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MAKING SENSE OF SOAPS

WHETHER CALLED SOAP OPERAS, soaps, telenovelas, *telerromans*, or, as my mother calls them, simply "my stories," television serials together constitute one of the most popular and resilient forms of storytelling ever devised. In some television cultures (Russia, China, Italy, Germany), serials are relatively new phenomena. In others (the US, Great Britain, Australia, and several countries of Latin America), they have been staples of broadcast programming since the early days of radio. Some serials eventually end (if only after hundreds of episodes). Others, even after a half-century of continuous unfolding, are no closer to their characters living "happily ever after" than when the first episode was broadcast.

Whether set in a middle-class American suburb, a Welsh village, nineteenth-century Rio, or the sacred time and place of Hindu myth, television serials are linked – in the way they are constructed, broadcast and watched—by their distinctive serial narrational structure. A serial narrative is not merely a narrative that has been segmented, but one whose segmentation produces an interruption in the reading, listening, or viewing process. Furthermore, that interruption is controlled by the producer or distributor of the narrative, not by the reader. In other words, the producer of the narrative determines not only how and when the narration of the story stops and starts, but also how and when the reader's engagement with the text stops and starts.

The serialization of narrative long predates the broadcast soap opera. Indeed, the rise of the literary serial narrative in the eighteenth century marks a crucial turning-point in the development of both literature and publishing. By the 1850s serialization had become a standard means of publishing novels in Europe and America. Most of Dickens's readers during his lifetime read his works as magazine serials not published books. One of the key institutional roles of the serial form has been to exploit new technologies of narrative production and distribution. Serialized novels in the nineteenth century helped build consumer demand for mass circulation newspapers and magazines, which had themselves been made possible by the development of high-speed presses. Serial comic strips facilitated the exploitation of high-speed color printing around the turn of the century. Movie serials helped to build a regular audience for the cinema in the 1910s.

Serial narrative was also crucial to the development of national broadcasting systems in a number of countries, and no more so than in the US. Devised around 1930 as one of a number of programming strategies to lure women to daytime radio and advertisers to program sponsorship, within only a few years soap operas proved to be one of the most effective broadcasting advertising vehicles ever devised. By 1940, the sixty-four serials broadcast on network radio constituted 92 percent of all sponsored programs during daytime hours. The ten highest-rated daytime programs were all serials. In 1948, of the thirty top-rated daytime radio programs, all but five were serials.[1] Serials have dominated daytime television schedules in the US since the 1950s. Several serials have run continuously for more than thirty years, and one, *Guiding Light*, has

been seen or heard (with a short gap in the 1940s) since 1937, making it the longest story ever told.

Although the fashion for prime-time serials in the US has waxed and waned since the astonishing success of *Peyton Place* in the mid-1960s and the global popularity of *Dallas* and *Dynasty* in the 1980s, daytime serials remain important to broadcasters today. Sustained and loyal viewership among women between the ages of 18 and 35 provides the basis for soap opera's continuing profitability for US network broadcasters.

The contemporary popularity of serials in the US is overshadowed by what popular journalists have taken to describing as outbreaks of "soapmania" in other parts of the world. The most popular and talked about television program in China in 1991 was *Kewang* (*Yearnings* or *Expectations*), which was, according to the *Washington Post*, "the biggest hit on television in Chinese history." Telenovelas constitute half of the total output of Televisa, Mexico's largest communications company, and in 1991 one Televisa serial was watched by 70 percent of the population with access to television. Most Latin American television systems broadcast a dozen or more telenovelas each weekday, and they consistently produce higher viewership than any other form of programming—domestic or imported. In Brazil, choice prime-time slots are reserved for serials, which can be expected to attract an audience of up to 40 million viewers.[4]

One of the most striking demonstrations of the popularity of serial television was the seventy-two part weekly serialization of the Hindu religious epic *Ramayan* broadcast in India in 1987–1988 and regularly watched by an audience of 80 to 100 million people. Broadcast on Sunday mornings, the popularity of the *Ramayan* prompted students at a number of schools to demonstrate against the scheduling of examinations on Sunday mornings and provoked the destruction of an electrical substation when a power failure interrupted a *Ramayan* broadcast. Three thousand sanitation workers in Amritsar responded to the news of the serial's imminent end by going out on strike. As the city braced for a cholera epidemic, business leaders threatened to close their doors unless agreement could be reached with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting for the serial to be extended. It was.

Although American serials are distributed widely around the world, they are eclipsed by the astounding global circulation of serials made in other cultures. Mexico's Televisa exports its serials to fifty-nine countries, including the US. A Televisa serial was the most popular program in Korea in 1991, and in 1992 another became the most popular dramatic series in the history of Russian television. Serials are one of Australia's most important media exports, and British serials have been sold to nearly twenty countries. But the prize for the world's most successful exporter of serial drama goes to Brazil's TV-Globo, the world's fourth largest television corporation. TV-Globo serials have been seen in more than 100 countries.

Why do they say such terrible things about soap operas?

No other form of television fiction has attracted more viewers in more countries more regularly over a longer period of time than has the serial. Given this fact, it is ironic that, until recently, serials largely have been ignored in the "serious" literature on television and typically have been regarded with dismissive disdain in the popular press. Elsewhere I have argued that in the United States, this paradox is primarily a function of the status of soap operas as a gendered form of narrative and its resistance to being read according to the protocols of more closed narrative forms. Especially when compared to high-brow forms of fiction or drama, the soap opera seemed to critics to be the very epitome of the low. As early as 1940, one American commentator called radio soap operas "serialized drool."[5] Serials have been regarded as some form of trash by critics and commentators virtually everywhere their popularity has prompted public comment: as

waste-of-time women's trash (US daytime soaps); glitzy, tasteless trash (*Dallas* and *Dynasty*); glitzy, tasteless, American cultural imperialist trash (*Dallas* in France); badly-produced trash (Mexican serials); adolescent trash (*Neighbours*); adolescent, colonial revenge trash (*Neighbours* in Britain); etc., etc.

