

This book is for my daughter Kathy

RONALD BERMAN

**HOW
TELEVISION
SEES ITS
AUDIENCE**

A look at the looking glass



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was reducing all meaning to the capacities and sympathies of individual selves. It was, finally, disintegrating the news to the point where it could be applied, or perhaps absorbed, by the viewer. The biggest social change of all, perhaps, is implied by the way the news is communicated. I will pursue the theme in chapters on TV fiction, but for now will put the matter this way: News, like other genres of the medium, is playing to subjectivity. What matters more than anything else is our *response* to public issues. And that means our emotional response as much as anything else.

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Soaps Day and Night

STORIES AND SELVES

Serial fiction isn't new; it began when publication caught up with demand. In the early part of the nineteenth century, books were expensive and writers like Dickens and Thackeray could not reach all their potential customers. Literacy had in effect become a commodity. For the Victorians the problem was solved by printing novels in monthly or even weekly installments. For a shilling the customer could get the latest chapter of *Pickwick Papers*. He or she could join a sympathetic group of equals gathered around a London newsstand (or, for that matter, a newsstand in Bombay), anxious to know the fate of Little Nell. Serial publication, like soap opera on television, brought together fiction and a mass public.

Emotions once reserved for high tragedy were drawn out of everyday life. Here is an excerpt from a letter to Dickens about the death of Paul Dombey in *Dombey and Son*: "Oh my dear dear Dickens! . . . I have so cried and sobbed over it last night, and again this morning; and felt my heart purified by those tears" (Altick, 1973, p. 7). Judging from other responses, this is, I think, pretty much representative. One's deepest feelings were affected by stories about one's own time, place, and social condition. Horror and pity, once the subjects of Shakespeare or Sophocles, became feelings attached to life and death in the middle class.

Now the novel has been supplanted, and the work it used to do, telling us about daily life, has been taken on by other forms. They don't do it as well, but that matters little to their audience, who demand from our own kind of serial fiction a limited number of effects. The soap opera audience, although much less literate than the audience for the novel, wants also to know about self and social class, about money, about rising and falling in the world, and about love.

I suppose you could say that the soap opera has risen a notch or two in social class since the novel established caste and class as interests of fiction. The romance once associated with love is now attached to money. Although the broad range of daytime soaps concern themselves with jobs and careers, the nighttime programs are about big money. Like a historical novel, the soap of the eighties is about the various generations of a family. During the day this family tends to be organized around business or professions. At night, in a more fantastic world, it is gathered around oil wells or ranches—the struggle is not for survival but for control. Like so many little King Lear, the fathers of nighttime soap are surrounded by the ungrateful young. This may be either a convenient literary strategy or a sign of the times. At any rate, the family of either day or nighttime soap opera is split around opposed interests. Parents and children disapprove of each other's business tactics or consultants or, now and then, lovers. But the essential fact in the structure of any soap is the family caught up in various ways with some kind of enterprise.

During the day we see more of communities than simply of Colbys or Carringtons. There will be a greater variety of character, more minorities, more of a sense of necessity in choosing careers, mates, or opportunities. Daytime soaps are on a much smaller economic scale, and will show us dramas about the fate of housemaids or police officers. Social class really means something on daytime soaps—it is not just a fantasy of wealth but something you can climb into or fall out of.

On either kind of soap love is probably less interesting than its after-effects. People are unquestionably drawn to each other, and acts of passion naturally result, but they are characterized by social self-consciousness. Men and women on soaps, before and after bed, ask themselves and each other if this has been "right" for them; if it suggests a break in their social lives; if it betrays their wives or husbands; what effect it has on their friends, acquaintances, former lovers, or spouses; and how it will affect business.

This is all natural to domestic fiction. The real issues always have been the social effects of personal actions. And of course in an age such as our own, when both men and women work, one's real interest is reserved for the long haul, not for happy interludes. So that soaps, which may get steamy now and then, and which feature altogether wonderful characters like Susan Lucci or Joan Collins, nevertheless concentrate far more on lives, money, and careers than they do on love.

