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**Abstract:**

Through an analysis of the audio-visual form of the weather programs on Nordic television the author indicates some of the general cultural implications. According to this interpretation the main function of the programs is not to just hand out information about the weather. It is much more about reassuring everyone of time and place, of a feeling of identity and social belonging. Thus the paper is pointing towards a more general discussion of what television as such is good for. But it is also pointing towards a discussion about our relation as modern or postmodern people to the weather - and more generally: to nature. What conditions of postmodern life are reflected by our ambivalent attitude towards the weather and the weather forecasts?

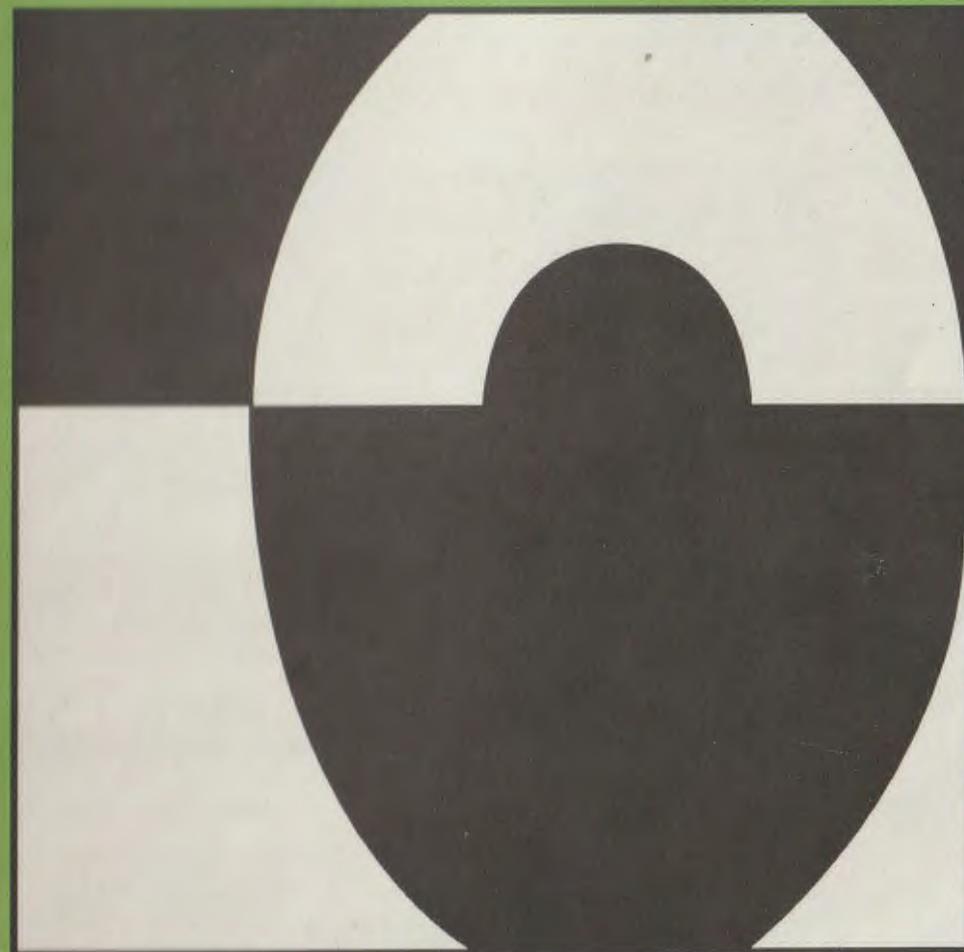
**MAN & NATURE**

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# MAN & NATURE

## WORKING PAPER 90



**Henrik Juel:**  
Smiling through the Lonesome Rain

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# SMILING THROUGH THE LONESOME RAIN

## WEATHER FORECASTS ON NORDIC TELEVISION

*Henrik Juel\**

### **Weather forecasts and cultural interpretation**

There is an old Danish saying, that everybody talks about the weather, but nobody actually does anything about it!

Today I shall not be talking very much about the weather - and I shall certainly not try to improve it. However, I am going to talk about weather forecasts on Nordic television, and that is a quite different phenomenon - and even something that we - or somebody - might be able to improve.