In the US the very term *soap opera* marks out the serial's ironic relationship both with high art and the dirt soap is bought to eliminate. The "soap" in soap opera alludes to the use of the serial form from its earliest days to the present as an advertising vehicle for laundry detergents and household cleaning products. The "opera" in soap opera signals a travesty: the highest of dramatic art forms is made to describe the lowest. (Similarly, western movies were called "horse operas" in the 1930s).

As a "soap opera" the serial is a drama about two kinds of dirt. In calling his study of the British serial *EastEnders*, *Public Secrets*, David Buckingham points to the tendency of serials to be "about" trash: they seem to revel in the concealment (to other characters and initially to the viewer) and revelation (to some other characters and to the viewer) of the dirty little secrets of characters' lives.[6] One of the most common ways for a serial character to demonstrate his or her villainy is to obtain and threaten to disseminate some "dirt" about another character: his mistaken parentage, her previous lover, his extramarital liaison, her child given up for adoption.

In the US and in other countries where serials function within commercial broadcasting systems to attract female viewers there is another dirty drama going on in the commercials that interrupt the narration of the serial. Characters in the soap opera commercial have, quite literally, dirty secrets: dirty laundry, dirty floors, dirty toilets, dirty bodies, dirty appliances, dirty children, dirty homes—which require the cleansing only this particular brand and type of soap can offer. Not coincidentally, it is female characters who are associated with dirt in the commercials. According to the commercials' logic, it is their inadequacy in controlling dirt that creates a problem, and it is their responsibility to eliminate the home's sources of filth.

Wherever they are shown, the act of watching serials seems to generate another kind of dirt: the dirty discourse of gossip. Perhaps more than any other form of television, serials encourage viewers to extend the pleasure of watching to the pleasures of talking about what they watch. Dorothy Hobson has documented the pleasures viewers take in gossiping about serials: what has happened, what might happen, what consequences whatever happens might have on the intricately patterned set of relationships that constitute any serial's social world.[7]

Like the trash generated by consumer capitalism, the serial has been associated with the masses and mass culture. For cultural critics such as Dwight MacDonald and Ernest van den Haag in the 1950s the spectator was being diverted from "serious" art by mass-produced, predigested works of mass culture, anonymously manufactured and distributed in bulk. The sheer quantity of mass culture was drowning real art, they argued, while its easy pleasures stupefied the spectator and rendered him or her incapable of aesthetic discrimination. MacDonald even singles out radio serials as a prime example of mass-produced mass culture that threatened to inundate authentic culture "by its sheer pervasiveness, its brutal, overwhelming *quantity*."[8] Thus, condemned for its ubiquity and written off as the unfortunate consequence of programming for the least common denominator of audience taste, the soap opera's very popularity has served as an obstacle to its serious scrutiny. With a few notable exceptions, the television critic writing in magazines and newspapers has shown about as much interest in writing about soap operas as the restaurant critic has in writing about McDonald's—and for much the same reason: they are both regarded as "junk."

Soap operas in media and cultural studies

Given the antipathy of most literary critics to mass culture in general, television more specifically (with the exception of anthology drama in the "Golden Age" of television in the early 1950s), and soap operas in particular, it is hardly surprising that it was not until the 1980s that soap operas began to be taken seriously as texts. To be sure, social scientists had subjected television soap operas to quantitative "content analysis" in order to compare the construction of some aspects of social reality in the world of the soap opera with their bases in "real life." Such studies assume that fictional texts are (and are understood by their readers to be) direct reflections of objective social reality and further assume that the features of that reality fastened upon in the study (occupational and sex roles, communication patterns, causes of death and disease, etc.) function within the text in the same ways they do outside of it. In general, content analysis tells us little about the way soap operas work as texts, generate meanings, and allow pleasures for their viewers because its procedures deny the soap opera any status as a complex fictional text.

Within this historical context, then, Tania Modleski's discussion of American daytime soap operas in her dissertation and book, *Loving With a Vengeance* (1982), was important for several reasons.[1] Demonstrating the usefulness of applying the methods of post-structuralist criticism to serials, Modleski situates soap operas and their study squarely within the context of feminist theory. She argues that soap operas, along with several other forms of popular culture, position their female "readers" quite differently than more male-oriented texts and make possible quite different pleasures and meanings. This is not to say that Modleski celebrates soap operas as feminist or progressive texts, indeed, she sees their formal structure and thematic concerns meshing all too neatly with the domestic demands placed upon women within patriarchal capitalism. Denied the omnipotent reading position to be found in more closed narrative forms, soap opera viewers are asked to relate to the diegetic families of their serials as they are expected to do to their own. They must exercise patience and tolerance in the face of unending tribulation, wresting pleasure from consolation and sympathy rather than from any expectation of final resolution. The narrative structure of soap operas—cutting in the middle of conversations from one plot line to another, interrupting constantly with commercial messages—mimics the rhythms of the mother/reader's domestic life.

Although Modleski's approach is textual rather than ethnographic, it also points to the importance of understanding soap operas and other forms of popular culture within the contexts of their reception and use. That concern for the reader or viewer also underlies my own study of American daytime soap operas, which appeared a few years later (*Speaking of Soap Operas*, 1985). In it I address the paradox of the soap opera's cultural status in the US: on the one hand, the soap opera is the most successful broadcast advertising vehicle ever devised; on the other, it is among the most disdained forms of popular culture of the last half century. At the crux of this paradox, I argue, lies the "gendered" nature of the soap opera's appeals and popularity. Soaps are both highly valued (by advertisers and broadcasters) and dismissed (by critics) as a "woman's" form.