A great American critic, Lionel Trilling (1950), once wrote that we learned from the novel "most of what we know about modern society, about class and its strange rituals, about power and influence and about money" (p. 63). With very little transposition the same could now be said about soaps. They don't teach as well, but they do show us what we know—and they show us ourselves.

How does a soap proceed? Not like a movie, which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Nor like a novel, which defines and develops characters. A soap is new every time we see it, even from Monday to Tuesday. This tends to be confusing to those of us educated under the old dispensation. If you cannot instantly disengage your expectations, to say nothing of your memory, you will not be able to watch a soap comfortably. It is a chronicle, not a history.

In soap opera it is perfectly possible to mislay a character. You can be born into or die out of the show—and there are probably more deaths on soaps due to accountants than to mortality. The obverse can also be true: It is easy to be resurrected. If one of the cast should happen to die in a car crash, it will be no surprise months later to find him flourishing although amnesiac. One of the reasons for this is that the crash is rarely portrayed in detail on film—it is simply said to have happened.

This has real implications for the rest of the soap story. Like the car crash that may or may not have happened as reported, the soap is built around ambiguities. One hardly knows who is alive or dead, who is an imposter or the real thing. Soaps are full of long-lost brothers who are as genuine as the script allows them to be. The key to the soap is not the action, but the script. Again, this is something hard to grasp for those brought up on different kinds of fiction. Reality is not what the plot suggests—nor even what the camera observes. Reality is what the script says it is.

Over the short term this doesn't matter much. Over the long term, however, the soap is basically incomprehensible. If a show has had a run of a few years its plot will look like a particularly ingeniously confused Turkish carpet. Its action spreads out laterally instead of developing in a progressive line.

Drama or Monologue?

The soap *looks* like a drama, and it involves adversarial figures and answering dialogue, but it does not really depend on interaction. The one great essential about soaps is that they are literally all talk. There

really is very little action in proportion to production time.

In any drama the dialogue has some special meaning. It is shot through with particular themes and ideas, articulated through significant images. It corresponds to, is tailored for, individual characters. In a drama, everyone has his or her own vocabulary. Very little of this is true for soaps. In fact, it can be said with little exaggeration that on a soap the dialogue doesn't have dramatic meaning. It may not have *any* meaning. That is because soap dialogue is not meant to further the action. It is a series of *statements* or expressions that show us not what people are thinking but what is on their minds, which is different. The soap script is designed to allow characters to empty themselves out, to cleanse themselves emotionally. Think not of the drama or the novel when looking at soap opera, but of the diary or journal.

Soap dialogue allows one to listen to oneself. It is almost purely expressive and subjective. Of course its subject will always be the self measuring its own claims to happiness, or stating its own consciousness, or simply letting off steam.

Soap dialogue has an odd resemblance to the talk of a patient to an analyst. The most common moment in soap conversation involves two people, one with personal emotional anguish that must be stated, and the other with no business but to witness that. Unhappiness does not really require a necessary cause—the characters of soapland are unhappy from the beginning. They have been or are insufficiently loved; perhaps they have been wounded in their self-conception. Or they have been emotionally traumatized in the past. They seem to be constructs of some common psychological needs now popular. We all evidently need far more emotional gratification than we get. Even if we *succeed* in life we may be deeply deprived. Our own self-worth is rarely visible to others. Born with this attitude, soap opera people do not really need what have been called the “blocking characters” of drama or the novel. Regardless of the opposition of villains, life on soaps would be psychologically unhappy. If Dickens had written a soap instead of a novel, David Copperfield would not have needed Uriah Heep to complicate his life. He would have needed only to let us know that he was unhappy with himself, or uncertain about his career or sexual choices. Soaps have many villains, but most people make their own troubles for themselves.