I have asked myself the question: Why do the Nordic weather programs look the way they do? Despite minor differences, why are they generally so much alike in structure and form? And despite all possible criticisms - and I can think of several - why is it still so popular to watch the weather reports? What are they really all about?

As the result of a rather quick analysis of the audio-visual form of the programs I shall outline some of the cultural implications. In my interpretation the main function of the programs is not to just hand out information about the weather. It is much more about reassuring us of time and place, a feeling of identity and social belonging. So this might

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be pointing towards a more general discussion of what television as such is good for. But it might also be pointing towards a discussion about our relation as modern or postmodern people to the weather - and more generally: to nature. Speaking academically: What conditions of postmodern life are reflected by our ambivalent attitude towards the weather and the weather forecasts?

I outline these grand questions right here at the start because I know, that to most of us, including myself, the weather forecasts on television seem to be a rather small or even ridiculous topic. But let us try to go beyond the jokes.

### **Our postmodern experience of the weather**

Television weather forecasts - they do have a comical aspect, somehow. The weather on television is close to being a joke - but real weather is not. Real weather is a very serious matter to most people.

This is so, even though we as postmodern people living and working in well insulated buildings and driving in cars with automatic regulation of temperature seem to be very independent of the everyday weather conditions. The weather might have a profound psychological impact, the aesthetic, symbolic or even religious potentials of the weather are important to most of us, but we are not really out there with our lives and well-being. We are not that exposed to the weather. After working hours, in our leisure time, we might want to go out to experience the weather for a few minutes. But that is more of a cultural or civilized luxury than it is a necessity. Even the farmers and fishermen depend more on market prices and obscure decisions in Brussels than on lucky weather conditions.

The weather makes itself known once in a while as a problem for traffic. But modern or postmodern people do not find themselves engaged in a constant battle with weather conditions (like maybe the

Eskimos did, in the past). Despite that, we do live and feel with the weather - it has a symbolic dimension, far beyond that of practical everyday life, and far beyond that of scientific meteorology. At this non-pragmatic and non-scientific level we sometimes allow ourselves to think of the weather as something like the mood of a metaphysical entity - like the smiles and frowns of a god. Sometimes we like to think of the weather as the mood of our all embracing powerful mother nature. This explains maybe the sublime joy some people find in extreme weather conditions: It is just great when snow and gales or flood wipe away all the little business of humans. This is not a very scientific attitude, but it is deeply rooted. And even a scientific view will admit that human life is ultimately very dependent upon weather and climate in the biosphere. Today's growing consciousness and concern for environment and nature reinforces the old and complex interest in the weather. Several ambiguities are playing their game with us civilized humans whenever we experience or are just reminded of the weather. That is a long story.

But allow me to point out, as an important premise for the discussion of television weather forecasts, that as practical postmodern people we do not in our everyday life depend very much on exactly how the weather turns out. And so we do not have much practical need for information about the weather. But we do have other needs, more psychological needs, existential needs, social or even metaphysical needs. Let us not too quickly rule out any human needs here!

We might take our precautions and carry an umbrella as we go out, this is to manage the situation, but it is not the same as being in command of the weather. The weather is - in all practical perspectives - beyond human control. We may have some influence - mostly bad influence - on the climate. Too much carbon dioxide and so on. Trying to prevent frost or provoke rain in a limited area by means of artificial chemical devices does not imply that we can manage the overall

conditions. So the weather is still part of the preconditions - it is the air that we breathe. And this makes it a serious, very human issue. We recognize this in the fact that talking about the weather when we meet with others, especially when they are strangers, is a very polite and gentle way of reassuring each other that we are all humans, and sensitive and sensible persons. Despite all differences we are all subject to the weather - the weather is a very democratic institution.

