

# From *Antigone* to *Another World*: Soap Opera as Dramatic Text

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Soap operas have been with us for more than sixty years; first on radio, then coexisting with those on television for a decade, only to have to capitulate to the new medium in the beginning of the 1960s. Little did the ad agents and intrepid female pioneers know that the dramatic form they created as an attractive and riveting surround for advertising would grow to be the most important genre in broadcasting.

Scholars have long had an ambivalent attitude (to say the least) towards this manifestation of popular culture. With the exception of Arnheim and James Thurber, who made brief forays into the jungle of radio soaps in the 1940s, the form was practically ignored for the first forty years of its existence. With the rise of the feminist movement, it was inevitable that the television genre made by women for women would have to be taken out of the closet and given a proper airing. How this was to be done was not quite so self-evident. As Robert C. Allen has pointed out, the analysis of soap opera became the domain of elitist aesthetic critics and mass media content analysts.<sup>1</sup> The former never got past retelling with incredulity some of the more fantastic soap plot lines, while making less than shatteringly cogent observations on soap themes and devices. The latter approach dominated soap research in the 1970s:

<sup>1</sup> Robert C. Allen; "On Reading Soaps: A Semiotic Primer," *Reading Television*, Ed., E. Ann Kaplan (Los Angeles: Univ. Pub. of America, 1983), p. 97.

the industrious content analysts went to work with an almost naive belief in the revelatory power of counting. So they counted: every possible unit from act of sexual intimacy to case of mental illness was subjected to the same rigorous academic scrutiny. The general idea was that this quantification would reveal startling and potentially dangerous discrepancies between the soap world and the "real" world, as revealed by population counts, divorce statistics and hospital records.

By the 1980s soap operas had gained at least a certain amount of respectability. This gave researchers greater freedom. The focus of interest was expanded and new perspectives introduced. Among these were socio-economic and cultural approaches. Attempts were also made to relate form to the industrialized production process and to other economic and technical determinants. Critics settled down to the fact that soap opera was not art, and never had aspired to that status. One of the new perspectives that seemed particularly fruitful because it addressed the vital question of how soaps create meaning, was the semiotic approach advocated by Robert C. Allen. In his groundbreaking essay, "On Reading Soaps: A Semiotic Primer" (1983), Allen identified the complex pattern of textual codes operating in and below the seamless discursive surface of soap opera.

In this study I intend to do more than take a cursory and no doubt biased look at past analyses of the soap opera genre. What I propose is a new approach, though one that has been staring us in the face all along. In all the writing that has been done on television during the past two decades, we have somehow lost track of the fact that, in its essence, television is drama. The British theater theorist Martin Esslin tried to alert us to this fact in his book *The Age of Television* (1982), where he stated that television is a dramatic medium and that "looking at television from the point of view and with the analytical tools of dramatic criticism and theory might contribute to a better understanding of its nature."<sup>2</sup> I wish to examine the validity of this sweeping statement by applying the approach it proposes to one specific element of television output. If drama is a common denominator of television programming, then it is my contention that soap opera is its most "dramatic" manifestation, the closest television has come to emulating the theatrical mode of representation. Using the analytical tools of dramatic criticism and

2 Martin Esslin, *The Age of Television* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1982), pp. 6-7.

theory I intend to undertake a formal analysis of television soap opera as dramatic text.

Before I go any further the object of study needs to be better defined. With all the writing on the genre there has been a general watering-down of meaning so that, through an unfortunate process of diffusion, "soap opera" can now denote anything from *The Young and the Restless* to *Dynasty* to the latest ABC miniseries to *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*. I intend to use the term to describe what it originally and exclusively referred to: American daytime serial drama, broadcast on the three networks every day between ten in the morning and three-thirty in the afternoon, five days a week, fifty-two weeks a year. My object of study is that enormous body of television texts originated by the Hummerts, Elaine Carrington, Ina Phillips, and the like; gargantuan family sagas, the oldest of which still on the air is *The Guiding Light* (1937-1956 on radio; 1952- on television). That this program has been playing continuously for forty years is in itself a remarkable feat. How this is possible is one of the questions this article sets out to answer.