What is the first rule of soap opera? No one should suffer in silence. Not to express all of one's anxiety would be an unthinkable deviation. There may be secrets suppressed in order to advance the plot, but no one

ever hides the sources of his or her own discontent. They are all talked out. This is pretty much the opposite of real life, which may constitute one of the principal attractions of the soap opera. Few of us ever get to let the world know exactly how we feel. Clearly, the audience of soap opera is smitten not so much with melodrama as with psychodrama.

Since a soap is literally all talk, it becomes necessary to institutionalize the role of listener or confidante. The confidante, long a part of sentimental drama, becomes the most obvious fixture of soaps and their stories. Every character has a friend who listens to his or her story. A social illusion is necessarily created that no one is solitary. In the world of soaps, not only do we express our deepest feelings, but the social world listens and responds to them. We are *visible* in the world of soap opera, far more visible than in reality. And the most visible thing about us is our psychology. The main characters (and many of the minor ones) reveal themselves in bursts of emotional rhetoric: in apology or declaration or demand or revelation of some kind. Common to most kinds of dialogue (or, frequently, monologue shared by two people) is the theme of subjectivity. The soaps are the product of an era fascinated by the self-evident topics of magazines like *People* or *Self*, which is to say that they cash in on the democratic tendency to reduce all things to a certain size. On soaps, what matters is not the state of the world but how you feel about it.

There is one large problem that soaps have not been able to solve: Their language is dreary, imprecise, not really capable of expressing much meaning. This really hurts because self-awareness, self-pity, and self-consciousness are, after all, interesting things. But, as the following collection of samples, from a single episode of *General Hospital* indicates, the characters don't often get the tools they need from the writers:

And that means trouble.
I'd better get to her before . . .
I've got an idea.
I'll get to the bottom of it.
I'm going to lose him.
I know how you feel.
We must look to the future.
All our troubles are over.

These clichés can't really express the emotional depth of suffering. Pitched to the general illiteracy of the audience, the soap tries to find a

language that everyone will understand. It is not surprising that soap language, which needs help so badly, gets it from spectacle and music. Deep emotion is suggested not by adequate statement but by the universal heavy sigh repeated every few minutes every day, from *The Young and the Restless* through *One Life to Live*. Everyone on soap opera has that sigh, followed by a little wince. And there is music all the time. Music serves the same purpose for the soap that the laugh track serves for comedy. It is heavy, portentous, and sentimental. And it is there all the time, covering stretches between dialogue, instructing us how to feel, trying to do what language has already failed to do.

The soap is full of nonverbal clues to character and feeling. To sigh is to have feelings. To wear a hat or especially a turban is (for women) the infallible sign of great wealth. To respond to animals or infants is to indicate moral value. To listen earnestly is to suggest moral purpose.

Even when tempered, as it is now, by fantasy, the soap is about husbands and wives. Its central institution is the family. One of the basic soap plots is about the formation of a family, from the first attraction between two individuals to the social resonance caused by their eventual connection.

In the good old days of radio, where soaps originated, family problems tended to be simple and solutions tended to be moral. Domestic uncertainty and unhappiness were the great subjects, and they were looked at from a woman's point of view. Today we are much more likely to hear about issues, many of them involving social change. Soap characters are involved in running corporations and vineyards and oil wells. They brush up against politics (although most of the ideas are carefully washed out). They are threatened by technology; for example, on one of the nighttime soaps, the ongoing pollution of inherited property. We hear now in the soaps about abortion and computers, about working women and market trends.

Clearly the biggest issue of social change is the liberation of women. Since the soap is designed for a female audience, the issue is a natural. The news of the day tells us that more women are now in the work force—and the soap responds by mixing career women in among housewives. Statistics indicate that many of these women are now executives—and the soap shows us women in skyscraper offices running financial empires. The news reveals the new sexual morality—and the soap is now about women attracted to (or suffering from) sexual freedom. The old standard problem of the soap opera, getting married,

has been joined by the new one of extracting a "commitment" and maintaining a "relationship."