Furthermore, soap operas operate according to very different narrative and dramatic principles than more closed narrative forms: they are predicated upon the impossibility of their ever ending. Hence, the critic attempting to "read" an episode of a soap opera comes to a story already years in the telling, and one that will be unaltered by anything occurring in that episode. Put in semiotic terminology, US daytime soap operas trade an investment in syntagmatic determinacy (the eventual direction of the overall plot line) for one in paradigmatic complexity (how any particular event affects the complex network of character relationships). The long-term, loyal viewer of the soap opera is rewarded by the text in that her knowledge of the large and complex community of characters and their histories enables her to produce subtle and nuanced readings,

whereas a single episode of any given soap opera, viewed out of context by a textually-naive critic, appears to be so much pointless talk among undistinguishable characters about events of maddeningly indeterminable significance.

The early 1980s also saw the first important critical work on British soap operas. The BFI monograph of *Coronation Street* (1981) and Dorothy Hobson's book on *Crossroads* (1982)[8] mark the inclusion of the serial form as an object of inquiry on the agenda of the emerging field of cultural studies. As any British television viewer knows, since 1960 semi-weekly episodes of Granada Television's *Coronation Street* have chronicled the lives of the residents of its eponymous working-class neighborhood set in a fictional northern city. The working-class milieu of *Coronation Street* and, since 1985, its chief rival in the ratings, the BBC serial *EastEnders*, has made class a central issue in critical analyses of British serials and set them apart from both American daytime and prime-time serials. The nature of class, the constitution and character of the working class, and the academic study of both were foundational issues for British cultural studies, in part because they figured so prominently in the work of such key figures as Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson, and Stuart Hall. Because *Coronation Street* emerges from the same cultural moment as Hoggart's influential study of working-class culture, *The Uses of Literacy* (1958)[9] and in the wake of the Angry Young (Working-Class) Man movement in British literature, theater, and cinema, it is a privileged and sustained instance of popular culture's engagement with questions of class and, as such, a convenient springboard for Richard Dyer, Terry Lovell, Christine Geraghty, and the other contributors to address the more general theoretical and methodological questions it gives rise to.

Ironically—given the contemporaneous struggles in the US to admit the critical study of soap operas to the academic agenda—*Coronation Street* was of scholarly interest to Dyer and his co-contributors because it enjoyed substantial scholarly sympathy and critical acclaim, albeit in spite of its status as "soap opera." The same definitely cannot be said of the object of Dorothy Hobson's 1982 book, *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera*. If *Coronation Street* was marked in the early 1980s as a program that transcended the conventions of its genre, *Crossroads* was frequently singled out by critics and broadcast regulators as the most egregious example of soap opera—and, by extension, commercial television—at its technical and aesthetic worst. As is frequently the case when such charges are made about soap operas, the only people who disagreed (or could not have cared less) were the millions of devoted viewers who watched each week: in the early 1980s, *Crossroads* was battling *Coronation Street* for supremacy in the weekly ratings.

Hobson's book contributed importantly to the early critical literature on soap operas in several ways, although its influence was felt much more and more immediately in Britain than in the US: with *Crossroads* not shown on American television, her book was not widely distributed in the US. Based on research for her dissertation at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, Hobson's published account is organized around a pivotal moment in the diegetic, institutional, and reception history of the serial: after seventeen years as its central female character, Meg Mortimer was to be written out of the show and the contract of the actor playing her, Noele Gordon, not renewed. This decision became the subject of enormous controversy in the popular press and prompted thousands of angry letters from Meg's fans. Meg's demise provided Hobson with an opportunity to examine the meaning of *Crossroads* for the company that produced it; the writers, producers, cast, and crew that made it; the press that covered it as "news"; and the audience that watched and read about it.

Methodologically, what distinguishes Hobson's study is what might be called its ethnographic orientation. Hobson is not concerned with *Crossroads* as text but how—as production challenge, enacted script, subject of public discourse, or viewing experience—it takes on meaning for the various groups that encounter it in any of its varied manifestations. Her role, then, is not so much

critic as observer and commentator on the observations of those whom she interviews about *Crossroads*.[10] Hobson's account of the audience for *Crossroads* replaces the American functionalist model of viewer/text interaction with one that foregrounds the production of meanings and pleasures. Furthermore, she argues that those meanings and pleasures cannot be "read off" the text in isolation but rather are deeply embedded in the social contexts of its viewing. Thus, they vary from viewer to viewer: *Crossroads* is a different experience for the young mother who feeds her child while she watches than for the widowed grandmother who views alone. Hobson's finding of the diversity of meanings and pleasures connected with watching *Crossroads* also suggests that they may be quite different than those assumed by its producers, writers, actors, or sponsors.

The investigation of the pleasures of soap opera viewing and their relationship to both genre conventions and the gendered nature of the serial audience also forms the focus of *Watching "Dallas": Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, Ien Ang's study of the reception of *Dallas* in Holland. Published in Dutch the same year as Hobson's work (1982) and translated into English in 1985, *Watching "Dallas"* is the first book-length work to examine the cross-cultural reception of serials.[11] Based on forty-two letters from *Dallas* viewers solicited in a Dutch woman's magazine, *Watching "Dallas"* is not so much a study of the audience for soap operas as it is an extended essay on relationships among gender, genre, and ideology generated by a "symptomatic" reading of viewer discourse on *Dallas* at a time when the show's popularity was a controversial issue in Holland.

Like Hobson and Modleski, whose work she acknowledges, Ang is concerned with the pleasures associated with soap opera viewing, particularly the pleasures available to female viewers (all but three of her respondents were female). However, Ang also investigates the ironic pleasure some viewers seem to take in hating *Dallas* or in disliking the values they see it representing so much that they enjoy watching the show in order to condemn and ridicule it. Ang relates this pleasure in displeasure to both an implicit critique of mass culture and to concerns about the influence of American popular culture on Dutch life.

