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Soap Opera

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It is no surprise that television genres have become central to popular discussion about television and to academic research nor that soap opera should feature largely in such debates. Defining genres, marking out the boundaries and then crossing them with glee is a practice engaged with by producers and viewers of television alike while genre definition, in a relatively new discipline like television studies, is a crucial way of mapping the field, of identifying precisely what it is that is there to be studied. The study of soap opera has been particularly important in the discussion of genres and debates about television as a whole. Firstly, defining soap opera was one way of separating the characteristics of television drama from drama in theatre or cinema and of assessing distinctions within television drama itself by setting soap opera against other forms such as the series or serial. More recently, the fictional elements in cross-generic programmes have been described by comparisons with soaps in the development of docusoaps, for instance, and of the various formats of reality TV. Secondly, how soap opera has been studied and defined has affected the development of television studies itself and continues to shape the way we look at certain kinds of issues. Work on soap opera has, as we shall explore, allowed an entrée for feminist work on television; it has also provided the basis for cross-cultural explorations of considerable richness. Finally, in debates about the mass media, soap opera continues to brand television as a whole as a mass medium

which produces particular kinds of products. That the term 'soap opera' is often used as a metaphor for rather tacky activity in other spheres - politics, sport, business - tells us something about how the pleasures and possibilities of popular television are defined.

Essays like this tend to function as summaries of the body of work which has led to this point. The emphasis is on a smooth account of the origins of the genre and the various by-ways taken which at some point merge together to give an accepted definition and allow the topic to be sorted out and slotted into the television studies curriculum. With media studies now a globally-established area of study, the proliferation of readers and text books encourages these readily transmittable versions of work which was often originally more tentative and certainly more provocative than now seems to be the case. I will explore this issue further in the first section of this essay but here I want to acknowledge that accounts such as this can only be partial. Work on television crosses disciplines and the programmes under discussion here are made worldwide so it is impossible to provide an all-embracing account. I should also acknowledge that I am writing as what might be called an 'observant participant', reversing the terms of the anthropological 'participant observer'. This essay, although it is not autobiographical, reflects my particular familiarities with textual and feminist work and with British programming. But it also draws on a personal history of working on soap opera during the time when it was being established as worthy of study. Charlotte Brunsdon, one of the most influential writers on soap, has produced a body of work marked by a complex account of the way in which issues of

feminism, femininity and identity are the subject not only of soap opera but layered into writing about it. This essay will not replicate that but will, I hope, share some of Brunsdon's sensitiveness to the position from which theory is/can be spoken.

The first section of this essay looks at the beginnings not so much of soap opera but of its study within a television studies (rather than a mass communications) tradition. I have not tried to replicate the historical accounts available elsewhere but draw attention to how the object of study and the historical context have been constructed in particular ways. The remaining three sections are organised around three questions: to what extent can soap opera as a genre be defined by its narrative structure; to what extent can soap opera be described as women's fiction; and what kind of intervention can soaps make in the public sphere? Discussing answers to these questions will allow me to reflect on how the field has been explored and draw attention to some newer work which indicates further possibilities.

BEGINNINGS AND DEFINITIONS

We can find a recent account of the kind referred to above in the British Film Institute's *The Television Genre Book* (Creeber, 2001). 'Studying Soap Opera', an exemplary summary essay by Anna McCarthy, describes the development of soap opera as a form and is followed by her second essay, 'Realism and Soap Opera', which describes some of the key academic texts in the study of the genre. This is a smooth, clear account which starts with a point

of origin in 1930s radio and concludes with a recognition that contemporary soap opera cannot be studied within closed generic boundaries. I do not want to dispute this as a legitimate historical account but I do want to suggest that it has consequences. Undoubtedly, it privileges a particular national version of soap opera, a fact indicated by the way in which the statement that 'the format emerged from the radio sponsorship by detergent companies in 1930's radio' apparently requires no indication that it is US radio and the development of US soaps which is being referred to. British programmes and academic work on them can be fitted into the schema developed from this originating point, partly because British soaps were developed in deliberate counterpoint to the US programmes and John Tulloch's subsequent account of 'Soap operas and their Audiences' is similarly based on Anglophone work. It is not surprising therefore that it is difficult to incorporate work whose development is different and significant that Thomas Tufte's section on 'The Telenovela' comes last and does not relate directly to material in the earlier sections. Unwittingly, a hierarchical relationship is implied in which the US versions retain the dominance ascribed at their point of origin.

