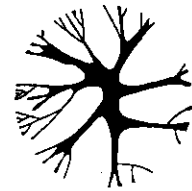


COMMUNICATION RESEARCH TRENDS



A Quarterly Information Service from the
Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture

Vol 10 (1990), No. 1

SOAP OPERA

by Gerlinde Frey-Vor, Universität Marburg

'Just a few years ago, television viewers in many countries wanted only to know the answer to one question -- Who shot J.R.?'

This quote from the March 1987 issue of *Time* magazine illustrates the powerful hold soap operas like *Dallas* have on the popular imagination. Yet, television and radio soap operas have more often been despised than studied. Their origins are in the continuous radio serials of the early days of US commercial radio, serials designed by conglomerates such as Procter and Gamble to convey their messages to large numbers of housewives. Indeed, the very term *soap opera* is derived from the fact that washing powder was one of Procter and Gamble's major products.

Today what do serials such as the Australian *Flying Doctors*, the British *East Enders*, the German *Schwarzwald klinik*, the Japanese *Machigai-darake no Onna-migaki* or the Indian *Buniyaad* - have in common that characterizes them as soap operas? Are their audiences similar? Are there themes, situations and plots common to all soap operas? What is the future for the soap opera now that serials like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* have passed their peak of popularity?

This and the following issue of *Trends* examine research on soap opera and their viewers which may help to provide a few answers to these and other questions.

I. What are Soap Operas and Telenovelas?

Evolution of The Soap Opera and Telenovela

The serial form of popular fiction and drama, with its stereotyped character formulae, has been around for many centuries. A number of countries, in the 19th century, serialized stories and novels (in newspapers, magazines or distributed as 'colportage') which were ravenously absorbed by the newly emerging mass readership. In France the 'feuilletons', novels published in the newspapers, were written by authors like Eugen Sue. In Britain and the United States many people waited impatiently for the next instalment of the serialized novels of Charles Dickens and others. Early in Dickens' career the characters of his novel 'The Pickwick Papers' (1836) became

the centre of a veritable cult. The characters developed into a sort of communal property and a spate of plagiarisms emerged, cruder than the original, which employed them in numerous new storylines.

The influence of the style of the 19th century French 'feuilleton' and the Spanish 'folletin' can still be seen in the contemporary Latin American telenovela. The Anglo/American soap opera, however, seems to have been influenced more or less directly by another type of serialized fiction. According to Raymond William Stedman, this was the domestic novel, written by such authors as Augusta Evans Wilson or Mary Jane Holmes, and directed to an almost exclusively female readership. (Stedman, 1971).

Another indirect influence in the United States was the 'film chapter-play', which was invented by newspaper-owners as a promotional tool. Like the domestic novels, the early film chapter-plays centred upon heroines, rather than male heroes. But, unlike the domestic novels, the film serials were not predominantly set in the home. Rather, they were blends of romance, action and suspense-drama. Often the heroines even had to perform quite perilous scenes. Episodes frequently ended in dangerous situations, leaving the spectators' suspense unrelieved until the subsequent episode. This device came to be known as a 'cliffhanger'. Today cliffhangers still belong to the dramaturgical repertoire of the soap opera genre, but with TV and radio soap operas the term rarely describes actual situations of physical danger, in most cases it merely refers to situations of emotional tension in which an episode may end.

The Radio Serial

The most direct influence on the Anglo-American soap opera is, of course, the radio serial. While in Britain the first Director-General of the BBC, John Reith, was very much opposed to soap operas, commercial radio stations in the United States were keen to use the form of the continuous serial. The continuous day-time serial became a favourite tool in that commercial struggle for listeners and advertising revenue. It was an instrument geared predominantly to attract housewives, the main buyers of consumer goods. Soon the system developed in such a way that radio networks sold only the transmission time to sponsors or advertising agencies, who made their own serials to go with their commercials. Procter and Gamble, the long established soap and cooking oil conglomerate, were among the first to advertise on radio and also the most willing sponsor of serials. According to Peter Buckman, the company had 22 serials under its sponsorship in 1939, worth US\$8,750,000. (Buckman, 1984). Thus it is not too surprising that the form was nicknamed 'soap opera'. Procter and Gamble still sponsor five TV soap operas, although continuous sponsorship of soap opera is no longer common today.