More than any work to that point, *Watching "Dallas"* foregrounds the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of the pleasures watching soap operas produces for some of its viewers. Many of the letters expressing considerable enjoyment of the act of watching *Dallas* also confess to finding some aspects of the program politically problematic, implausible, silly, insulting, or excessive. Serials, Ang suggests, engage their viewers along a number of different axes, and deriving enjoyment from the viewing experience would seem to depend upon the negotiation of multiple tensions. For example, being a regular serial viewer involves resolving or at least accommodating the tension between recognizing the soap opera world as fictional construct and accepting its "as-if-it-were-real" character. As both Hobson and Ang demonstrate, female soap opera viewers—frequently charged in the popular press with an inability to distinguish soap opera fiction from "real life"—move easily and knowledgably in their discourse about soaps between pleasure in soaps' status as fabricated products of the show business industry and the different kinds of pleasure to be derived from involvement with soap characters as if they were (but still knowing they are not) people.

Sparked in part by these and other early critical investigations of serials, the late 1980s and early 1990s . . witnessed a burgeoning of work on the form around the world among scholars operating within what might be called "media studies" or "cultural studies" academic paradigms. Critical work on soap operas also expanded as theories of media derived from structuralism and post-structuralism supplanted or at least were allowed to coexist with more empiricist models in academic curricula. Studies of serial audiences benefited from the increased interest in ethnography among media scholars in the wake of David Morley's *Nationwide* monograph (1981) and his *Family Television* (1986), as well as John Fiske's celebration of such studies in his work. David

Buckingham's *Public Secrets: EastEnders and Its Audience* (1987) certainly reflects this interest as well as a concern to link institution, text, and audience in the study of serials.[17]

The other major locus of critical work on serials in the 1980s and early 1990s was Latin America, particularly Brazil. As Maria Teresa Quiroz has noted, although serials have been a part of Latin American broadcasting since the 1940s, they have attracted the serious attention of critics and scholars only recently.[18] Interest in the Latin American television serial, the telenovela, has been prompted not only by the enormous contemporary popularity of the form from Mexico to Chile, but also by the rise of Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela as major serial exporters both within and outside of Latin America. Brazil's TV Globo sells telenovelas to more than 100 countries around the world; serials produced by Mexico's Televisa have been number one hits in Korea and Russia; and Venezuelan serials have engendered "novelamania" in Spain.

Scholars of Latin American serials, such as Ondina Leal, Tomas Lopez-Pumarejo, Michèle and Armand Mattelart, Jesús Martin-Barbero, Renato Ortiz, Nora Mazziotti, Monica Rector, and others[19] have seen telenovelas as well as imported US serials as opportunities to explore questions of national identity, cultural authenticity, the relationship between television and everyday life, and the gaps between serials' representation of social reality and that experienced by serial viewers. But more than anything else, the telenovela has been discussed in terms of its relationship to modernity: the economic, cultural, and psychic reorganization of society around the demands of consumer capitalism. Modernity has certainly been an important issue to scholars in Europe and North America, but principally as a historical phenomenon and in relation to its epochal successor, postmodernity. For scholars of Latin America, however, the project of modernity is of current not just historical interest. Television has been seen as an important instrument of modernity in Latin America—supplanting premodern modes of experience, suppressing linguistic and cultural differences, addressing the viewer as consumer, and offering a window onto a high-tech, secular, market-driven world into which the viewer is somehow expected to fit. Jesús Martin-Barbero, along with Mattelart and Mattelart, views telenovelas as a mixture of modern and more traditional modes of storytelling and reception. The attenuation of the story over a period of weeks and months evokes the slow, cyclical rhythms of the seasons and family life. But within each daily episode, the viewer encounters the frenetic pace and fragmentation both of contemporary television style and of modernity itself.

Soaps go global

The development of cable and satellite technologies in the 1980s expanded the delivery capacity of many national television systems. At the same time and in response to some of the same forces, governments across Europe began to shift from a public-service model of broadcast policy to a "mixed" or entirely commercial model. The expansion of channel capacity and the growth of the commercial broadcasting sector combined to produce the need to build new audiences for television and to find relatively low-cost sources of entertainment programming. Importing serials from other countries became an attractive programming option for several reasons. In addition to being internally self-promoting—each episode is implicitly an advertisement for the next—serials also advertise and promote the medium through which they are delivered to consumers. In order to realize any pleasure from their engagement with serials, the viewer must "stay tuned." Given the number of hours of programming they represent and the size of audience they can attract, imported serials are relatively inexpensive (US$4,000 to US$8,000 per episode in Greece or Spain, for example)—especially when compared to the cost of locally-produced dramatic programming.

For decades it has been axiomatic that the international circulation of television programming occurs from north to south and from west to east: that is to say, US and, to a lesser degree,

European program producers maintain their hegemony over the global television market by selling their programs at a low cost to foreign broadcasters, particularly to broadcasters in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. They can do so because their production costs have been recovered in the far larger and richer domestic market. Thus prices for foreign sales can be kept at a level low enough to discourage domestic drama production elsewhere but still high enough to be profitable to the producer.

Interestingly, however, it was not US producers who benefited most from the increased demand for serial programming in the 1980s, although a few US companies scored spectacular successes in the early part of the decade with such shows as *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, and *Falcon Crest*. Rather, Latin American producers, particularly Brazil's TV-Globo and Mexico's Televisa, moved aggressively into the international arena, both benefiting from their near-monopoly domestic positions. TV-Globo, which in 1991 captured 60 percent of the Brazilian television advertising market, began exporting telenovelas to Europe in 1975. Within a decade, its annual profits on foreign telenovela sales to nearly 100 countries had risen to US$20 million.

A further instance of the "flow" of television programming from south to north, periphery to center, is the export of Australian serials, particularly Grundy Television's *Neighbours*. Originally produced for Australia's Seven Network in 1985, it was cancelled after seven months, then picked up by the competing Network Ten. A surprise hit on its new network, *Neighbours* was launched on commercial television in Great Britain in November 1986, becoming the first serial there to be "stripped:" shown each weekday. Its success in the UK was even more surprising than its ratings-topping popularity in Australia. Grundy Television claims that the *Neighbours* cast is the first of any television series to have traveled to Britain at the request of the royal family for a Royal Command Performance. *Neighbours* has now been seen in some twenty-five countries around the world, from Bulgaria to Zambia.