But for every social action there is bound to be a reaction. Not everyone in the audience is liberated. So the soaps keep men on in positions of authority—as physicians and lawyers and heads of households. Mothers continue to be best sources of love, sympathy, and advice. And, according to one survey, the soap is in some ways antifeminist:

Conservative, nurturing women tended to be good characters, while evil women were career-oriented and nontraditional in their behavior. *All My Children's* Erica Kane Martin, who informed her mother that she was a feminist (November 1, 1982, episode, and others), is the classic example of a selfish, ambitious, "bad" woman. This example suggests that soaps equate "good" with traditional, sex-typed behavior; that is, a "good" woman is not career-oriented and ambitious. (Cantor & Pingree, 1983, p. 91)

The information is interesting, but I'm not sure about the interpretation. The passage cited above seems to confuse character with occupation. Erica (or Alexis on *Dynasty*) would be what they are whether they had careers or were locked in a closet. And "badness" is relative—the audience is I think quite pleased to see Joan Collins sexually and financially triumphant. In fiction, *good* and *bad* are tricky terms—remember that Shylock and Iago take all the curtain calls.

CHARACTER AND SOCIAL VALUES

The soap opera is never funny about anything. It would be as out of place to be witty on this kind of show as in a campaign for state assemblyman. It might even be said that the soap has less of a sense of humor than almost any other fictional genre. In a way this is understandable: Some of the roles are already like cartoons and might lose their credibility if they were questioned. A sense of humor questions everything. But why are soaps so relentlessly *serious*? Serious especially about character and social values? There are comic characters even in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. Is it the case that middle-class values or aspirations are too important for laughter? Or that the soap avoids any modality that might allow the viewer to look at the show in more than one designated way?

In soap opera, no social institution is ever satirized. The hospital and the ranch and the corporation all seem to be good by definition. The life they encourage, if lived rightly, seems to be just fine. This has several consequences for character. No one is ever allowed to be ambivalent about "basic" values. Characters may from time to time not know what they want, or make the wrong choice of bed, board, or career, but their philosophy is never in doubt. To see a soap requires more than one kind of suspension of disbelief. We have to accept that all its troubles occur in a social universe that really hasn't been responsible for causing them.

One of the big values on soap opera is money. The "bad" characters are corrupt in pursuit of it, but the money itself is okay. In fact, the "good" characters seem innocent enough in its pursuit. On certain soap operas what money does is fiercely admired by the cast and, one imagines, by the audience. Money and what it can buy are always on display and we are invited to pant over its power and uses. The set and costumes have come to matter increasingly, and soaps have become visual displays for *haute couture*. Current nighttime soaps are very nearly pornographic about wealth. One doesn't know what matters most to the producers, Joan Collins's body or her wardrobe—probably the wardrobe. Her clothes are calculated to be the last word not in style or beauty but in the appearance of expense. As in the commercials she now does for *Time* and other magazines, they are "statements" about acquisition. Although Joan Collins is often viewed as a middle-aged sex goddess, she may be much more like Imelda Marcos than *Venus Geriatric*.

In the mid-1980s, the soaps seem to have moved away from middle-class actuality and toward middle-class fantasy. They are now about conspicuous consumption. In some ways the soaps are fictional versions of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. But there is a real difference between interest in wealth and the depiction of wealth as a value in itself. Possibly the writers of *Dallas* and *Dynasty* are saying with a straight face what F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote satirically: "The richer a fella is, the better I like him."

In more traditional fiction wealth is an object of suspicion, and its acquisition is part of a tension between ambition and surrender to its values. Especially in the last two centuries, the centuries both of the modern novel and the modern experience of "rising" into the "upper" middle class, getting money has been a major theme of both life and art. And serious literature has used the theme well. If one looks over

Fitzgerald and Hemingway—or Balzac and Dickens—it's fairly plain that wealth has a Faustian effect on character. It frees us from the ordinary human fate. We are no longer compelled by necessity. Which means that *we are free to act out what we really are*. Wealth allows character to reveal itself, finally, because there is no need any longer to subscribe to the hypocrisies of manners and morals. The rich, like Tom Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*, are free to be themselves. Or, like the inimitable Joan Collins, to show the world actual human desires unmediated by conscience or other social inhibitions. In great literature—and now and then on soaps—wealth really does free character and express nature. It certainly disposes of the merely social obstacles to self-expression.