Equally contentious is identification of a starting point for academic work on soap opera in television studies. Here I want to refer not origin but to a proclaimed break. In *Speaking of Soap Opera* in 1985, Robert Allen marked a break with what he calls the empiricist work on soap opera being done in mass communications research. Allen traces out this work from classic mass media work in social sciences beginning in the late 1930s to the content analysis

prevalent at the time he was writing. Such work is condemned for its narrow focus which ruled out, for instance, the aesthetic experience of the audience and for its emphasis on counting standardised responses to limited questions rather than examining the complexity of soap opera's production, textual organisation and relationship with its mainly female audience. Although Allen looks at the institutional history of the daytime soaps and production practices of The Guiding Light in particular, it was chapter 4 on 'A Reader-Orientated Poetics' which was most influential, the title indicating that he was using an approach developed from semiotics and reader-response theory which emphasised the range of responses made possible by a complex and extended text. The nature of the break Allen was making can be seen by the way it was reviewed by sociologist Muriel Cantor, herself a soap opera specialist. She identifies Allen as 'part of a new teaching subdiscipline called television criticism' (386), criticises chapter 4 as 'obscure' (387) and suggests that he would have done better to build on earlier work rather than dismissing it. Allen, however, prevailed as the new discipline of television studies developed and it is only recently that connections between earlier work and that associated with Allen's cultural and textual approach have been made. Brunsdon finds in the 1940s work on soap opera audiences by Arnheim and Herzog 'tropes, themes concerns and characters that recognizably return in [later] feminist work ' (2000, 51) while Tamar Liebes (whose own work has made a major contribution to the field) has suggested that Hella Herzog's work might be connected in 'a matrilineal line' (2003, 44) with that

of Janice Radway and Ien Ang, scholars much more strongly associated with the cultural studies traditions Allen was moving towards.

Whatever the differences between US scholars, however, they were at least referring to the same thing - an unending, daytime, fictional programme shown five times a week. Stempel Mumford emphasised the importance of "dailiness" though she recognised the difficulties this might cause in systems in which soaps were shown in prime time perhaps two or three times a week. An example of a more confused approach to the object of study can be found in British work of the 70s and 80s when there was much less certainty about whether the rather foreign term 'soap opera' could be usefully applied. My article on Coronation Street in 1981 referred to the 'continuous serial' partly in deference to the refusal of the production company to call its programme a soap and partly in acknowledgment that the analysis was based on textual work of definition rather than production work on origins. The term is used in some, but not all, of the other essays, and perhaps the term is most clearly used by Terry Lovell when she discusses the pleasures Coronation Street might offer women viewers. By the early 1990s, the term had become more widely used in British television production and in the press while feminist work by Ang, Modleski and others had made it central in academic debates. The title of my Women and Soap Opera therefore named the genre and made the US association with a female audience. But the definition I offered in the introduction struggled to maintain the broader approach necessary for the study of British television - soaps here are defined 'not purely by daytime scheduling or even by a clear

appeal to a female audience but by the presence of stories which engage an audience in such a way that they become the subject for public interest and interrogation' (4).