### The sublime and the trivial

If a person somehow - even just slightly - pretends to have control of the weather, we immediately recognize this as hybris, insanity, blasphemy and poor taste. We all welcome a good joke about the weather, but hinting at the possibility that maybe the person presenting the weather on television is the one responsible for it, is a borderline joke. If the attitude of the weather presenter is not carefully balanced he or she will inevitably be the butt of that joke. And the more the weather presenter tries to build up for herself or himself a platform of serious science, computer data, technology, complex scientific terminology and the like - the deeper she or he is likely to fall. Science and the academic attitude are always also about power and control: Science aims at understanding and explaining phenomena, true, but why? Ultimately in order to control or dominate - nature as well as humans. In our age we all have a lurking feeling that this control of nature, this struggle for power, might have dark hidden sides to it. Sometimes it is a relief and very amusing to believe that nature strikes back. Sometimes it is funny and satisfying when the people of science, power and position - and impressive people of the media - turn out to be just little stumbling or stuttering men and women.

Thus the weather forecast on television has every chance to be regarded as a joke. And indeed sometimes it is funny. But most of the

time it is just trivial and in poor taste. Speaking philosophically - and I here draw heavily on the analysis of the sublime by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant - the weather shows on television tend towards being the opposite of the sublime, i. e. the inversion of the sublime experience: Great human powers and human principles and intentions revealed as weak and poor compared to the overwhelming voice of nature.

*Norwegian TV2:  
Presenting the weather  
is quite a job. And even the  
geographical shape of the  
country is sometimes a problem  
on the screen.*



Trying to explain the jokes is not funny and besides too vast a job, but I hope to have hinted at some of the reasons why weather on TV calls for a smile. I sometimes feel I have to excuse my interest in this part of television. If I were only studying the news, or the soap-operas, or the worst, the most perverted types of sex and violence on TV, I would be sure to be paid some respect. Not so with the weather...

### Analysis - interpreting form as content

My method of analysis is not a straight forward reading of empirical data about TV-reception. There is no such thing. The conceptual framework, the whole scientific and ideological and ethical horizon of the investigation must - on the one hand - be worked through before you can make any

simple quantitative or qualitative research into how the audience receives anything. And - on the other hand - you have to make some empirical studies in order to ask yourself the right questions about the aim and method of further investigation. What I build on here is not one method of research, not one group of interviews, not one type of psychological experiment, not one volume of sociological tables, and not just my own free imagination either. What I want to do is to present an interpretation which, if it succeeds, makes it possible to see more interesting features in the weather forecast than before. My humble background is both theoretical and practical research: philosophy, communication studies and hands-on experience with planning, recording, editing and testing (as formative research on an actual audience) of audio-visual material.

When it comes to analyzing a specific program or part of a television program there is a number of tricks that might help the analysis along. One trick is to run the tape quickly backwards in the search mode. In that way you actually hear and see most of what is important: You can see what the program contains, the elements of the program, how it is structured, how the transitions are made - and you are not so likely to be carried away by the charm or excitement of the story. (A media friend of mine claims that he only wants to watch bad movies - because only then can he enjoy undisturbed the structure and formal elements)

Running through the weather programs in this way you will discover that there are two main types: without or with a visible presenter. You either get some maps with graphics and a voice off screen, or you get some maps with graphics and a person up in front blocking the view. The programs with the visible presenter can again be divided into two groups according to this important criterion: Is the presenter sitting down or standing up?

But to be more systematic: I interpret form as content. What I try to do - and this can even be spelled out in a number of steps and thus may be called a method of analysis - is that I go through all the formal traits of a program interpreting the form as content. If a program uses a special type of "wipe", this is a formal trait that will in the end turn out as significant: It is part of the content or meaning. If there is a "voice over", this indicates in itself something else than an "on screen presenter" - and so on. And so I go through the whole list from the grand question of context and genre, narrative structure, to the tiniest types of audio-visual effects. Making a television program you are choosing - skillfully or not, willfully or not - specific ways of photographing, structuring, cutting, presenting. The many technical and narrative possibilities are filtered in the production process leaving specific ways of doing things - and thus a more or less coherently stylized program. The formal traits, the style and organization, meet the audience and from this grows the content, the core and communication of the program, be it an experience or even a message - or a nice way to fall asleep.