## Plot

With the creation of the soap opera, the world was faced for the first time with a dramatic text that blatantly disregarded Aristotle's dictum that a play should have a beginning, a middle and an end. As Dennis Porter so aptly points out, soap operas consist of "an indefinitely expandable middle."<sup>3</sup> All of the ten and some odd serials that are on the air today have plots stretching back fifteen to forty years. Even if they had had traditional expositions, no one could possibly remember them and soap operas have effectively done away with the need for setting the scene. Or to put it another way, soap operas are in some respects constantly introducing and explaining and filling in the gaps in the narrative. The means of continuous exposition that draw the novice into the fiction are many, including the frequent repetition of proper names, the

3 Dennis Porter, "Soap Time: Thoughts on a Commodity Art Form," *Television: The Critical View*, Ed., Horace Newcomb (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 89.

use of flashbacks and the ceaseless repetition of narrative information.

In stark contrast to narratives of nearly any other kind, soap operas are notoriously long-winded. Dennis Porter calls it "retardation,"<sup>4</sup> I prefer the less connotatively loaded term "prolongation." This prolongation takes the form of a great deal of both inter- and intraepisodic redundancy. The few dramatic events are experienced, relived, retold and reinterpreted. This is not a result of a lack of imagination on the part of the writers, but rather a consequence of the particular paradigmatic richness of the soap discourse. On a purely syntagmatic level, it would seem that nothing much is going on, while in fact every scene is full of "ultimate meaning," inexorably linked to past events and past relationships, which soap connoisseurs are intimately acquainted with.

There is another device soaps use to extend plotlines: the narrative can be interrupted both from within and without the diegesis. In the first case, a phone rings or a person arrives just as Mary is about to tell John that she is carrying Bill's child. In the latter case, a commercial break interrupts Mark just as he is about to tell his wife about his affair with Jane. What this means to the way soap operas work dramatically is that the narrative "makes anticipation of an end an end in itself."<sup>5</sup>

An even more striking characteristic of soap opera plots is the fact that there is no end in sight. This lack of narrative closure is the consequence of the complex parallel plot structure. While traditional plays can be divided into those with single and those with double plots, soap opera defies also this dramatic typology by presenting five or six plotlines at once. Though they have no recognizable beginning and often a diffuse ending, these plots conform to a great extent to Freytag's pyramidal plot structure with rising action, climax and falling action. The individual subplots will vary in importance according to how far they have developed towards a climax.

A word must be said about the structure of the episodes themselves. They are in fact the individual acts of the developing drama, lasting a half or a full hour. It would be naive not to recognize that their structure is determined by the various commercial breaks. The action will most often rise to a mini-climax before the commercial interruption, fall afterwards, rise again, and so on till a final climax is reached at the end (in

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>5</sup> Tania Modleski, "Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas," *Understanding Television: Essays on Television as a Social and Cultural Force*, Ed., Richard P. Adler (New York: Praeger, 1981), p. 183.

the form of a nerve-wracking psychological cliff-hanger on Fridays).

The question of rising and falling action conveniently takes us to the second thing we need to consider: how soap opera uses plot to create interest and suspense. Though I would not go as far as Renata Adler who says soaps are pure plot,<sup>6</sup> there can be no doubt that plot is an important factor in keeping eyes glued to the screen and soap operas achieve this primary objective in a variety of ways. Critics of yesteryear would constantly harp on the fact that soaps used the most elaborate and outrageous situations to create interest, and that the unfortunate characters experienced more pain and suffering in a week than a regular person would in a lifetime. The fact of the matter is that, seen in relation to the extensiveness of the discourse, the paucity of any real action is striking.

If there are so few narrative events, how do soaps keep us from touching that dial? One solution is to resort to that old cornerstone of drama: conflict. Plenty of conflict of every imaginable and unimaginable kind is the key: individuals struggling with themselves, with each other, with the mores and unwritten laws of family and soap community.