In the early days sponsors naturally had the right to influence the content of a serial. The process of inventing and writing a radio serial became rationalized to an extent never seen before. 'Once a sponsor was signed up, the Hummerts (Frank and Anne Hummert, who were the most prolific inventors of serials and storylines) would outline each episode in some detail to make sure it conformed to the sponsor's expectations. Then they would hand over the drudgery of actually writing the words the characters were to speak to dialoguers. The Hummerts thus kept total control of characters and plot - and incidentally of the rights in each

serial. Writers were paid a standard fee... and did what they were told' (Buckman, 1984, p.10).

Owing to production constraints, radio serials, unlike the film chapter-plays, had little direct action. The most important element was reaction to events expressed in dialogue. The influence of the domestic novel was seen in their domestic settings, often with a mother figure in the centre. Elements of romance and melodrama also became staple devices of radio serials, whereas comic elements only rarely played an important part.

The most striking feature of most radio soap operas was their longevity. The early North American radio soap operas often broadcast for more than ten years, some even for twenty years. Around 1960, however, the radio audience declined in favour of television, and sponsors in America gradually lost interest in radio soap operas. By 1960 the last six radio serials were brought to an end, despite massive protest from listeners. Some of the radio serials were taken over into television.

In Britain the first radio soap opera emerged only after Reithian principles had been undermined in the course of World War II and its immediate aftermath. In 1950 *The Archers*, a serial about country life, started on BBC radio and has been on the air ever since, five days a week, with an omnibus edition - a comprehensive replay of the five shows - at weekends. Unlike American radio stations, BBC radio still continues the radio serial form.

In the British Broadcasting Corporation, as in most West European countries so far, commercial sponsorship of radio and television serials has not been allowed; but serials on independent television and radio are sponsored.

The Anglo/American Soap Opera Format on Television

Although differing considerably in technique from radio, television continued to employ the same formulae: open ended stories on the domestic concerns, daily hopes and despairs of more or less average middle class families, living in small towns or suburbs. Up to the present day most day-time television soap operas resemble televised radio programmes rather than films, for visualization is minimal, action scarce and dialogue dominant. It is invariably a small community - e.g. neighbourhood, extended family or the members of an institution such as a hospital, lawfirm, bar or motel - which is the centrepiece of a soap opera. From there the numerous storylines evolve - interwoven in a complicated manner - to constitute the open-ended episodes. Soap opera storylines nearly always centre around human interest stories rooted in the lives of individual characters, rather than major political or social issues. The skeleton of any soap opera is made up of personal relationships, which predominate even in serials that are set in places of work,

such as offices or hospitals. Also embedded in the personalized relational code of the soap opera are themes which belong to such categories as crime or social or medical problems.

In addition to more general features, a number of shifts and variations in character and style in the Anglo/American soap opera have occurred over the years which have often resulted in the establishment of distinct types. One such variation, which had occurred by the 1950s, is the evolution of the type of medical soap opera set in a hospital or doctor's surgery. Classic examples are the American *General Hospital* and the British *Emergency Ward Ten* (1957-1966). Australia has produced and exported quite a number of soap operas set in doctors' surgeries. As another example of a more recent shift in the soap opera genre, the increasing use of crime elements could be cited. *The Edge of the Night*, which started broadcasting in the 1950s, but was still on in the 1980s, carried a lot of crime. According to Peter Buckman it is the nearest the genre comes to a thriller (Buckman, 1984). A shift towards the employment of younger characters and their problems, for example in the Australian soap opera *Neighbours* has also occurred in attempts to capture teenage audiences.