By comparison, the telenovelas maintained a different name and the possibility of a different identity. Writers on them trace a distinctive form with its own version of antecedents in newspapers and radio, a particular relationship with melodrama and links to the storytelling, songs and verses of oral culture. Despite this, the pressures of genre connection mean that telenovelas are regularly subsumed under the term soap opera as in Allen's 1995 collection To Be Continued, which is subtitled 'soap operas around the world', making the US term the binding factor. That tradition continues in this essay but as more indigenous examples are explored, the originating point in US radio seems to become less significant, blocking off more than it reveals. Other sources are being explored in literary serials, written and film melodrama, realist novels with their emphasis on everyday detail, folktales and histories, religious sagas and ancient legends. In this essay, I have situated US soaps alongside rather than above all the others. Serial dramas of all kinds come out of a tradition of human story telling which is highly valuable to modern broadcasting systems since it draws regular audiences to repeated and repeatable scenarios. As we shall see, soaps speak both to television's capacity for intimacy and its role as public educator.

NARRATIVE

The double emphasis on the formal qualities of narrative and their usefulness to audience-seeking television companies was noted by Raymond Williams in a 1969 television review when he observed how narrative was used to organise viewers' relationship with a new medium; a series, he remarked, 'is a sort of late version of character training: encouraging regular habits in the viewers; directing them into the right channels at certain decisive moments in their evening lives' (81). Much early work in television studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s looked at how narrative worked on television, mapping out the key features which distinguished a series from a serial, a mini-series from a classic serial, a situation comedy from a soap.

Soaps were of central interest in this debate because they seemed to be the clearest example of television's difference from other narrative-dominated media. For critics coming from literature and cinema, the defining feature of soap opera was the way in which its narratives operated differently from two common, though often implicit poles of comparison being used - the American feature film and the bourgeois realist novel. It needs to be remembered that work on soaps developed in a situation in which theoretical debate was much concerned with the interaction between formal and ideological properties of particular forms. Endings were strongly associated with the ability of dominant ideology to close down and overdetermine progressive or radical possibilities which might have been raised in the ongoing narrative. Endings resolved the problems, giving the reader an illusory sense of control and power. The never-ending nature of soaps and their 'sense of an unwritten future' (Geraghty, 1981, 12) was a key feature,

setting up a different relationship for the audience and apparently refusing the ideological closure of other texts. For Allen it meant that the soap opera text, as it developed over the years, is 'ungraspable as a whole at any one moment' (1985, 76) and can never be understood from the position of closure when the meaning of action is clear and ambiguities and contradictions have been ironed out. While 'our desire for narrative closure' was seen as fundamental to the fictions of Hollywood cinema', soap opera with its lack of closure 'has openness, multiplicity and plurality as its aims' (Flitterman-Lewis, 217).

For a period, then, when theoretical work was being developed through US and British examples, the lack of an ending (even when a programme ceased) was the defining quality of a soap. The association of unending seriality with a more open text has been challenged in recent work. Jostein Gripsrud, for instance, argues that open endings cannot be equated with ideological openness while Stempel Mumford suggests that US daytime audiences expect stories to be resolved so that the narrative can move on and that these closures strongly reassert capitalist patriarchy. More importantly, the emphasis on endlessness proved too rigid to take on other forms of serials which needed to be incorporated into the soap opera debate. Telenovelas, for instance, work towards closure in a manner which is often the subject of extensive controversy and popular debate. Allen recognised this in To Be Continued which emphasised the worldwide attraction of the serial form. In his introduction, the distinctive emphasis on endlessness is less prominent though he does preserve a distinction between open and closed serials and still associates 'the absence of a final moment of

narrative closure' in the former with the indefinite postponement of 'final ideological or moral closure' (21). As a further refinement, we might note that telenovelas too have their open and closed versions; with closed versions, the ending is already decided when the programme starts screening while open versions have not been completed at this point and their endings are therefore more subject to audience reactions and preferences (O'Donnell, 5)