When speaking of conflict in soap operas there is one structure that is fundamental: the eternal triangle. Very often the plot revolves around obstacles in the path to happiness of the couple involved. This obstacle is most often in the concrete form of a father (as in a comedy by Molière) or a paramour from the past. The push-and-pull can go on for months until some kind of resolution is reached, the woman usually having to decide and one of the men to concede defeat. But the obstacle can also be internalized in the form of the memory of a lover who has gone to soap heaven or doubts about the sincerity and honesty of the beau/belle. It is a fact of life in the world of soaps that life is difficult and wrought with barriers to the fulfilment of happiness. This is naturally a consequence of the need to create ever new plot developments. The axiom coined during French classicism holds equally true for soaps as it did for the tragedies of Corneille and Racine: "L'homme heureux n'a pas d'histoire"—a happy man doth not a story make. In soap opera happiness is almost certainly concomitant with narrative insignificance.

One final means of creating plot interest in soaps is by the introduc-

<sup>6</sup> Renata Adler, "Afternoon Television: Unhappiness Enough and Time," *Television, The Critical View*, p. 76.

tion of a new character into the community. The arrival of this person is always elaborately preannounced and the ground prepared. The new character is guaranteed to have some tie of blood, friendship or love to existing characters, so his or her arrival on the scene sets up new structures of conflict. A relatively recent innovation, first introduced in prime-time soaps, is the introduction of real-life stars playing themselves. The interaction between "real" (though how real are they?) and fictional characters serves to increase the verisimilitude of the soap and further erase the distinction between art and life.

### Character & Dialogue

Characters are alpha and omega when it comes to writing a soap opera story: "What soaps have always offered their followers is the opportunity to get to know and care about a group of characters."<sup>7</sup> It does not matter how ingenious the plot is—if the belief and interest in, and yes, caring for the characters is not there, then you are doomed to failure. But how does one generate this affection for the fictional population of Soapland—how is characterization achieved?

In soap opera, as in most any form of dramatic presentation, character is revealed through action and dialogue. What characters do and say tells us who they are, though deeds are probably more reliable indicators than words. Because there is little real action in soap opera, dialogue increases in importance as a means of characterization, and it is a sign of the soap opera form's closeness to stage drama that so much emphasis is placed on dialogue. I would venture that in soap opera dialogue is action: words are used purposefully and towards an end: characters do things to each other with the words they speak. They may not beat each other over the head, but many a verbal slap in the face is delivered in the course of a week.

In addition to function, the question of dialogue form is important. Bentley has said that drama idealizes "the grimness of our bad talking"<sup>8</sup>

7 Madeleine Edmondson and David Rounds, *From Mary Noble to Mary Hartman: The Complete Soap Opera Book* (New York: Random House, 1976), p. 184.

8 Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama* (London: Methuen, 1965), p. 75.

and soap dialogue is far from naturalistic. Naturalism has never even been a goal. The Hummerts, who laid down the early rules of the genre, were mainly concerned with the clarity of the message rather than the verisimilitude of its form. Actors had to have the clearest possible diction and there was to be no overlapping of speeches. This is still very much the case. Soap characters have no trouble at all in expressing themselves, in finding the right words to convey what they feel no matter how outrageous the circumstances. Being speechless, tongue-tied or struck dumb is not considered particularly conducive to signification. The faces of soap characters also speak volumes and facial expression is an important signifying system in itself. Internal monologue, soliloquies and the like are never used to give access to characters' minds, and though we cannot tell what the characters are thinking unless they verbalize it (which they often do), we can certainly see the wheels of their minds turning in those tortured final close-ups soaps are so infamous for.

Soap fans come to know "their characters" very well indeed. "In real life," says E. M. Forster, "we never understand each other: neither complete clairvoyance nor complete confession exists."<sup>9</sup> Soap opera offers us people we can understand completely. Esslin goes so far as to claim that recurring characters become more real than most people the viewers know. After all, they have been present at the most important events in the characters' lives, they have shared their ups and downs, their trials and tribulations. They may even spend more time with them than they do with their friends.<sup>10</sup> This intimate insight into the characters' psyches makes the writer's job very demanding. The question of character motivation and credibility is forever present, and eagle-eyed fans will be sure to notice a lapse in characterization.