### **Context and genre**

Analyzing weather forecasts is only interesting in order to gain some new understanding. We all know what they look like. We are usually not in doubt for very long about a program: Is this the weather or is it a political debate or is it a commercial? We know, and indeed our instinct for the genre is amazingly quick. Children know right away what's on. And the weather is usually just some map with little clouds and suns. Even with computer animation and satellite films its not very amusing to children. The sound is dull, no action there at all, no music, no nothing except some dreary adult voice. Sometimes a person is standing in front of the map moving awkwardly about, pointing and talking. On the NRK he is also threatening with a stick. Children sense - perhaps better

than adults - the distance, the awkwardness of this person's movements and pointing. I shall return to this awkwardness.

But first I have to say that nowadays some channels do put little stories in the weather forecasts, stories that take place outside the studio, and maybe show something typical of the season, some charming children playing in the snow, or on the beach, or an interview with a farmer complaining about the lack of rain or sun. In fact the tendency of today's television seem to be separate weather programs. The advantage of this - not on the part of the audience but seen from the point of view of the producer - is the opportunity of putting in some additional commercials, trailers, teasers, and sponsors. Ultimately, and this is the actual situation in America, a channel might become a 24 hour weather channel.

In the separate weather programs the actual forecast is more or less liberated from its traditional role as a joker at the end of the news. Such weather programs can of course integrate all sorts of stories about nature and people, and the relation to meteorological science does not have to be evident everywhere. But on the other hand it is worth noting that not just anything goes in connection with the weather: only certain human interest stories and nature stories or something else that's taking place outside. You cannot here deal with sports or political events right on - not unless it is clearly the weather that's in focus.

But historically it all seems to start with the news. It probably started with the newspaper news. On the back of the newspaper, or at some other not too prestigious place, they would have the weather, and they still do. On the radio, the weather forecast typically comes at the end of the news, and that is where we usually find the television weather too on the Nordic channels and on most channels all over the world. The news reports on Nordic television are very much alike in their choice of

news, in structure and hierarchy and ways of presenting. It is not just their sources that are the same, it is also the style and structure.

*Danish DR-TV 1:  
Stylistic innovations  
in 1996 include  
new animated graphics.*



The weather belongs in the low end of the news, down where you have little cultural events, human interest stories or stories about unusually big cucumbers in some nobody's garden. When the news reader comes to the weather you can regularly see this serious person light up in a smile or even a silly joke. Even if the weather is just being read by the very same news reader while showing some maps and graphics. The news reader finds it silly business and is trying to keep a distance here. Where the weather is presented by a meteorologist in the studio the very act of giving the word to the scientist is usually done by making some disrespectful or cheap remarks. Sometimes the meteorologist fights back and we have a delightful pingpong of remarks that would suit any talk show. I have been told that meteorologists everywhere in the world are tired of this treatment. And indeed no other expert called upon to make a statement on the news program about politics or sports or economy is ridiculed in this way. And this is so even though most of the other experts on the news in general are much less

grounded in science, and are probably airing their personal or political views much more than the meteorologists are.

### **Time to relax**

Somehow the newscaster - and a good deal of the audience - feel relieved when they can turn from the much too serious news to the not at all serious business of talking about the weather. (And today the news readers really do turn a lot from one issue to another. They turn from one camera to the other every so often. And they make mistakes all the time - I think that's maybe on purpose to make us believe, that it's not a recorded but a live program!) The weather has the function of reassuring us, that despite all the news, mostly bad news, everything else will continue: The weather should remind us that we are all human beings, that we will all be exposed to the same weather, and that we are all at the moment situated in the same geographical region and that the flow of time and days to come is the same for all of us. It is very democratic the weather. Does not distinguish between rich and poor. And it is inevitable, impossible for us to change. Looking at the news from the world you might get the feeling, that you really ought to do something, but that again seems very troublesome - the weatherforecast tells you not to overestimate yourself by worrying too much.

So we rejoice in the weather, we feel relieved, even happy, yes, we are even happy to complain about the forecast. Why is this so? Well, when I think back I have never ever seen a news program on television that really convinced me that I lived on a planet of wise and good hearted people, all living in peace, all sharing the fruits of their joint labour, all equal in opportunities, taking care of the weak, taking care of the environment, no one starving, all happy. No, the news always reminds us that there are worse things going on out there than the weather. It might be gray tomorrow, it might even rain, but then again it's all right.