Prime-Time Soap Operas

But the most significant variation in the genre was the invention of the prime-time soap operas *Dallas* and *Dynasty* in the late seventies. (Some scholars as, for example, Cantor and Pingree (1983) think them too different to be grouped under the label 'soap opera'). In an attempt to attract a greater share of male viewers to the genre, the form was altered to give more emphasis to prominent male characters than in the day-time serials. In addition, the setting was transferred from the world of the suburban middle-class family to the glamorous society of Texas oil barons with their fast cars and expensive life-styles. Higher production budgets meant there was significantly more concern for visualization.

Another significant variation in the genre occurred in Britain in 1960 when the commercial television company, Granada, introduced *Coronation Street*. *Coronation Street* was the first soap opera which was set in a working class district. As the still successfully broadcast *Coronation Street* and more recent similar serials such as *Brookside* and *EastEnders* show, the social realist type of soap opera is still prevalent in Britain. Only in 1975 was the first soap opera with a more working-class urban setting, *Ryan's Hope*, introduced in the United States.

Despite many variations in the genre, it is, however, important to note that the term 'soap opera' in Britain, North America and Australia invariably denotes a continuous programme, set

in the present with open-ended episodes in which a number of different storylines alternate with each other. Many Anglo/American soap operas have been continued for decades. While other literary or dramatic forms consist of a beginning, a middle and an ending, the purpose of a soap opera, according to Dennis Porter, 'clearly is to never end, and its beginning is always lost sight of...soap opera... is entirely composed of an indefinitely expandable middle.' (Denis Porter in Newcomb, 1982. p.124). With some reservations, this also applies to the American evening soap operas such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty* which are broadcast in blocks of 26 episodes and only reappear after lengthy breaks.

The 'continuous' serial differs as far as its narrative structures and presumably also, as far as the psychological relationship of the viewers to it are concerned, from a 'drama series'. A series consists of a smaller or larger number of self-contained episodes. Apart from the evening-soap-operas, such as *Dallas* which are shown only once a week, soap operas in North America and Australia are normally broadcast five days a week for half an hour, 45 or even 60 minutes during the day. British soap operas are normally shown two, sometimes three, times a week, for half an hour in early prime time. The fictional time in those serials normally is made to progress in accordance with the actual calendar year.

The Latin American Telenovelas

The Latin American variation of the continuous serial is the telenovela. The predecessors of the Latin American telenovela, the radionovelas, were initiated in the 1940s by the same US conglomerates - mainly producers of soap, detergents, toothpaste and other household goods - which had started the North American radio soap opera in the thirties. Expanding via Cuba to other countries of Latin America they spread the radionovela. One of the earliest radionovelas, made in Cuba, but taken over by a number of other Latin American countries and later made into several television versions, was 'El Derecho de Nacer' (1946). Even in this period the radionovelas differed considerably in length from the North American radio soap operas which were broadcast for much longer.

In recent years the increasing production of telenovelas in a range of Latin American countries (e.g. Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Peru, Venezuela, Colombia and Chile) has brought about a greater independence from North American programme imports. The flow of telenovelas among Latin American countries, however, is very unbalanced. The most potent producers and exporters of telenovelas are the commercial media-giant 'Globo' in Brazil and its Mexican counterpart *Televisa*. Telenovelas are an important export item for a number of Latin

American countries. These exports go not only to other Latin American countries and Hispanic networks in the United States, but also, especially in the case of the *Globo* telenovelas, to well over 100 countries throughout the world where they have started to compete with American serials.