When speaking of character in drama the question of individual versus type is bound to arise sooner or later. The question of whether the vast panoply of people populating the soap world can be classified into archetypes has been addressed by many, including Mary Cassata in *Life on Daytime Television* (1983). She comes up with a useful system of classification including such subgroups as romantic hero(ine), benevolent mother/grandmother, family man/patriarch, career woman, profes-

9 E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970 [1927]), p. 54.

10 Esslin, *Age of Television*, p. 42.

sional man, etc. There is not much to add other than the comment that these categories are surely not mutually exclusive.

Essential to any soap narrative is the figure of the villainess (villains also occur, but less frequently). The villainess is the person who makes things happen, or at least tries to. As Tania Modleski has pointed out, she is the only soap character who actively tries to manipulate her own fate and that of the people around her.<sup>11</sup> She invariably comes from "outside," from the sinful big city usually, into the pollyanna world of the soap. She stirs things up, plots and schemes and while she never succeeds neither does she totally fail. Sooner or later she will have to be won over to the right side and reform or be done away with.

As an antithesis to the villainess we have the soap heroine, who I like to think of as the quintessential "good woman." She is most often middle-aged, but perfectly preserved and far from homely. Meticulously garbed and coiffed, she has tons of patience and understanding, always says the right things and is terrifyingly wise. Nevertheless, she has certainly made her mistakes, and as writer Agnes Nixon once pointed out, she has suffered the consequences.

Porter writes that soap characters "constitute what might be called the legitimately sexually active portion of the population."<sup>12</sup> This is true for the most part, but there is a small category of largely female characters that are above or beyond the grip of romance. These "tent-pole" characters have been around for a long time in their respective serials, they have literally grown old and venerable on the tube. These matriarchs represent continuity and constancy in the turbulent, ever-changing soap environment. They are mostly in the background, always ready to help, and lend their eminently reassuring presence to the community.

From the discussion so far it seems that the most essential roles in 'soap opera are occupied by women. This is true. But naturally men are also necessary, if not more than to become objects of the love and devotion of soap females. In truth, soap opera men are a sorry lot. On the basis of Arnheim's threefold division of soap characters into the good, the bad and the weak, male characters often fall into the last category. They are susceptible to all kinds of temptation, and if it were not for the love of some good woman they would be lost causes most of

11 Modleski, 'Scach Tr Tomorrow,' pp. 187-88

12 Porter, "Soap Time," p. 91.



them. Some of them are dashing and debonair (usually the villains), but most look as if they were taken right out of a commercial for breakfast cereal. There are also young, sexy ones, of course (objects of a fetishistic female gaze), but they are usually so "nice" that they come off as daytime's answer to the "dumb blond."

A few words must also be said about the uniqueness of soap characters. Consider the following: Helen Wagner has played Nancy Hughes since *As the World Turns* started on April 2, 1956. Eileen Fulton and Pat Bruder have played Lisa Miller and Ellen Stewart on the same serial since 1960. In these cases one can really talk of character and actor becoming one. It seems to me that soap operas have carried out a project started by the great Ibsen himself, namely the creation of the biographical character. But while Ibsen had only the prerequisite two to three hours to make the audience feel the presence of a character with a past, the soap writer can show every step of this life over a period of years. The character's past becomes part of the memory of the soap fan in an uncanny way that is essential to the appreciation of the form. It is this offer to the audience of the representation of lives that are separate, but continuous with our own, that Porter means is a central clause of the soap opera contract.<sup>13</sup>

Not only are soap characters individualized to an extent unparalleled in the history of drama, but there are so many of them. No self-respecting soap opera can do with less than 25-30 contract players, not to mention under-fives and walk-ons. Naturally, everyone is not in focus all of the time, but about fifteen to twenty usually put in an appearance in any given hourly episode of say, *Another World*. This means that soap writers have again been innovative in creating a situation of unique multiple identification. Rather than identifying with the one protagonist as in classic Hollywood narratives or in prime-time, soap viewers get to see things from all sides, to sympathize with all the characters involved. This is no doubt one of the secrets of soap opera's enormous appeal, there is something for everyone.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88