As work beyond anglophone television narratives continues, the generic definitions based on narrative have grown looser. Popular narratives considered under the term soap opera, but which are not defined by the lack of an ending, include different forms of Latin American telenovelas; European versions of the form produced in Italy and Spain, for example; serialisations of Hindi sacred texts; the *shinei ju* or 'indoor drama' from China and the *hsiang-tu-chu* or rural soaps of Taiwanese television. A primetime slot is now the norm for many viewers worldwide. Soap opera narrative work now places less emphasis on the lack of an ending and instead defines the form by its extended, complex and interweaving stories; a wide range of characters, allowing for different kinds of identification; the delineation of an identifiable community, paying attention to domestic and familial relationships; and an emphasis, often expressed melodramatically, on the working through of good and evil forces within a family or community. In some appropriations of the term, it is clear that the dominance even of an extensive and interrupted narrative as a defining feature is becoming weak. One critic discussing soap opera in China describes *Kewang* and *Beijingren sai Niuyue* as marking 'the maturity of "soap opera" as a full-blown

Chinese genre' (Lu, 26) though they had only 50 and 21 episodes respectively. It is worth bearing in mind therefore when reading the literature that programmes are treated as soap operas in some critical contexts which would not be in others and that US writers are more likely to retain the original daytime, endless model.

A number of points emerge from this shift. Firstly, it may be that the 'pure' soap opera like *The Guiding Light* and *Coronation Street* is no longer the most characteristic form of soap. If so, the implications of that need further discussion and in particular attention needs to be paid to the formal narrative processes which mark forms which are not united by their lack of closure. Yean Tsai goes back to Propp to analyze Taiwanese soap operas but other models are needed to dig below the familiar assertion that soap are characterised by interweaving stories. Nelson's proposal that television fiction is dominated by 'flexi-narratives' might be worth exploring here or the 'Scene Function Model' proposed by US researchers as an analytic tool for television narrative (Porter et al). The implication here would be that, at the level of the narrative unit, soaps operate in the same way as other forms of television fiction and that it is misleading to see the soap opera genre as distinctive. Alternatively, it might be that there is merit in clearly delineating differences between narrative formats within the soap opera genre and being more careful about applying soap opera as a blanket category to different forms. A final possibility is that soap operas are distinctive but that their defining features lie elsewhere which takes us on to our second question.

'SHOULD WE STILL CLASSIFY SOAP OPERAS AS "WOMEN'S PROGRAMMES?'

It could be argued that the notion that soap opera is fiction for women is largely a product of a particular contingency. Work on soap opera was developed by theorists with a strong background in feminist film theory in relation to a very particular mass media product (US daytime soaps) at a time when feminism was having some impact on the academic world and beyond. Asking to what extent soap operas are women's fiction enables us to look at the various ways this question has been understood and to trace a shift from posing the relationship as an aesthetic one to an emphasis on women as audience.

Tania Modleski's early intervention in this area was premised on a knowledge of and commitment to avantgarde aesthetics which would be unlikely today. Understanding her chapter on US daytime soaps in *Loving with a Vengeance* requires a knowledge of debates about 'still embryonic, feminist aesthetics' (105). Modleski's interest in the endlessness of the soap opera format, its use of mechanisms to retard narrative progression and the gap between what is spoken and what is intended are related to what they might offer avantgarde practices. Modleski's critique of the female viewer's pleasure in soaps is balanced by the possibility that this pleasure might, if properly understood, be incorporated into de-centred feminist artistic practices. More than Allan, who foresees the next step as relating his 'constructed reader positions' to 'the experiences of actual soap opera viewers' (182), Modleski was working in the realm of theoretical and psychic possibilities. She could be sharply criticised

in terms of her theoretical arguments, as Gripsrud demonstrated, but a more common approach was to ignore the work on feminist aesthetics, criticise her negative view of the female viewer and treat her descriptions of the housewife viewer as if they were hypotheses for testing out on the ground. It would have been more interesting perhaps if the results of work with female audiences which called Modleski's account into question had themselves fed back into work on feminist aesthetics but by the late 1980s/early 1990s that moment had been lost. For good or ill, analysis of women's television had separated from the avant-garde and, although Modleski's work is described as influential, this aspect of it had relatively few followers.

