sup>

As the broadcasting licence and Tesvisio's programming principles for programming indicate, the main guideline in programme planning was not profitability (see also Keinonen 2011, 49–57). TES-TV had aired non-commercial content, such as religious and scientific programmes and school television programmes along with more commercial genres like US tele-films.<sup>7</sup> Tesvisio adopted the unwritten programming policy from TES-TV and created programming very similar to the YLE output. One striking feature in the early programming of Finnish commercial television was the combination of the arts and entertainment, high and popular culture.

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4 Mikkelä, interview, 2007.

5 Särkkä, interview, 2007.

6 YLE, the Tesvisio archives, mappi 1, Oy Tesvisio Ab:n toimintaperiaatteet [file 1, The principles of Tesvisio] [1960].

7 The National Archive Service of Finland, Television alku Suomessa [The Beginning of Television in Finland Collection], ledger, attachment no. 2: Radiosinöörisuran Televisiokerhon ja TES-TV:n ohjelmat [Programming of the Television Club and TES-TV].

## From High and Popular Culture to the Aesthetics of *Culture Moyenne*

In Finland, for some scholars, the 1950s was a decade characterized by struggles over cultural definitions. The questions of defining high and popular culture, art and entertainment, were both aesthetic and political. The juxtaposition of “good” and “bad” art first appeared in the film culture (Koivunen 2004, 396), where discussions on quality revolved around a national phenomenon called “rillumarei.” The term refers to four or five comedy films written by Reino Helismaa as well as a certain music style connected to these films (Peltonen 1996, 7). “Rillumarei” draw on the rakish life-style of lumberjacks, popular songs, folk culture and the Finnish tradition of stand-up comedy and sketches. As such, “rillumarei” became an aesthetic f-word – it represented bad taste and low culture, everything that was commercial and vulgar. (Heikkinen 1996, 311–313.)

Finnish television was launched in the context of these highly segregating discussions on high and popular culture. In turn, discussions evolved around the development of television in other countries. The Finnish press had carefully monitored the development of British and American television cultures even before domestic broadcasting started. As the press published articles on the declining quality of programmes and the amount of violence shown on US television, they established a permanent connection between television, commercialism and popular culture (Salmi 1997, 270; Keinonen 2011, 173–174.) Although these discussions did not include Finnish television programming in the late 1950s, TES-TV was positioning itself in the fields of cultural definitions by certain politically charged programming decisions. Many of the “rillumarei” characters, like anti-heroes and happy-go-lucky tramps, were transferred from films and theatre stages to television (Heinonen 2003, 123; Pesola 1996, 119). Reino Helismaa, for example, drew on his earlier works for film, radio and revue theatre as he wrote sketches, programme manuscripts and song lyrics for television (Pennanen and Mutkala 1994, 261–262). These factors naturally confirmed the existing connections between popular culture and television.

A contrasting policy perspective was represented by programmes introducing classical music, visual arts and theatre to the television audience. One of the very first series on the TES-TV channel was *The Voice of Firestone* (1956).<sup>8</sup> The series

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8 The National Archive Service of Finland, Television alku Suomessa [The Beginning of Television in Finland Collection], ledger, attachment no. 2: Radioinsinööri-seuran Televisiokerhon ja TES-TV:n ohjelmat [Programming of the Television Club and TES-TV].

was imported by the United States Information Service and it offered classical and semi-classical concerts featuring well-known singers and musicians (The Museum of Broadcast Communications 2011). As John Caldwell states, *The Voice of Firestone* delivered high culture in reduced and user-friendly form to the homeowner. Unlike other programmes, which pushed the populace up and toward culture, *The Voice of Firestone* “dragged culture on stage for the masses” by presenting the artists as “plain folks” and directly addressing the television viewers. (Caldwell 1995, 35.) Thus, in the programming of Finnish commercial television, the series was equivalent to programmes presenting music and ballet numbers and plays performed by Finnish theatre companies, all in the television studio. Other programmes, like the lectures on visual arts, aimed at educating the audience and inducing them to appreciate high culture. These also included one of the landmark events in the early television history, a live broadcast from the Finnish National Opera. *Swan Lake* was shown to celebrate the first 100 broadcasts by TES-TV. It offered viewers a live experience of a complete ballet performance in their own living rooms.<sup>9</sup>

These efforts to bring the arts into Finnish homes through the television receiver stemmed from various specific cultural and political conditions. First, as post-war Finnish society remained volatile, cultural stimulus was seen as a means of reaffirming national stability (Hurri 1993, 67). Second, the Finnish broadcasting pioneers were driven by a remit to inform and educate (as well as entertain) the viewers. Third, as commercial television was seen as a poor relation to the public broadcasting company YLE, the TES-TV staff wanted to raise the status of commercial television and prove that they were able to avoid any American-style excess. When television was launched, the Finnish press published news on the excessive amount of advertising and the declining quality of programming in US television. This was something the Finns did not want. (Keinonen 2011, 173–174.) Thus, the first art programmes in Finnish television did not only aim to educate the viewers but also to raise the cultural status of the new medium. By showing art, early commercial television presented itself as positively disposed to the arts.