Luckily the weather is not something that politicians or generals or union leaders or bureaucrats control - and just think what a mess it would be if they did.

### **The personal presenter**

So, it is a great relief to get to the weather. And after great tension - especially after tensions of the sort that you are not quite willing to admit - you make silly jokes and this is what meets the weather presenter. Bad position to start from. And, speaking of position, no other scientific expert invited in to comment on anything during the news is left standing up in the studio like a stand-up comedian. The weatherforecast is shown with a very peculiar choice of camera-angle and composition. You see most of the presenter standing right there on the floor. All other experts can hide their more or less presentable bodies behind a table, or at least they get to sit down. Even the sports presenters get to sit down casually or in sporty ways on the edge of the table. Not so with the poor meteorologist.

I said before, that the meteorologist or weather presenter is often characterized by very awkward movements. There are at least four very different reasons for this:

1) Perhaps they have been chosen because they were good meteorologists or persons somehow related to somebody - rather than being chosen because they were good performers with a coherent body language.

2) The widespread use of the chroma-key technique has the effect that the presenter cannot see what's on the screen to which he or she is pointing. So they are trying to remember some rehearsed movements, looking sideways to the monitor and pointing at nothing.

The next two reasons belong on the side of the audience:

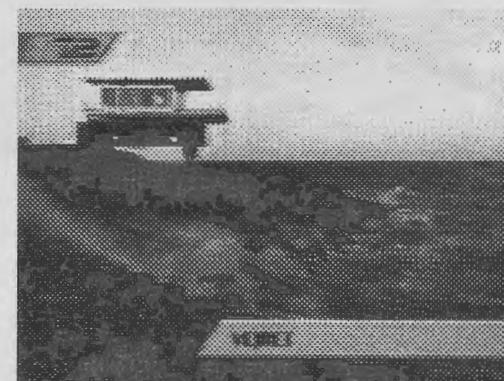
3) We are not very used to seeing persons standing up full figure in front of us, not in the news and not in real life. It is interesting, almost like peeping through a keyhole to see the bodies of these men and women. It has some erotic overtones. This goes for both male and female presenters and is admitted by both men and women in the audience. To show most of your body - even though very properly dressed - on TV is to be very sexy, and almost to be public property. For any closer analysis this reveals quite a lot about the hunger for social and sexual contact in our culture. To think that our TV-habits are ruled by the need for information or cultural enlightenment is to be out of touch with this world. In the movie "To Die For" the weather girl says that in America you are nobody until you are on TV. I might add, that to be in the media is the postmodern way of having a body. (Finnish television recently had a case with a homosexual meteorologist - when he came out as gay some viewers complained that now they could not trust the weather forecast any more. This may just be a false or inaccurate rumour, but I welcome it as an indication of how many mixed emotions are at stake here.)

4) The fourth reason is that readiness on the side of the audience to laugh, or at least to be not too serious about the weather presenter, which I have already tried to explain. We feel relieved when the serious news is over and we tend to laugh at the expert "controlling" the weather, and actually we hope secretly something will go wrong, that he or she will stumble and fall, that the animated graphics on the screen will go crazy ...

### Reassurance of place and time

At this point I hope you are not surprised to hear me say that the weather programs are not very much about the weather. They are about many other things, one of them is geography. Or more properly, the maps and

the careful descriptions of the weather of the different regions of the country and of Europe all have the effect of reassuring us, that we belong to this very part of the earth and to this very part of the nation. It is fun to see what kinds of weather friends, family and foes are going to get in some other part of the country. But most important is, that you can see on the map the region where you yourself are living. If the presenter stands blocking the view too much one day, or if heavy clouds appearing on the satellite film with today's weather cover too much of a certain region so that people from that area can't get a good view of their region that evening the TV-channel can count on many angry complaints. The different shapes and sizes of the Nordic countries give different problems of design, but I'm sure this local enthusiasm is known everywhere. The weather program has to reassure us that we live where we live, and that the nation is still there.