A more common approach was to see in soap a female-orientated narrative in which women were central. Feminist film theory had wrestled with the position of the female spectator but soap opera seemed to offer women stories which could be understood from their viewpoint. Brunsdon's proposal that soap operas, far from being mindless, actually required feminine competences was highly influential as was the notion that soap stories paid attention to the complexities of the private sphere which tended to be ignored in other genres. Soaps were valued for the way they made the work of emotional relationships visible in what could be seen as 'a woman's space', a term which drew on the feminist demand that women engaged in political or social activity needed their own space in which terms could be discussed and re-defined before being taken out into the public world. Soaps were indeed part of a highly gendered cultural

system but this rather lowly format did offer space for women to reflect on what it felt like to be female in the contemporary world.

This association of soap opera with female competences and understandings was highly influential and persists in more recent accounts. O'Donnell, concluding his extensive study of soaps in Europe, comments on the different representations of men and women in the genre and remarks that 'the general life cycle constructed by European soaps . . . is one in which women appear much more competent and dynamic than men' (223) although this does not mean that they always have happier outcomes. Hayward disagreed with Modleski over the argument that US soap narratives were shaped by the rhythm of women's lives but did accept that content and theme were marked by gender; she argued that 'soaps remain unique both in positively portraying women and being in a form still produced primarily by women' (143). Purmina Mankekar in her study of viewers of Indian serials comments that 'an astonishing number continue to deal centrally with women's issues' and adds that even when gender is not the main theme it contributes to be a 'critical sub-text' (303). Tsai compares Taiwanese serials from the historic genre which centre on 'male authority' with the rural soaps in which stories 'often detail conflicts and power struggles between females' (178) and which are marked also by 'an attempt to promote a positive image of modern Taiwanese women' (181).

The centrality of women, and in particular the predominance of stories about families, was an important element in work which sought to situate soap operas into the larger category of melodrama. Christine Gledhill, among others,

demonstrated that melodrama was a term of considerable complexity but it could be used to describe soap's emphasis on women's voices and domestic spaces, the use of heightened mise-en-scene and music to express what could not be spoken, the value placed on feeling and on moral judgments which clarified, if only temporarily, good and evil actions. The use of melodrama to describe soap opera as a genre had advantages. It allowed soap opera to be constructed alongside the women's film, the romance and the costume drama as a distinctive form of popular culture. There was also a pull the other way though out of women's culture. Since much of genre television could be associated with the broad terms of melodrama it allowed for soaps, potentially at least, to be seen as a fundamental form of television rather than a separate women's space. And, since melodrama, as an element in popular culture, was a distinctive phenomenon outside anglophone cultures, the use of the term helped to acknowledge the crucial importance of the telenovela in the assessment of television drama.

One of the differences between content analysis and textual work on soap opera was the way in which theorists such as Brunsdon implicated the audience in a study of the text. Nevertheless, the shift to work with audiences and to notions of the female viewer constructed not from the programmes but from the responses generated by qualitative research was recognised as significant. Although Len Ang's work on Dallas viewers tried to explore their unconscious feelings and desires, much of this work, based as it was on interviews and questionnaires, reflected the conscious statements of the respondents. Although

the ambivalences and indeed guilt of the female viewer were explored, what emerged from accounts such as those by M E Brown, Andrea Press and Dorothy Hobson backed up Brunsdon's earlier textually based account of the ideal soap viewer as competent, capable of making decisions about what stories and characters she engaged with. This positive view of the woman viewer has continued in more recent studies. Baym describes a US daytime soaps website as being 'not only a place in which female language styles prevail but also a place in which there is considerable self-disclosure and support on the very types of female issues that provoke flame wars (if raised at all) in so many other groups' (139). And Mankekar concluded her study of male and female viewers of soaps in a North Indian city by arguing for the importance of seeing 'women viewers as active subjects in the light of the tendency to depict "Third World" women as passive victims' (317).