Ironically, producers of US daytime serials are now in the position of taking lessons from their Latin American and antipodean competitors, as they turn to the export market to offset domestic declines in viewership and revenue. Although they continue to be profitable, the future of US daytime soap operas is perhaps more uncertain than at any time since the genre made its successful transition from radio to television in the early 1950s. Total network viewership, both prime-time and daytime, is steadily falling, as more viewers have access to dozens of channels.

For the four major commercial networks, dispersed viewership across an increasingly fragmented market means lower ratings, reduced total advertising revenue, reduced advertising rates, and, with program production or licensing costs not declining, reduced profit margins, especially for daytime. Although soap operas have gained in some audience segments over the past ten years —men and adolescents especially—these are not groups traditionally targeted by the companies whose advertising has sustained the genre for a half century. Total viewership among the most valuable segment of the soap opera audience—women between the ages of 18 and 35—has declined since 1980 as more women have entered the paid workforce and as women at home defect to other programming alternatives.

The penetration of the VCR into the American market over the same period (currently over 90 percent of US homes have a VCR) has had a curious impact on soap opera viewership. Although soap operas are one of the genres most "time-shifted", soap opera viewing on videotape does not figure into audience ratings data, and even if it did, advertisers would discount such viewership, believing (probably accurately) that most viewers "zip" through the frequent commercial messages.

As they scramble to staunch the flow of audience to cable, satellite, and independent stations, the networks have turned to programming forms that require minimal start-up investment and

carry low production budgets: game and talk shows. Both these genres represent serious competition for soap operas.

As cable systems enlarged their channel capacity and new cable programming services began to target specific audience segments ("narrow casting," as opposed to the commercial networks' traditional strategy of "broadcasting"), some predicted that cable programmers would turn to the soap opera as a way of attracting and maintaining viewership. This vision of different soap operas for every audience segment has, for the most part, not come to pass. Most cable programmers have not commissioned new soap operas for several reasons. First, even though production costs are still far less than dramatic programming shot on film, the weekly budget for an hour-long soap opera exceeds US$500,000. Although soap audiences can be extraordinarily loyal, viewership and viewer loyalty can take years to build. For cable programmers attempting to program for a tiny sliver of the available audience, with advertising revenues a fraction of those for the commercial networks, and, consequently, with minuscule programming budgets, buying network series reruns from syndicators and developing new programs within cheaper genres (talk shows, game shows, and "reality" programs) seems a better risk than starting new soap operas.

The crowning irony, of course, would be the conquest of the US market by Latin American serials. Although this has not yet occurred, Latin American serials have become staples in one segment of the US television market. Telenovelas have become mainstays of Spanish-language cable, satellite, and broadcast channels, now available throughout the US. However, because they are not subtitled in English and since most Americans living north of the southern rim of the country do not speak Spanish, the impact of Latin American serials on US television is greatly circumscribed.

From its beginnings in the late 1940s, US commercial network television has been informally closed to foreign programming. With a huge domestic television production infrastructure, the world's richest consumer market to absorb high production costs, and program suppliers able to offer programming to the networks for less than their actual cost of production (because of lucrative syndication, foreign, and other ancillary rights accruing to a series with a successful network run), there was no incentive to seek alternative, offshore sources of programming. Furthermore, using wonderfully circular logic, the networks reasoned that since there was no tradition of watching programs dubbed or subtitled, or even programs with different English accents on network television, audiences would not tolerate such programs. Thus, the only national broadcasting service that has relied heavily upon imported programming has been public television, which has provided a venue for British drama, documentary, situation comedy, and, with the importation of *EastEnders* from the BBC, serials. But PBS is a distinctly minority service, attracting on average about 3 percent of the available primetime viewing audience.

Open and closed serials

The term "serial" draws our attention to the one feature *Kavalcy, Coronation Street, Guiding Light, Dallas, Ramayan, Los Ricos Lloran Tambien*, and even the programs that make up *Masterpiece Theatre* all share—their seriality. True serialization—the organization of narrative and narration around the enforced and regular suspension of both textual display and reading activity—produces a very different mode of reader engagement and reader pleasure than we experience with non-serials. As literary theorist Wolfgang Iser has noted, the act of reading any narrative involves traversing textual terrain over time, as the reader moves from one word, sentence, paragraph, and chapter to the next. Or, in the case of cinematic or televisual narratives, from one shot, scene, sequence, or episode to the next. As readers or viewers we take up what he calls a "wandering viewpoint" within the text as we move through it, looking back upon the textual terrain already covered

(what Iser calls retention) and anticipating on that basis what might lie around the next textual corner (protension). Both processes occur in the gaps between words, sentences, and chapters (or shots, scenes, and sequences)—those necessary textual silences where we as readers/viewers are called upon to connect the words, sounds and/or images of the text to form a coherent narrative world.[15]

The serial, then, is a form of narrative organized around institutionally imposed gaps in the text. The nature and extent of those gaps are as important to the reading process as the textual "material" they interrupt. Each episode ends with some degree of narrative indeterminacy, a plot question that will not be answered until the next episode. In the US, where daytime serials are broadcast Monday through Friday, the greatest indeterminacy is left with the viewer at the end of the Friday episode, encouraging her, as the announcer's voice used to say, to "tune in again next time" on Monday. These gaps leave plenty of time for viewers to discuss with each other both the possible meanings of what has happened thus far as well as what might happen next. Thus, regardless of the cultural context of their production and reception, regardless of their plot or themes, television serials around the world seem more than any other form of programming to provoke talk about them among their viewers. Indeed Christine Geraghty sees this as their defining quality:

> Soap operas . . . can now be 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.[16]

Non serial popular narratives tend to be organized around a single protagonist or small group of protagonists and to be teleological: there is a single moment of narrative closure (obviously involving the protagonist) toward which their plots move and in relation to which reader satisfaction is presumed to operate. The classic example of this type of narrative is the murder mystery, in which the revelation of the murderer at the end of the story absolutely determines the movement of the plot. By contrast, the serial spreads its narrative energy among a number of plots and a community of characters, and, what is even more important, sets these plots and characters in complex, dynamic, and unpredictable relationship with each other. Because serials cut between scenes enacting separate plot lines, the viewer is prompted to ask not only "Where is each of these plot lines going?," but also "What might be the relationship between different plot lines?"