## Setting

The soap opera setting is at once concrete and abstract. If we look at its physical manifestation first, its substance, we will soon discover that what the producers of television soaps did was move the traditional theater "box set" into the studio, and then put the cameras into the box set. Soap operas were studio-bound in radio, and they have stayed so ever since. This has given them a unique texture, an almost tangible atmosphere of brilliant even light and crystal-clear sound. The soap world is remarkably insulated from the world outside its rooms, for it consists of nothing but rooms. Manmade, tailor-fitted, snug or austere, maniacally tidy or in calculated disarray, these closeted spaces are all soap viewers ever see of Bay City or Oakdale. They are the concrete part of an almost mythical whole that is the northeastern urban (but not too much so) soap community.

There are public spaces and private spaces. The public spaces serve the same purpose as the anteroom in 17th century French drama, as a place for people to meet each other outside the home (and for some of the characters to earn their daily bread). Typical places are hospital waiting rooms and restaurants of varying degrees of formality. Every soap must have at least one. The private space, in contrast, is the domain of the family. Here comfortably appointed living rooms predominate, plus a fair sprinkling of bedrooms. Kitchens are more out than ever. How all these rooms are placed in relation to each other is never clear, but the whole soap setting seems somehow akin to a doll's house, complete with plastic shrubbery and stationary cars. As viewers we peer into the little room, where the fourth wall has been removed to accommodate us.

Horace Newcomb was the first to suggest that soap opera settings are indeed abstractions.<sup>14</sup> The walls are so flimsy they shake when someone closes a door too hard. The decor is often spartan. A doctor's office is suggested by a large desk and some diplomas on the walls. A couch, some easy chairs, side tables and dimly lit lamps are all you need to conjure up a living room. The settings that result are more a generalization of what the room in question should look like, than a place where

14 "Soap Opera: Approaching the Real World," *Television: The Most Popular Art*, Ed., Horace Newcomb (New York: Anchor Press, 1988), p. 165.

real people might live. Even when the mise-en-scène is more elaborate, as it has become in later years, the rooms exude an unreal showcase atmosphere. Is it true, as Porter claims, that all these furnishings and appliances are just "commodities in space"?<sup>15</sup>

The impersonality of the sets is anyhow in stark contrast to the individualization of character we have noted earlier. By making the setting no more than a well-planned representation of various room functions, the soap opera loses out on an important and economical means of characterization. Just think of how much detailed information Ibsen and Chekov managed to convey about their characters by means of visual suggestion.

If we accept the thesis that soap opera is a fundamentally theatrical program type then it is logical to ask which dramatic genre it belongs to. Is it tragedy, comedy, melodrama or farce? To most people the answer would seem obvious. Soap opera has become synonymous with melodrama, the bastard form of tragedy. Yet we have to be far more careful in applying the term indiscriminately to soaps, they are not all equally melodramatic. Prime-time is more melodramatic than daytime, *Another World* is more melodramatic than *As the World Turns*, etc.

Maybe more fruitful than forcing soaps into generic gloves that do not fit is the discussion of soap opera realism. Ien Ang has considered the subject in her book *Watching Dallas* (1985). She makes the important point that the experience of realism is extremely subjective, and she identifies many kinds of "realisms." One is "empiricist realism," which compares reality inside and outside the text. It is this approach (basic to content analysis) that has chiefly led to the negative appraisal of the genre. Its basic assumption is that soap opera should strive towards and is dutibound to reflect the "real world." The question of whether the "real world" exists at all is one thing, another is why soap reality should have to coincide with it.