*Danish TV2:  
The weather report live  
from the middle of Denmark.*

Another thing that the program should assure us of is the continuation and orderly motion of time. The chronology of the program is very important. Usually, and this is the most conservative type, we hear how the overall weather situation has evolved since the day before, or at least how the overall situation is today, as a point of departure. This is

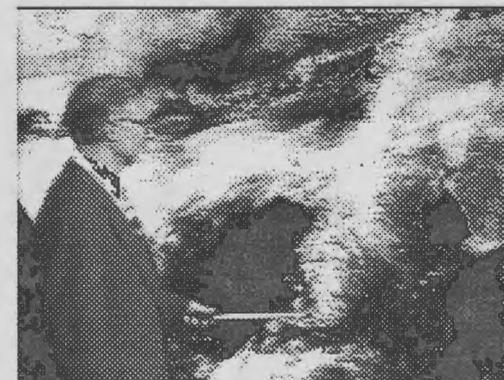
followed by forecasts of for tonight and tomorrow, and concludes with the overview of the next five days. Often the weather for tomorrow is recapitulated - as this seems to be the most important plot. This is a very comforting traditional way of telling a story. It is just like the realist novel, telling us that things happen for good reasons and in due time, and it can all be explained and should all be accepted in this order. So the weather forecast is really telling us something basic about time and place and causal connections. On the one hand very comforting, on the other hand this is also where the daemon lurks in us all: We would like to see this all too realistic worldview fall apart, we would like the fantasy fairy tale to come true once in a while. And with the weather we are sometimes lucky: and how we all rejoice in the mistakes of the scientists.

The weather forecasts on TV are not primarily a matter of information. (Those wanting real information, like sailors, turn elsewhere, to other media like the phone or the radio. And the actual viewers are looking for something else than just the weather) The weather programs are about reassuring us of our identity as situated in time and place within nature. And reassuring us that we are all humans together, children of mother nature. And that we are not completely alone, there is someone on TV talking to us - live.

#### **Awards to outstanding Nordic TV weather forecasts**

The very form of the weather programs often turns the attention away from the weather and to the personal presenter. So what the viewers get is not meteorology, but a screen-person. But who can say that it isn't good television to make a program about the person presenting that program? It seems to be the ultimate concept of television. Let us not be old-fashioned and try to claim that people really need information and some entertainment, and that we know what it should be, and what

is good for everybody. Let us be more humble and observe what's going on and try to interpret it. The weather programs are very, very popular. And so the television weather can most probably satisfy many needs, maybe some we haven't yet even thought of as producers or researchers. For a closer inspection it should be possible to discover a wide range of very different social services performed by the Nordic channels here. And I think it would be proper to hand out some awards or film prizes for the most outstanding weather forecasts. If I were to be on such an award committee I would like to give the following prizes.



*Norwegian NRK:  
The schoolmaster  
with his legendary pointer.*

A prize to the NRK for their very fine preservation of the classical schoolmaster type standing there as a talking authority, but obviously also as a very shy person, in front of the chalkboard, pointing with his pointer. I would have said this schoolmaster type only existed in the doubtful memory of older people, but the NRK has preserved this fine specimen from antiquity. This is the picture, the idea of science, authority and very dry reliability. And he almost looks alive.

A prize to Finnish TV2 for promoting the image of a competent female scientist. On their weather program the meteorologist is sometimes a woman - this is not so unusual - but she is also the one

controlling the graphics, pushing a button whenever she wants the map to change. Usually that function is left to some technician outside the picture.

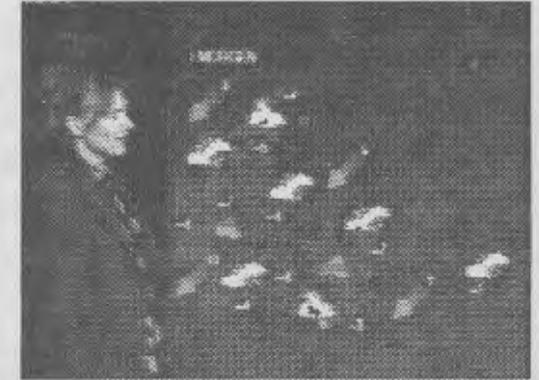
Danish TV 1 gets a prize for the long lasting effort to liberate the clothing style of respectable men. The very popular meteorologist Volborg is famous for his colorful and fantastic sweaters, probably designed by his wife (that's something we speculate about in Denmark). He is a short somewhat round fellow, but does have his own very refreshing way of moving and dressing. He may block a clear view of the maps behind him, but he does have colorful sweaters.