It is at this point that we need to distinguish between two fundamentally different, but frequently conflated, forms of television serial: what I call "open" and "closed" serials. US daytime, British, and Australian serials are open narrative forms. That is to say they are the only forms of narrative (with the possible exception of comic strips) predicated upon the impossibility of ultimate closure. No one sits down to watch an episode of one of these programs with the expectation that this episode might be the one in which all individual and community problems will be solved and everyone will live happily ever after.

In a sense, these serials trade narrative closure for paradigmatic complexity. Just as there is no ultimate moment of resolution, there is no central, indispensable character in open serials to whose fate viewer interest is indissolubly linked. Instead, there is a changing community of characters who move in and out of viewer attention and interest. Any one of them might die, move to another city, or lapse into an irreversible coma without affecting the overall world of the serial. Indeed, I would argue that it is the very possibility of a central character's demise—something that is not a feature of episodic series television—that helps to fuel viewer interest in the serial.

US daytime soap operas are "open" in another sense as well. Events in a daytime soap are less determinant and irreversible than they are in other forms of narrative, and identity, indeed ontology itself, is more mutable. For example, generally, when a character dies in a fictional narrative (assuming we are not reading a gothic horror tale or piece of science fiction) we expect that character to stay dead. In soap operas, it is not unusual to witness the resurrection of a character assumed to be but not actually dead, even after the passage of years of intervening story. I remember one character on a now cancelled soap opera called *The Edge of Night* who was presumed drowned in a boating accident in the Caribbean literally for five years before she returned. It turned out she had been rescued by a passing French yacht and discovered to be suffering from amnesia. She was taken to Paris where she lived for five years before recovering her memory and returning to her husband and family in the States.

Another distinguishing feature of open serials, particularly US daytime serials, is their large community of interrelated characters. More than half of all US daytime serial episodes are one hour in length and all are broadcast five days each week. As a result, it is not uncommon for the cast of a daytime soap to include more than thirty regularly-appearing characters—not counting a dozen or more others who have moved away, lapsed into comas, been incarcerated or otherwise institutionalized, or are presumed dead. Furthermore, the audience comes to know some of these characters quite literally over the course of decades of viewing. In the nearly forty years that actress Charita Bauer played the role of Bert Bauer on *The Guiding Light*, her character evolved from young bride to great grandmother. Viewers of *Coronation Street* have followed events in the life of character Ken Barlow since he was introduced in the show's first episode in December 1960. Thus, the community of soap opera characters shares with the loyal viewer a sense of its collective and individual history, which, in some cases, has unfolded over decades both of storytelling and viewing: the viewer who began watching *The Guiding Light* in 1951 as a young mother caring for infants might herself now watch with her grandchildren. Truth to tell, writers seldom draw upon their characters' or viewers' specific knowledge of story events from decades past, although some viewers are quick to chastise writers when they inadvertently violate that shared history.

The size of the open serial community, the complexity of its character relationships, and the fact that these characters possess both histories and memories all combine to create an almost infinite set of potential connections among characters and plots events. The revelation of hidden parentage—a plot device common, so far as I can determine, to television serials around the world—is emblematic of this feature of serials, in which to whom someone is or might be related is frequently more important than anything that character might do.

The open serial's emphasis on relationships among characters also helps to explain a frequently commented upon feature of open serials: their redundancy within a given episode. Such a program might devote most of an episode to relating a single piece of narrative information—the revealing of parentage, let's say. One character overhears someone telling someone else, who then tells another character, who telephones yet another with the news, etc., etc. This reiteration does nothing to advance the plot, and the uninitiated viewer might well regard it as redundant. However, to the experienced viewer, who tells whom is just as important as what is being related: each retelling affects relations among the community of characters.

It is not uncommon to hear people who don't watch open serials complain that "nothing ever happens" in them. "Why bother watching every day or even every week," they puzzle, "when you can keep up with the plot by watching an episode a month." This complaint is grounded in two fundamental qualities of open serial narrative, but it also reveals an equally fundamental misunderstanding of how these narratives function and the nature of the pleasures they might generate. It is true that no story event will push the open serial narrative any closer to ultimate closure. It is also

true that, compared to other types of popular narrative, the emphasis in soap operas is on talk rather than action. But, as we have seen, events in open serials take on meaning for viewers not so much in relation to their place in a syntagmatic chain but rather in terms of the changes in the paradigmatic structure of the community those events might provoke: if, after twenty years, Jason's father is revealed to be Ralph, then Jason must call off his engagement to Jennifer who is now revealed to be his half-sister, and he must come to terms with the fact that Jeremy, his nemesis, is also his half-brother! But, because he is not a regular viewer, the soap opera critic is ignorant of this complex paradigmatic structure and its history. Soap operas are to him merely so much syntagmatically inconsequential talk. To him, little changes from year to year in the soap opera community; to the competent viewer, however, each episode is loaded with important adjustments or possible alterations to that world.