Although individual programmes did not mix markers of high and low culture, the simultaneous presence of popular and niche output in the TES-TV programming suggests that the issue of cultural hierarchies did not present a problem in terms of programming policy. In Tesvisio, however, the cultural extremities of TES-TV were soon modified as representatives of *culture*

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9 The National Archive Service of Finland, Television alku Suomessa [The Beginning of Television in Finland Collection], ledger, attachment no. 2: Radioinsinööri-seuran Televisiokerhon ja TES-TV:n ohjelmat [Programming of the Television Club and TES-TV].

*moyenne*. In Pierre Bourdieu's established theory of taste and class, taste is distinguished in terms of three zones: legitimate taste, middle-brow taste and popular taste. Middle-brow culture or *culture moyenne*, according to Bourdieu, imitates more legitimate forms of culture and, in turn, encourages the blending of legitimate and popular culture. (Bourdieu 1984, 16, 323.) In Tesvisio, most of the works of high culture were introduced in popularised forms, like short plays and other more easily digestible types of programmes. The connection between television and folk culture also loosened as the "rillumarei" phenomenon was abandoned. Thus, the programming of commercial television only gradually adjusted itself to the definitions of middle-brow culture.

## Telefilms and Live Broadcasts

As indicated above, the programming suggests that there were certain principles guiding the choice of programmes. More practical matters, like availability, also left their mark on programming and made a contribution to the development of television aesthetics. Many of the very first programmes were provided by information services (like the United States Information Service).<sup>10</sup> During the first months, the programming included Russian, Indian, French, British and US films. The USIS films usually presented US states and cities (like *Wyoming* 22 March 1956, *Arizona* 1 April 1956, *California* 15 April 1956, *New Hampshire* 22 April 1956 and *Chicago* 29 May 1956). Other films were produced to show off technological and cultural achievements (like *Atomin aakkoset* [Atomic ABC] 3 April 1956, *Atomi ja biologia* [Atom and Biology] 24 April 1956, *Atomi ja tekniikka* [Atom and Technology] 29 May 1956 and *Arkkitehtuurinäyttely* [Architectural Exhibition] 27 March 1956).<sup>11</sup> Together with the domestic feature films and documentaries they introduced film aesthetics into Finnish television.

This trend was further enhanced by the import of the "quality control telefilms". Produced by the Hollywood studios, these episodic 30-minute series capitalized on classical cinematic styles, like film-noir in *Father Knows Best*. (Caldwell 1995, 49–50.) The years 1961–1962 saw a dramatic increase in the global trade of American tele-films (Tunstall 1977, 144). This influx immediately affected the programming of commercial television in Finland: since tele-films

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<sup>10</sup> Särkkä, interview, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> The National Archive Service of Finland, Television alku Suomessa (The Beginning of Television in Finland Collection), ledger, appendix no. 2: Radioinsinööri-seuran Televisiokerhon ja TES-TV:n ohjelmat (Programming of the Television Club and TES-TV).



represented a high quality of television production (compared to domestic live productions) and could be bought at a reasonable price, they offered the newly established television companies a profitable way to fill the schedule. *Jungle Jim* was the first to be shown on TES-TV in 1959.<sup>12</sup> In the autumn season of 1961, Tesvisio showed at least eight tele-films, including family sit-coms (*Lucy and I*), crime series (*Scotland Yard* and *Naked City*), adventure films (*Robin Hood*) and westerns (*Wagon Train*).<sup>13</sup> While other tele-film genres introduced various cinematic features, westerns opened up the television image with their epic grandeur and expansive landscapes (Caldwell 1995, 51).

Feature films and tele-films were important for the early television aesthetics in two ways. First, they created a connection between commercial television and film art and second, they made film aesthetics an integral part of television flow, thus transforming television aesthetics. Domestic live transmissions, on the other hand, were far from spectacular, but they represent the original television style. The set for the first public broadcast on 24 May 1955 consisted of a pair of curtains, a few plants and cardboard walls with mere holes for windows. These offered a background for separate numbers including singing, dancing and talking. To maintain a tolerable image quality the visual style was based on simple close-ups and contrasts of light and shadow.<sup>14</sup> These stylistic choices created a sense of intimacy suitable for the small screen (Newcomb 1974, 246). Even later, the sets were very modest: usually a corner of the studio with a stage, a chair and a desk (in *Tupla tai kuitti*, the Finnish version of *The \$64,000 Question*) or a refrigerator, a table and a couple of kitchen cabinets in housekeeping programmes (like *TES-keittiö* [TES Kitchen], 1957). [Fig. 1.]