Characteristics of the Telenovela

Telenovelas with daily episodes (broadcast from Monday to Friday or Saturday) were first shown in the early 1960s. Today, most Latin American television systems show nine to fifteen different telenovelas daily (Rogers and Antola, 1985). Each episode of a telenovela differs from that of the Anglo/American soap opera in its greater range of styles (e.g. historical and contemporary settings, and it also seems to be less rooted in the domestic world than the American daytime serial). As far as Brazil is concerned, some authors suggest a development from historical narratives based on Cuban or Brazilian novels (e.g. *Escrava Isaura*, 1977-1979) to stories with more contemporary settings and often topical political and social contents (e.g. *Rogue Santeiro*, 1984/85). In *Saramandaia* (1976), the author Dias Gomes also attempted to include characteristic elements of a rural folk culture. Despite a number of recent variations, the uniting features of the telenovela are romance and melodrama in a somewhat different guise than in their Anglo/American counterparts. A part of the melodramatic set-up in many telenovelas is an emphasis on a romanticized upward social mobility: a hero, or more often a heroine, who progresses through a romantic liaison from 'rags to riches'.

The telenovela also differs from the Anglo/American soap opera as far as the narrative structure is concerned. For, though telenovelas are continuous serials, they are not as open-ended as the soap opera. Most telenovelas consist of 150 to 250 episodes, which are broadcast over a period of six to nine months continuously, though some very successful telenovelas have been extended to last for more than a year. Structurally, the telenovela resembles the 19th century feuilletons, mentioned above. Like the Anglo/American soap operas, telenovelas also employ the device of the cliffhanger, especially at the end of the week.

Unlike the soap opera, however, the telenovela is expected to have a happy ending. The happy-ending is to combine and terminate the various plots and great number of subplots. Thus, strictly speaking, the storylines of the telenovela are, despite complicated entanglements, linear and not spiral as is sometimes suggested for the Anglo/American soap opera. Yet, despite some attempts in Colombia to use literary adaptations in the telenovelas (e.g. adaptations of a novel by Isabel Allende) and some attempts in Brazil to introduce more innovative stylistic devices, the

telenovela, like the soap opera, is synthetic drama, which includes as many popular elements as possible, and a drop in audience figures can bring about a change in storylines or characters.

In contrast to the North American production system where scriptwriters are dominated by script editors and producers, the production of telenovelas, at least in Brazil, seem to rely more on the author.

In most Latin American countries there exists quite substantial censorship which also affects the telenovelas. Censorship is concerned with a wide range of moral issues and, depending on the type of government, also with the presentation of political matters.

Telenovelas in Latin American countries, even more than soap operas in their country of origin, attract large and stable audiences. Some telenovelas often achieve audience figures of 70% and more and sometimes final episodes have ratings of 90 to 100%. The enormous popularity of telenovelas is not lessened in communist Cuba and they are also popular in the communist countries to which they have been exported, including Angola, the Soviet Union, Poland and the People's Republic of China.

Today, telenovelas are seldom financed by individual sponsors but rather through advertising time sold by the networks. But advertisers are not only allowed to insert commercials which can be clearly distinguished from the narrative, they are also granted the opportunity of 'merchandising', that is to say product-placement.

The Soap Opera Format in Other Countries

Like Latin American countries, other countries have developed their own variations of the soap opera format in addition to importing American serials, such as *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Falcon Crest* and the like. These serials are often not as long-running as Anglo/American serials. This is mainly due to the fact that their audiences are not used to the long-running format and to difficulties in sustaining continuous production. Only three examples can be referred to here.

France

French television had always shown American programmes, but not until the beginning of the 1980s did it show American soap operas, such as the evening serial *Dallas* or the five times a week *Santa Barbara*. At the same time the three French networks, TF1, Antenne 2 and FR3, also produced indigenous variations of the American format. This meant that the formula of the long-term serial programme had to be revived. For, although France had already had long-running serials with very short episodes of 15 minutes in the 1960s, this form had been abandoned in favour of shorter series.

In 1985 Antenne 2 broadcast *Châteauvallon* the first French serial in the style of *Dallas*. That

serial was set in an average sized city outside Paris and centred upon two conflicting clans, the Bergs and the Kovalics, and the resulting tales of love and hatred, ambition, politics and money. As with American serials the producers of *Châteauvallon* based their serial on an audience survey which tried to pinpoint the successful ingredients in previous American and French serials. The synthetic nature of that serial was further enhanced by the very rationalized production with a pool of writers which was without precedent in French television. As for its narrative structure, *Châteauvallon* had open episodes and the potential for an infinite number of episodes. Despite its potential for infinity, the serial lasted, for only twenty-six 55 minute episodes which were broadcast once a week during prime time.