The centrality of paradigmatic structure in the open serial thus helps to account for the emphasis on talk over action as well as for the typical settings in which this talk occurs, and, in the case of US daytime soaps, at least, the kinds of occupations soap opera characters are given. Open serials tend to be organized around locations where characters regularly have occasion to meet: restaurants, hospitals, nightclubs, doctors' offices, lawyers' offices, corporate headquarters, etc. And characters are given occupations that depend on "talk": doctors, nurses, lawyers, entrepreneurs, police officers, entertainers, etc. US daytime soap operas are middle- to upper middle-class in their social settings, and working-class characters seldom figure prominently in plot lines. British soaps, on the other hand, tend to represent working-class social worlds. Still, their key settings are places where characters come to talk: the most important location in both *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders* is the local pub.[17] These locations and occupations also facilitate the introduction of new characters, who enter the story as hospital patients, newly assigned doctors or nurses, bar patrons, crime victims, criminals, etc., in the case of US daytime soaps, and newly arrived residents of "the street" or Albert Square, in the case of *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders*. Conversely, US daytime and British soaps, typically do not give characters occupations that are non-social, solitary, or non-verbal: farmers, factory workers, computer programmers, night-watchmen, or lighthouse keepers.

The absence of a final moment of narrative closure also indefinitely postpones any moment of final ideological or moral closure in the open serial. Open serial writers and producers can raise any number of potentially controversial and contentious social issues without having to make any ideological commitment to them. The viewer is not looking for a moral to the story in the same way he or she is in a closed narrative, even a closed serial. This is not to say that open serials are not ideological constructs, but it is ultimately not in their interest (or that of their producers or sponsors) to be seen to take sides on any particular issue or to appear to be overtly didactic. *Brookside* creator Phil Redmond has said that his serial

> remains, always has and always will remain, neutral with no particular view or axe to grind. The characters within the programme can be as extreme in their views as the story, characterization or reality demands—although the programme itself must not be seen to take any particular viewpoint.[18]

At the center of this normative space are those values, attitudes, and behaviors implicitly or explicitly believed by producers to be held by the core group of intended viewers: in the case of US daytime serials, middle-class women between the ages of 18 and 35. These norms form, for the most part, the unarticulated givens of the serial social structure. However, in their continuing efforts to keep storylines "current" and interesting to viewers, writers frequently introduce plot lines dealing with controversial social or moral issues. The narrative structure of open serials

enables these plot lines and the implicit values they carry to be tried out and allows their fates to be influenced (if not determined) by viewer response. If viewers lose interest in a given plot line or find it offensive, it and the character(s) to which it is attached can be dispensed with or the character can be divested of it (drug use, prostitution, radical political views, etc.). Another strategy for dealing with aberrant values is to attach them to a character on the margins of the serial's core value systems and thus keep them at the edge of the serial's normative territory.

Indeed, the open serial frequently provides a more politically acceptable venue for the airing of controversial issues than more determinant forms of television drama. The first successful television serial in the Republic of Ireland was *The Riordans*, which ran from 1965 to 1978. This story of family life in a rural community dealt with a wide range of highly charged social issues, the living conditions of farmworkers, sexuality and the use of contraceptives, alcohol and tranquilizer addiction, and the role of the church in Irish society. That it was able to do so on government-controlled television, in a society where the majority, as late as 1986, opposed divorce, and under the ever vigilant gaze of the Catholic Church, was a direct consequence of its open serial form. It could raise these issues without taking a perceptible stand or proffering solutions.

But it is important to note that the nature of the paradigmatic structures of US daytime and other examples of open serials themselves carry implicit ideological valences. For example, there are three basic types of relationships among characters in a US daytime soap. One might be related to another character through kinship (as a mother, father, brother, sister, uncle, cousin, etc.), through romance (husband, wife, lover, former lover, potential lover, secret admirer, etc.), or through social bond (employer, co-worker, friend, neighbor, enemy, etc.). White, heterosexual characters move easily among these three categories: a neighbor becomes a lover and is later revealed to be a father as well, the possibility of romance developing among colleagues is ever-present, and even criminals and their victims become romantically involved. However African American, gay, and lesbian characters are consigned to much more restricted positions in this paradigmatic matrix, more because of the underlying ideological values of that structure than any direct consequence of biology or sexual orientation. Although there have been homosexual characters in soap operas, they have in the main been treated like contentious social issues, introduced from outside the community as a part of a specific and limited story line and, after a while, disposed of without lasting impact upon the community. The presence of more than a token gay character among the paradigmatically embedded central characters of a soap opera would call into question the very structure of that community. Similarly, with interracial heterosexual romance still problematic for the normative world of the US soap opera, black characters are relegated to "second-class" citizenship on soap operas: because they are less likely to be actual or potential romantic partners for white characters and thus not likely to be revealed as their parents, brothers, or children, black characters operate largely among their own tiny subcommunities and appear in the larger community only as co-workers, neighbors, friends or acquaintances.

Unlike the open serial, the Latin American telenovela and other forms of closed serial are designed to end and their narratives to close—although this closure might not be achieved until after several months or 200 episodes. It has been said that the narrative trajectory of the Brazilian telenovela, which usually is broadcast nightly for four to six months, can be divided into three stages. The initial episodes introduce a variety of characters and open up a number of plot lines. In the next twenty or thirty episodes two or three major themes emerge, central characters are defined in greater detail, and plot lines are further complicated. The final third of the telenovela is devoted to bringing the major plot lines to some form of resolution.