As the live programming suffered from a constant lack of financial and technical resources, it appeared homemade and clumsy. In older television countries live drama had given way to pre-recorded performances in order to establish the kind of “control and precision” that was already familiar in film (Hartley 2008, 164). However, in Finland these two modes of expression determined the style of the television programming at the same time. There was no recording technology in either TES-TV or Tesvisio, and the contrast between film and live programming remained until 1964 and the merger of Tesvisio and YLE.

Despite the lack of resources, there was a certain attempt at a truly televisual expression. This aim was clearly indicated in 1960, when TES-TV was replaced

12 The National Archive Service of Finland, Television alku Suomessa (The Beginning of Television in Finland Collection), ledger, appendix no. 2: Radioinsinööri-seuran Televisiokerhon ja TES-TV:n ohjelmat (Programming of the Television Club and TES-TV); *Radiokuuntelija* [Radio Listener] 10/1960, 11/1960.

13 *Radiokuuntelija* [Radio Listener] 40/1961, 41/1961.

14 Särkkä, interview, 2007.



by the programme company Tesvisio and a professional set designer was employed. Ensio Suominen had previously worked in film and theatre and that is where he drew from also in television. Suominen's aim was to create a light and airy television image. He replaced the black sets with white backgrounds and introduced a staircase that seemed to be floating in the air and a mirror floor which he used repeatedly in his theatrical productions.<sup>15</sup> [Fig. 2.] Thus, he quite literally opened up the picture of Tesvisio and created a new look.

Suominen's works actually enhanced the connection of television and the arts at least in two ways: first, by bringing theatrical style to television in designs he had used in the theatre and second, by contributing to the development of a genuinely televisual style. This period could even be regarded as the beginning of the aesthetics or at least aesthetic consideration in Finnish television. For the first time, a serious amount of time and effort was put on the elaboration of how the television looked. These examples indicate that as soon as the television personnel became familiar with the new technology, there was an intention to explore the aesthetic possibilities of the medium. The unique mixture of coincidence, international trends and national aspirations created in early Finnish commercial television a style that made a significant contribution to the evolution of a national television culture.

## **The Art of Commercial Television**

The first years of Finnish television witnessed the creation of a connection between commercial television and popular culture but also with commercial television and the arts. When Tesvisio was sold to YLE, the situation changed. A commercial television company, Mainos-TV, was still leasing air time from YLE and broadcasting on the public television channels.<sup>16</sup> However, the contract with YLE profiled Mainos-TV as a broadcaster of popular programming. Although Mainos-TV established a permanent theatre department for broadcasting live plays from the studio, programming policy clearly favoured American tele-films. This bias generated criticism both in YLE and in public during the late 1960s.<sup>17</sup> It even contributed to the establishment of two opposing paradigms of Finnish television: commercial television, popular culture and entertainment v public service television, high culture and information (e.g. Ruoho 2001, 223). These two paradigms have characterized the debate on Finnish television ever since.

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15 *Täällä Tesvisio*, episode 7.

16 Salokangas 1996; Hellman 1994.

17 Salokangas 1996, 157–8.

What is forgotten in these discussions is that during the TES-TV/Tesvisio period, a commercial television company was profoundly committed to airing arts programmes and educating the audience. Broadcasting both arts programmes and advertising was not an issue. Thus the early years of Finnish television give us an alternative model for combining the arts and television. As a medium, television was taken seriously – it provided a channel through which arts could reach everyone (or at least those who could afford a receiver). But the benefits were mutual. By broadcasting arts programmes, the Finnish commercial television companies were able to avoid the accusations directed at commercial television in the United States. These programmes helped TES-TV and Tesvisio in accumulating value for their programming and thus, to legitimize commercial television.

TES-TV and Tesvisio also served as a “laboratory” for the aesthetics of Finnish television. As I have described above, the promotion of television aesthetics was highly rated especially in Tesvisio. As soon as the company could afford a set designer, one was employed to create experimental props, which changed the picture in the tube. Television was seen as an art in its own right, not only as a mediator of the arts.

## Empirical Material:

Mikkela, Otto, manager in TES-TV 1957, interviewed on 11 September 2007 in Helsinki.

*Radiokuuntelija* [Radio Listener] magazine 1957–1964.

Särkkä, Arto, manager in TES-TV 1956, interviewed on 11 September 2007 in Helsinki.

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*Täällä Tesvisio* [This Is Tesvisio], television documentary, ten episodes, YLE 2004.

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## List of Figures

**Figure 1.** Modest set of a table, refrigerator and a couple of kitchen cabinets in housekeeping programmes like *TES-keittiö* [TES Kitchen], 1957. (Picture reproduced with the permission of YLE.)



**Figure 2.** Ensio Suominen's set design introduced white, airy backgrounds and a mirror floor which he used repeatedly in his theatrical productions. (Picture reproduced with the permission of YLE.)