*Danish TV2:  
Up in front a young woman  
in a traditional, natural fur  
coat - and in the background  
the celebrated profile of modern  
technology: the new bridge.*

The prize for the program that has moved the most away from dealing with the weather goes to Danish TV2, originally inspired by the Norwegian TV2. Here nice young people not educated in meteorology, point to a map they cannot see trying hard to remember their little weather story kept in a language consisting of short sentences and poor grammar. They are extremely popular - probably because most viewers feel more comfortable with these amateurs doing their best and smiling hard, than with professional scientists. Especially old people and

people of little education stick to this channel (the program comes right after the "Weel of Fortune").



*Danish TV2:  
The camera tries hard to  
keep giving us a good view  
of the new bridge right  
behind the presenter -  
but at the end of 1996  
most of the construction  
lights were turned off.*

This Danish TV2 program is broadcast from the little island Sprogø, where a tunnel and a bridge are currently being built to connect Zealand and Funen -Storebæltsforbindelsen. It is a huge building site, and from an ecological point of view it is a very questionable project. At the start the political decision to go along with this project lacked political support. But the workers and engineers are regularly the stars of the weather stories, and the building site is seen in the background most of the time. The other little weather stories on other days are of the usual type shot maybe at the open air museum and talking nature and the good old days. So the program mixes nostalgia with technological progress, the innocence of the fresh young presenters with the hidden powers of prestigious building projects. Despite the fact that they often send this weather program directly from the outdoor-situation it is not really the weather that's up in front - but the coolness of the bridge and the warmth of the young presenters. They are promoting images of more traffic and ruthless technological growth, but they do it believing

they have nature and the happy life of the good old times on their side. Thus the program is loaded with ambiguity and contradictions - and it is very popular. The program is bridging some postmodern dilemmas.

### **The question of quality**

Quality in television is a much debated issue: Is it the same as high ratings, is it what promotes the image of the channel, is it what the cultural connoisseurs and critics like? Or is quality just what I like?

Quality is not the same as quantity. No matter how many viewers watch a program, no matter how high a share or rating, this does not make it a quality program. Not unless you decide that what you will understand by quality is the same as a high number of viewers.

If we compare for a moment with a supermarket, then I think we can agree that the best quality of meat is not always the best selling type. Or think of cars: Is a handmade sports car poor quality just because it is bought by few people? Quality cannot be determined or even discussed at such a broad level as quality as such. We have to specify: quality in what respect, for whom, and so on.

Better quality in weather forecasts is not just about more precise or elaborate predictions. Because that may not at all be important to very many viewers. And it may not be important to the sponsors or the production company. They may want some mistakes or even scandals on the program once in a while.

### **The future of the weather on TV**

My own suggestions are very humble. But I do think that a lot more imagination and experiments would be in place. The weather is a wonderful subject with great attention as a challenging starting point and many mixed emotions are at stake in the audience. And so it should be possible to make quite different programs with another style and

structure. I don't think the types we see right now are anywhere close to having explored the many possibilities.

One show to come could be the dressing and undressing of well known media persons in front of the camera - of course in clothes appropriate to the coming weather...

If a weather program was to come closer to the weather I think it might be necessary to do away with the personal presenter. Whenever there is a person in the picture he or she is in more than one sense filling out the picture and blocking the view. But I don't think we should do away with the presenter in order to be left with just the usual maps and graphics. Something closer to the weather should be tried.

And I do believe that much more attention should be paid to the sound of the programs. The actual sound of wind and rain and thunder, the way footsteps sound, or birds singing on a cold misty morning, all that could be used in beautiful and even in informative ways. Music could do wonders here too.

But this is idle speculation. Making TV to satisfy the director of the channel, the boss at the production company, the meteorologist proud of her science, and the majority of viewers is one thing, it is probably a very hard and a very impersonal job - but our personal feeling for the weather is something else - it is a very personal thing too, the weather.