To Nico Vink, closure represents a key difference between Brazilian and North American serials. The teleological thrust of the telenovela privileges the final episodes institutionally, textually, and in terms of audience expectation and satisfaction. The ending of a telenovela is heavily

promoted, and, in the case of particularly popular telenovelas, becomes the subject of anticipatory public and private discourse: "how will everything work out?" "Who will win and who will lose?" "Who will live and who will die?" Two endings were shot for *Roque Santeiro*, a telenovela broadcast in 1985. The nature of each was publicized as the serial approached its final revelatory episode and a public opinion poll taken to determine which the audience preferred. Both commentators and ordinary viewers (through letters to newspapers) attempted to see in each ending a meaning that extended well beyond the narrowly textual. One critic saw one ending as transforming the serial into an allegory for the socio-political situation in Brazil. A viewer responded by published letter that the alternative ending provided moral closure for the world of the text in compensation for the lack of it in the real world. "Everyone knows," she wrote, "that in reality the powerful never go to prison. Just for that reason at least a [tele]novela should offer this satisfaction."[9]

As the public discourse surrounding the ending of *Roque Santeiro* suggests, closed serials also offer viewers an opportunity after closure to look back upon the completed text and impose upon it some kind of moral or ideological order. In this sense, closed serials are inherently melodramatic in nature. To use Peter Brooks's phrase, melodramas are narratives of the "moral occult."[10] They offer us worlds in which the unthinking decision, the chance encounter, the accidental occurrence, the meaningless tragedy all seem connected to some deeper but obscure pattern of significance, some hidden moral order. Each twist of the plot implicitly prompts us to ask "what does this mean?" "Why is this happening?" The melodrama defers providing any answers until the end, when the outline of the operative moral or ideological universe comes into view through the way in which resolution and closure are imposed upon the narrative. The attenuation of the narrative in closed serials combined with the privileging of closure—both within the text and in intertextual discourse—invites the viewer to supply or discern a moral to the story.

The open serial's lack of closure enables it to accommodate a wide range of interpretations among its viewers. Indeed, the elaborate discourse about serials—generated by viewers as they watch, among viewers on a work break or on the playground, and in the pages of magazines devoted to serials—reflects the process that occurs within each viewer as she or he comes to terms with the serial text. Because of the gaps created by its serial structure, even the closed serial, for a time at least, opens up issues, values, and meanings that the text itself cannot immediately close off.

The serial form and its various manifestations on television systems around the world clearly engage viewers in ways and on a scale that is perhaps unprecedented in the history of storytelling. To attribute this phenomenon either to the hypnotic power of the media or the mental inadequacies of soap opera viewers (both of which have been proposed in the past) accounts neither for the meanings or the pleasures they generate.

Notes

1. Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), pp. 114–22.
2. See, among other testimonials to the popularity of serials, Matt Moffett, "All the World Sobs Over Mexican Soaps," *Wall Street Journal* (January 9, 1992), p. 1; and Everett M. Rogers and Livia Antola, "Telenovelas: A Latin American Success Story," *Journal of Communication* 35 (4) (1985).
3. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas*, pp. 8–29.
4. David Buckingham, *Public Secrets: EastEnders and its Audience* (London: BFI, 1987).
5. Dorothy Hobson, "Soap Operas at Work," in Ellen Seiter, Hans Borchers, Gabriele Kreutzner, and Eva Maria Warth (eds), *Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 150–67.
6. Dwight MacDonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," *Diogenes* 3 (summer 1953), pp. 10–17.
7. An article on soap operas taken from her dissertation was published in 1979. See "The Search for

Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas," *Film Quarterly* (fall 1979). See also her *Loving With a Vengeance* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1982).

5 Richard Dyer, Christine Geraghty, Marion Jordan, Terry Lovell, Richard Paterson, and John Stewart, *Coronation Street* (London: BFI, 1981); Dorothy Hobson, *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera* (London: Methuen, 1987).

9 Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Penguin, 1958).

10 Hobson's insistence on examining *Crossroads* as the result of a dynamic set of institutional practices and a different but equally complex set of reading (viewing) practices can also be seen in one of the first scholarly books on Australian serials: John Tulloch and Albert Moran's *A Country Practice: "Quality Soap"* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1986). They speak of the meaning of the serial they investigate (*A Country Practice*) arising from its "performance," not just by actors but by all those involved in its production, distribution, and reception.

11 Ien Ang, *Watching "Dallas": Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, trans. by Della Couling (London: Methuen, 1987).

12 See, in particular, Fiske's *Television Culture* (London: Methuen, 1987); David Morley, *The "Nationwide" Audience* (London: BFI, 1980); Buckingham, *Public Secrets*.

13 Maria Teresa Quiroz, "La Telenovela peruana: antecedentes y situacion actual," in Nora Mazziotti (ed.), *El espectaculo de las pasion: Las telenovelas latinoamericanas* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Colihue, 1992), pp. 111–32.

14 See Monica Rector, "A televisao e a telenovela," *Cultura* 5 (18), pp. 112–17; Ondina Leal, *A novela das oito* (Petropolis: Vozes, 1985); Tomas Lopez-Pumarejo, *Aproximacion a la telenovela* (Madrid: Catedra, 1987); Michèle and Armand Mattelart, *The Carnival of Images: Brazilian Television Fiction* (New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1990); Jesùs Martin-Barbero, "Communicacion, pueblo y cultura en el tiempo de las transnacionales," in M. de Moragas (ed.) *Sociologia de la comunicacion de masas* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1985); Renato Ortiz, Silvia Hebera, Simões Borell, José Mário, and Ortiz Ramos, *Telenovela: historia e produçao* (São Paulo: Editorso Brasilbense, 1988); Nora Mazziotti (ed.), *El espectaculo de las pasion: Las telenovelas latinoamericanas* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Colihue, 1992).

15 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

16 Christine Geraghty, *Women and Soap Opera: A Study of Prime Time Soaps* (London: Polity, 1991), p. 4.

17 The late (and, by some, lamented) British serial *Crossroads* used a motel for the same purpose. An exception to the above—sure to be noted by British readers—is Channel Four's *Brookside*, which debuted in 1982. Creator Phil Redmond quite consciously rejected the idea of centering the serial around a pub, feeling that British social life in the 1980s no longer revolved around pubs. Instead he set *Brookside* in an eponymous suburban cul-de-sac, where, as in *Neighbours* three years later, character interaction could develop among its residents. See *Phil Redmond's Brookside: The Official Companion* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987).

18 *Phil Redmond's Brookside*, p. 7.

19 Nico Vink, *The Telenovela and Emancipation: A Study on Television and Social Change in Brazil* (Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute, 1988), p. 179.

20 See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

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