If soaps then were women's fiction, these studies revealed that it was not just because of the stories they told or the heroines (and villainesses) they offered but because of the way their viewers felt about these programmes. It was a relationship comparable to that generated by particular forms of women's reading, providing women viewers with something that was specifically theirs. The notion of a women's space re-occurred with accounts of women watching US soaps in a 'distinctly female space . . . characterised by the absence of men' (Seiter 244). For many, soap viewing was accompanied by female-dominated talk, a process which Brown found often linked mothers, daughters and friends and could be described as 'a woman's oral culture that bridges geographic

distances' (85). Even when men watched (and some studies included male viewers), it was claimed that women viewers defined the way in which the programmes were understood and their role in everyday life beyond the viewing schedule. It should be noted though that women's possession of soaps was generally something that had to be worked for. It was vulnerable to changes in storylines and characterisation in pursuit of other audiences; to self-criticism and guilt; and to critical pronouncements from male members of the family.

The concept of soaps as women's fiction is open to the criticism that the proposition depends on an essentialist account of gender. Myra McDonald argues that 'feminist romanticism about soap opera' (72) helps to preserve gender distinctions in relation to the myth of femininity which should instead be challenged. But the proposal that there is a specific relationship between soap opera and women viewers has been deemed problematic in itself and the question posed in the title of this section has indeed been taken from one such account. Gauntlett and Hill, on the basis of a five year study of 450 British viewers, argue that the programmes themselves have changed with less emphasis on women's stories; that the network of talk and discussion which surrounds the programme is not exclusive to women and that men generally did not find it difficult to admit to liking soaps; and more broadly that their respondents did not want to distinguish between "women's" and "men's interests" (219) in television viewing, except in relation to sport. To some extent, this kind of critique has been backed up by other audience studies - Buckingham's work on children's viewing; Lull's on families watching television

(check), Gillespie on teenagers, Tulloch on the elderly - though there has been relatively little work specifically on men and soap opera [1]. More trenchantly, Gauntlett and Hill concluded that 'academics (and others) should stop talking about soap opera as a "women's genre"' (246) though their own evidence ('whilst women were three times more likely than men to rate soap operas as "very interesting", men do nevertheless watch soaps' (227)) could perhaps be interpreted differently. Certainly, evidence from other surveys still tends to suggest that women are the most engaged viewers of soaps. A British survey published in 2002 by the Broadcasting Standards Commission found that the most strongly committed viewers of primetime soap operas were predominantly younger, working class women, many of whom were at home all day looking after small children. Much of the international work discussed here indicates a different kind of engagement by women, even when the programmes are viewed as part of the family.

In part, some of this criticism comes from the tendency to read 'feminist work' as a block, neglecting the reservations and differences in position which have now been traced out, for instance, by Brunsdon (2000) in her work on the relationship between feminist writers and their object of study. The body of work which associated women and soap opera has to be read in the context of feminist politics in which notions of, for instance, 'women's space' had particular strategic connotations. It is not necessary to deny that soaps have been, and in certain situations still are women's fiction, in order to tell other stories based on different research into soaps.

SOAP OPERA AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

We have seen how the notion of the private sphere was important for the discussion of soap opera as women's fiction. In this section, however, I want to look more closely at the contribution soaps make in the public sphere. The binary opposition sometimes made between the public and private sphere is, I think, a misunderstanding of the function of the concept of the private sphere. As I have indicated, the term did not generally indicate a final retreat from the public sphere nor that women should disengage from the political and social activity. The intention was rather that what was deemed to be activity in the public sphere should at the very least be informed by experiences and feelings which were traditionally understood as private and personal. Soaps in this formulation are better understood not as belonging to the private sphere but as operating on the boundary of the public and the private, negotiating over how terms might be used. Soaps tend to frame problems and solutions so that they offer a particular explanation which might be applied not just to the fictional world but to the world in which the viewer might take action. This didactic quality led Buckingham to describe EastEnders as a 'teacherly text', suggesting, for example, in a discussion of how the programme handled ethnicity, that 'the crucial question is not whether EastEnders' black characters are "realistic", but how the serial invites its viewers to make sense of questions of ethnicity' (102). It is this overt sense-making activity which leads us into the public sphere. Because this places an emphasis on the social context in which soaps are making an intervention, this

didactic aspect also raises questions about how soaps play a role in the processes of globalisation and modernisation.