One reason for the harsh demands made of soap opera is that the form has proven to have a powerfully verisimilar quality. Soap opera took up the dramatic program of realism and became the new theater of illusion at a time the theater world was being shaken by the alienating innovations of Artaud, Brecht and the Absurdists. Realistic drama tried to make

15 Porter, "Soap Time," p. 95.

people forget they were sitting in a theater, soap opera attempts to make us forget we are watching electronic images on a screen in our living room. Fundamental to achieving this effect in the theater was the creation of a new type of character. For the first time audiences experienced being face to face with contemporaries, with people they might meet on the street or who might be living next door. What Northrop Frye has called the realistic style came to predominate, characters were seen as being on the same level as the spectators, they were no longer gods, princes, heroes or dunces. The soap opera took this tried and proven formula to its heart and has kept to it ever since.

Not much has been said of the thematic concerns of soap opera in this essay. Mary Cassata sums it up when she says "soap operas have always centered about the themes of family and love, and their importance in life."<sup>16</sup> The following from *The Complete Soap Opera Book* is also enlightening: "The central tenet of soap opera is that personal happiness is possible, right here on this earth, for the person who despite all obstacles refuses to despair and continues to strive for it. The vision of supreme happiness that is held out—and demonstrably available to the ordinary, quite average person—is that of happy marriage."<sup>17</sup> This concern with the family and marriage is not unique in any way in the history of drama. In fact the relationships of people bound by blood and love have been a basic concern of playwrights of all ages. Writers as diverse as Aeschylus and Ibsen, Molière and Shaw, have dealt with the institution of marriage and the threats to it. Thematically soap opera is firmly planted in the mainstream of dramatic tradition.

It is the particular property of drama that it sets up a situation and works it through. This is also what soap opera does. Maybe the situations portrayed are not the tragic nemeses of princes or the socially determined, wrenching fates of a Nora or a Hedda Gabler, but they are nevertheless profoundly human. For all the surface unreality—the complex plotlines and interrelationships—the actions and reactions are perceived as authentic. It is an *emotional* realism that carries the soap form. The important question is not whether you believe Mary MacKinnon can come back to life after having been thought dead for seventeen years; the question is rather how her husband and deserted children

16 Mary Cassata and Thomas Skill, *Life on Davtime Television: Tuning-In American Serial Drama* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablcx, 1982), p. 99.

17 Edmonson and Rounds, *From Mary Noble to Mary Hartman*, p. 16.

react—is that believable? To answer that question the reader constantly checks current behavior against the consistent pattern of personality the character has built up over time.

Many of the dramatic situations in soaps are blatantly unlikely. But though these cases of melodramatic excess may be the most prominent aspects of the genre, there is a sea of everyday situations that are just as important. So important, in fact, that soap opera might justifiably be called the drama of everyday life. The infidelity, love triangles and maternal worries of soap opera are those that anyone might experience. The difference is only that soap characters are repeatedly being assailed by such dramatic situations. Thus soap opera satisfies the central human inclination towards serious drama: "the desire to experience in concentrated form the intense and exciting moments of life."<sup>18</sup> For how dramatic are our lives, really? Not very, but in our fantasies they are awash with excitement, we dream of situations we have never experienced and never will. We are the writers of our own life's drama, though in the end, the scene never follows the script. Soap operas present situations that do turn out the way, we want them to. This is infinitely pleasurable.

In a particularly insightful part of her book Ien Ang describes the "tragic structure of feeling" that is central to the understanding of soaps and how they interact with the reader. The tragic structure of feeling is a way of perceiving life as "an endless fluctuation between happiness and unhappiness. Life is a question of falling down and getting up again."<sup>19</sup> Everyone is familiar with this common-sense philosophy. In soap opera the characters hit the dirt with terrifying frequency, but they always pick themselves up again. This is eminently reassuring.

I began this essay by remarking that soaps have been around for a long time. They will continue to be so as long as people enjoy being told a good story, especially one with the built-in promise that it will never end. James Thurber once said: "The characters in Soapland and their unsolvable perplexities will be marking time on the air long after you and I are gone."<sup>20</sup> Thurber's prophecy held true for his own lifetime, no doubt it will hold true for ours.

18 G. B. Tennyson, *An Introduction to Drama* (London: Holt, Rinehart, Winston 1967), pp. 75-76.

19 *Watching Dallas*, p. 46.

20 James Thurber, *The Beast in Me and Other Animals* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), p. 222.