For the most part, however, soaps do not rise to the occasion. To be rich, like the Colbys or the Carringtons, means to be very much like the audience. To have money is to be lucky rather than different. The character of Blake Carrington is passive to the extent of being dim-witted. Wealth has done nothing for him psychologically except allow him to pay his bills.

I've suggested that there is a kind of pornography of wealth on soap opera—the audience is invited to lust after houses and jewels and stock-market options. The women of soap are not undressed, as moralists might fear, but overdressed. Again, there are some interesting differences between the fiction of high culture and this offshoot of mass culture. In Fitzgerald's short story "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz," there are some great lines describing the reaction of the middle class to the real thing, big money. The hero of the story, John T. Ungar, from the small and superrespectable town of Hades on the Mississippi, has just gotten into a preposterous automobile owned by the Washington family. It is lavish beyond belief: The upholstery is made of tapestry and embroidery, covered with woven gold and even with the supererogatory "ends of ostrich feathers." It is This Year's Model in spades. But the appropriate reaction to the display of buying power is very far from laughter:

If the car was any indication of what John would see, he was prepared to be astonished indeed. The simple piety prevalent in Hades has the earnest worship of and respect for riches as the first article of its creed—had John felt otherwise than radiantly humble before them, his parents would have turned away in horror at his blasphemy. (Fitzgerald, 1951, p. 9)

And so, one imagines, would the producer turn away in horror if it had occurred to him or her that the world of wealth on soaps was not a proper world at all. Or that characters could become caricatures if they were defined entirely by having money and acting out our dreams of consumption.

Dualities

There are some characters on soaps, brilliantly acted, who escape the general fate. They are not reductive because money is for them a means to power—so is sex. Everything refers itself to a motive, and not merely the generalized desire for “happiness.” J.R. Ewing of *Dallas*, Alexis of *Dynasty*, and Erica of *All My Children* are motivated by genuine self-interest and because of this are morally isolated from other characters on their shows. Those others, who serve as foils for Alexis and Erica and J.R., are radically innocent. They are convinced of two things in general: One is that the happiness of others is implied by their own, and the second is that the pursuit (and even capture) of happiness is a natural right. The burden of the many monologues and dialogues of soap opera is that there must be a solution to human problems. Since nothing is wrong with the world as it is, and since the pursuit of wealth, power, love and, “happiness” is normative, the failure to get what you want is only a failure of means.

This philosophy underlies soap-opera motivation and discourse. The typical argument unfolded in a moment of truth on screen will be that if something had been done in the past, if some opportunity had been taken or some temptation resisted, then things in the present would have been uncritically good. If only the right advice had been listened to, or the rules observed more closely. This view, pretty much by definition, is the opposite of tragic—and there will be some who call it the opposite of realistic. Nothing in the nature of things except for decisions accounts for happiness or unhappiness. No “star-crossed” lovers for the soaps.

In his recent book *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch (1978) has described a change in cultural definition: “The pursuit of self-interest, formerly identified with the rational pursuit of gain and the accumulation of wealth, has become a search for pleasure and psychic survival” (p. 69). The observation seems especially accurate for soap opera, which is in its own way a mirror of the times, except that on soaps, characters are liable to practice both kinds of self-interest at once. It is altogether fascinating to see how J.R., Erica, and Alexis link the two

kinds of pleasure, money and sex. Most of their encounters in the bedroom lead to changes in stock options. And there is a kind of cross-fertilization, as attitudes conventional for business are transposed in love. It is no wonder that, at a time when the mass media’s other forms ceaselessly exhort us to see ourselves as upwardly mobile consumers of every kind of property or pleasure, that these characters should have become cultural heroes. Joan Collins finds her natural metier, the advertisement; Larry Hagman comes to symbolize American manners and mores on the television sets of Namibia, Chad, and Tongo; and Susan Lucci is a conglomerate of her own:

Television’s greatest villainess isn’t really Alexis (Joan Collins) on “Dynasty.” The real vixen in TV is Erica Kane (Susan Lucci) on the popular ABC soap opera “All My Children.” The network has been literally holding its corporate breath waiting to see what Lucci might do once her contract ended. . . . She was entertaining offers from all the networks and lots of other organizations too. (Smith, 1986, p. C-2)

What do these great consumers of love and money bring to their shows? Unlike their foils, they are self-aware. They are capable of being jealous without cause, of bringing down destruction for a whim, like the ancient gods. Like Alexis, they do what they want. Like Erica, they do what is easiest. But whatever they do is conceived as an extension of ordinary human possibility: They take the logic of the situation past the point that most of us dare to.

Their victims believe that happiness for one person means happiness for someone else as well. But Erica and company have given a certain amount of thought to the subject, and have concluded that their own happiness does not depend on that of anyone else. Nor need it make anyone else happy. They are perfectly subjective, images of psychological change in our national self-conception. The majority of innocent, striving characters of soap opera seem not to realize that there are those to whom the happiness of others is offensive.

This heightened sense of character, and of its intensely subjective values, makes it difficult to agree that the soap opera is confined to domestic themes. One recent summary of studies on the subject concludes that the soap is “a world dominated by interpersonal relationships, where characters discuss romantic, marital, and family problems, and where health and work are major concerns within these

contexts" (Cantor & Pingree, 1983, p. 84). Within limits this is true enough. But the soap does other kinds of work as well. In trying to keep up with the present it alters the old form. Right now, in the middle of the eighties, the major characters of the soaps are not very domestic. They display all the signs that we have come to associate with the personal liberation that marks this decade. They are alone, very much self-concerned, and interested in the various kinds of power, both material and emotional. They are not romantic—even though deep sexuality is hinted at, it turns out that sexual relationships are rarely ends in themselves. The major characters—those most enthusiastically accepted by the American (and even the world) audience—may live in family circumstances, but they go through sequential marriages and "relationships." If art imitates life, then these kinds of characters show the decade to itself.

My own guess, then, is that two kinds of social change are the underlying subjects of soap opera. One is fairly visible: These programs now translate news events into fiction. They show us the use and abuse of controlled substances. They have the latest attitudes toward alcoholism or sexual deviation. They are definitively about the new status of women—and, consequently, of men. They suggest the high incidence of crime in actual life and of terrorism. They contain characters far from the small town that was the origin of the genre, characters who step in from the vagueness of outer geography to the *mise-en-scène* of Texas or Colorado. The "interpersonal relationships" of soap opera now are incredibly complicated because of the current history they are meant to represent. In this respect, then, the soap is almost literally a form of "news of the day."

But it is in a second respect that the soap displays social change more tellingly. It has two sets of characters, the simple and the complex, who tell us not about the news but about ourselves. The simple—who are often victims of the complex—represent in their innocent way all the hopes and desires of their audience. And their attitude is certainly representative: Without any sense of hubris at all they demand from life every natural right that has been drafted since 1789. They want happiness—and in order to get it they construe the social, political, and psychological world as if it existed only to respond to human desires. These characters worry us even when they are blameless. Always talking of themselves, always invoking happy moments of their past, always demanding that the world listen to them, they seem to have sprung up

from the shelves of self-help and self-fulfillment. The complex characters are, paradoxically, more comfortable to understand. They hover on the edge of drama because they demand real "interaction." And in their powerful self-awareness and emotional selfishness they too help delineate the portrait of an age. Both kinds of characters unite to show some new social values, and we draw from their depiction an uneasy recognition of individualism concerned not with political freedom but with emotional indulgence. Are the soaps an art form? Not to me. Are they meaningful? Very much so. Better than most other forms of fiction in our time, they show us the passionate concern with the self that has been made possible by a new kind of cultural economy.