The capacity of soaps to create public debate about particular issues is well recognised. Brazilian telenovelas have 'dealt with bureaucratic corruption, single motherhood and the environment; class differences are foregrounded in Mexican novelas and Cuba's novelas are biting topical as well as ideologically correct' (Aufderheide, 263). Controversial stories bring, for instance, sexuality into public debate and the sensationalist handling of stories dealing with sex and violence has made many programmes vulnerable to the criticism made of US daytime soaps that 'soap opera, while playing lip service to the feminist stance, actively popularizes the rape myths of patriarchal culture' (Dutta, 35). In addition, soaps often have the function of representing groups or figures who tend to be under-represented in other dramas, characters whose political attitudes, ethnicity, sexuality or age makes them different from the standard hero. Again, this tends to raise complex debates about whether and how this is done. While soap producers claim to be pushing boundaries forward, the groups represented and academic critics tend to brand such attempts as tokenistic representation; as Judith Franco put it when discussing a Flemish soap, Thuis 'represses differences of sexual preference and ethnicity' (460), despite the token presence of a working class Moroccan character and a bisexual Dutchman. Nevertheless, soap operas have provided a way of widening television's representational field and some critics have been more sympathetic to the attempt. Hayward has indeed argued that US daytime soaps have a positive social role in exploring

shifting and marginal identities and that they privilege 'difference over homogeneity, understanding over rejection' (191).

But we can discern broader patterns here than controversies about representation. Audience work indicates that soap opera's use of social issues and minority figures in their storylines is incorporated into the broader processes of making complex social identities. The British Queer as Folk is an example of a soap which deliberately set out to represent gays in an assertive and challenging way and, as a myriad websites show, found international audiences which identified strongly with its characters and stories. Chris Barker, in a study of the 'production of multiple and gendered hybrid identities among British Asian and Afro-Caribbean girls', found that talk about soaps was appropriate for this kind of research because of their emphasis on 'interpersonal relationships intertwined with social issues' (119). But such overt storylining is not always necessary as Marie Gillespie found in her study of how young British Asians used the rather anodyne Neighbours for such activity. Soaps with their intertwining of the public and private may be a particular appropriate resource for work on identity which frequently involves the presentation of the self in public and the Foucauldian notion of self-production

Gillespie's example shows how this teacherly mode of soaps may go well beyond the intention of the producers but another body of work makes a stronger association between soap opera's capacity to engage with the public sphere and certain modes of production. Although, as we have seen, some US critics have claimed a progressive function for their daytime soaps, other commentators have

associated the social inclusivity of soaps with the traditions of public service broadcasting. Such work thus tends to distinguish between US soaps and other programmes as Liebes and Livingstone do when they set out a model for identifying three types of soaps: community soaps, dynastic soaps and what they called dyadic soaps. The former offered ways of articulating social relations based, in the case of community soaps, on class and, in the case of dynastic soaps, on generation and family. In the dyadic model, however, in which stories centred almost exclusively on the establishment and breakup of romantic couples, there was less sense of stability and cultural relations. Programmes of this kind, largely US daytime soaps, were less engaged with the social and 'less expressive of any particular cultural environment' so they concluded that, if this were the form more generally adopted, it would be 'more difficult for nationally produced soap operas to reflect the cultural concerns of their country'(174-5).

James Curran makes a similar connection between British public service broadcasting and the community orientation of some of its soaps, suggesting that a system which does not depend on the market is more likely to support 'a sense of social cohesion and belonging' and to extend the traditional social realist acknowledgment of the working class to groups such as the elderly, single parents, the unemployed and 'some ethnic minorities'. Such inclusivity is specifically contrasted with the 'glamourised, "upscale" settings that dominate much of American domestic drama'. Curran's consequent claim that 'public service broadcasting promotes sympathetic understanding of the other' is a bold one but certainly speaks of the possibilities of social intervention at a very direct

level (207). One specific example of this might be the BBC's use of EastEnders, alongside other materials in documentaries and websites, to draw attention to issues of domestic violence, an integrated approach underpinned by the BBC's public service remit of education as well as entertainment. O'Donnell extends this by arguing that European soaps have a strong relationship with certain strands of political culture; he suggests that many of Europe's soap operas and telenovelas promote explicitly the social democratic 'values of solidarity, caring for and about others, defending other people's rights, compromises and co-operation' which are being abandoned by their governments in the management of social welfare. Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that soap audiences are, by their engagement with such programmes, being helped to keep such values alive and that the luminaries of the public sphere – politicians, activists, teachers – might benefit from paying attention to the lessons of these programmes (222-3).

As these examples suggest, soap opera has been used in debates about US domination of global television. The resilience of indigenous soaps in the 1990s tempered some fears and the telenovelas of Latin America offer an interesting example of how US programmes could be successfully displaced by more popular and local forms. The companies producing such programmes could use this success as the basis for their own export strategies which included the sale of Mexican telenovelas to the US market. It should be noted, however, that the need to root such stories in the local and national experience means that not all telenovelas can be exported and, for many critics, the process of making programmes for the more undifferentiated audiences of the export market has led

to a 'tendency to dissolve cultural difference into cheap and profitable exoticism' (Martin-Barbero, 284).

Martin-Barbero attributed the success of the telenovela to 'its capacity to make an archaic narrative the repository for propositions to modernize some dimensions of life' (280). This association with a modernizing agenda is seen as a key element in the success of a soap. O'Donnell suggests, for instance, that younger women 'provide much of the zest of European soaps and . . . represent a modernizing force' in their stories (222). This chimes with the didactic project assigned to soaps in other countries in which production (often state controlled), text and reception come together in different ways to present a version of the modern state. Purnima Mankekar and Lila Abu-Lughod, for instance, offer rich ethnographic accounts of how soap opera serials were used in north India and Egypt respectively to offer a particular accounts of national identity and modernity. Mankekar describes men and women viewing prime time serials, 'a cross between American soap operas and popular Hindi films', which carry 'explicit "social messages"' (303). She observes how the programmes are discussed by those watching who simultaneously identify with the emotional storylines and criticise acting or shot set-up. The programmes have a specific agenda in terms of encouraging what are seen as modern attitudes within a nation but Manekkar observes how the viewers are conscious that 'the serials they watched had been selected, censored and shaped by the state' (314). The process of viewing and discussion meant that modernising messages might be dismissed or more personal interpretations made central to viewing pleasure.

A similar pattern of didactic modernity and complex reception is traced by Abu-Lughod in her study of the highly successful Egyptian programme Hilmiyya Nights, first screened in 1988. Unusually, the programme which followed a group of characters from the late 1940s to the present day of the early 1990s, was shown on a yearly basis during Ramadan. It was, she suggests, produced by 'a concerned group of culture-industry professionals' who constructed themselves 'as guides to modernity and assume the responsibility of producing through their television programmes, the virtuous modern citizen' (377). The serial used spectacle, melodrama and a realist attention to class and regional detail to embed the stories of individual characters in an historical narrative which 'provided an explicit social and political commentary on contemporary Egyptian life' (381). Abu-Lughod traces the response of the educated classes, including censors and intellectuals, who sought to protect the public from elements of this controversial history but also points out how the "uneducated public" with whom the programme was immensely popular nevertheless refused simply to absorb the secular vision of a modern Egypt with its emphasis on education and patriotism across classes. Such a portrayal is instead set in the context of a different kind of lived modernity marked by 'poverty, consumer desires, underemployment, ill health and religious nationalism' (391).

Both these examples illustrate with vivid details how the 'teacherly' dimension of these local versions of serial drama is used for a modernizing agenda in public debate but is experienced differently and unevenly by those for whom the modern state is a more ambivalent project. Both also illustrate the

range of work undertaken in the study of soap opera/telenovelas/serial drama and how deeply it is embedded in the lived experience of television production and viewing.

Notes

1. For an interesting account of the relationship between male viewers and (Greek and US) soaps, see Frangou (2002).

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