India

In India the government television network *Doordarshan* broadcast the serial *Hum Log*, which was shown two or three times a week. This first soap opera ever produced in Hindi consisted of 156 episodes (each 22 minutes long), and was shown over the limited period of 17 months in 1984/85. It was set in the present, centred around three generations of a lower-middle-class Indian family living together in one house and deliberately included educational topics (e.g. family planning, hygiene, equality of men and women). *Hum Log* was not only the first indigenous soap opera in India but also the first programme financed by commercial sponsors. The serial, which achieved very high audience figures, prepared the way for more commercially-sponsored, home-produced soap operas in India. Two soap operas which came after *Hum Log*, are *Buniyaad* and *Khandaan*.

West Germany

West German television networks reacted to the enormous success of *Dallas* (which was first shown in 1981) and *Dynasty* (first shown in 1983) by producing their own indigenous long-term serials. Until then, German television had not produced long-running serials in the soap opera format. Rather, the most frequently used formats were series of about 13 self-contained

episodes or mini-series of three to six episodes. However, some very popular family series in the 1950s and 1960s kept on reappearing in new sets, so that the total number of episodes could amount to well over a hundred (Rogge, 1987).

In late 1985, however, ARD started to broadcast *Lindenstrasse* and ZDF offered *Schwarzwaldklinik* to its viewers. *Lindenstrasse* is modelled on the British social realist type of soap opera, but is marked by some ingredients from the more melodramatic American serials implanted into a quite authentic German milieu of middle-class residents of a Munich street. The serial, which is shown once a week for half an hour, has open episodes and was, right from the start, designed to last for more than 200 episodes, and although it does not achieve stunningly high audience figures (mostly a share of around 30%) it is likely to last for much longer. *Lindenstrasse* is also the first serial in the Federal Republic that is subject to the tight and streamlined production schedule of a continuous programme, though only one episode per week has to be produced, which by international standards is very little.

ZDF's *Schwarzwaldklinik* was broadcast once a week in blocks of 24 episodes of 45 minutes length. Unlike *Lindenstrasse* or the French *Châteauvallon*, *Schwarzwaldklinik* did not consist of narratively open episodes but of self-contained episodes, though the central setting of a residential clinic remained the same and a number of loose overall storylines were employed. It is therefore questionable from a narrative point of view whether *Schwarzwaldklinik* can be called a soap opera, though in its country of origin it is sometimes referred to as one. Stylistically, it synthesizes elements which are popular with German audiences: elements from the German 'Heimatfilm' with its glorification of landscapes and folk life, elements from the *Artzfilm* - stories about doctors and hospitals, stylistically different from such serials as *General Hospital* and *Emergency Ward 10* with their image of trustworthy, authoritative doctors, and elements from the typical German family series of the 1960s. Thanks to those ingredients *Schwarzwaldklinik* achieved a popularity (audience shares of 60% and more) which is unparalleled by both *Lindenstrasse* and the imported American serials. Yet, the series was not meant to last indefinitely and was terminated in spring 1989, after 70 episodes.

II. Studying the Content of Soap Operas and Telenovelas

Studies from the Empirical Social Sciences

Mary Cassata and Thomas Skill (Eds.). *Life on Daytime Television: Tuning-In American Serial Drama*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1983. 214 pp.

Rhoda Estep and Patrick T. MacDonald. 'Crime in the Afternoon: Murder and Robbery on Soap Operas'. In *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, Vol.3. Summer 1985. pp.323-331.

Dennis T. Lowry and David E. Towles. 'Soap Opera Portrayals of Sex, Contraception and Sexually Transmitted Diseases' in *Journal of Communication*, Vol 39 No 2. Spring 1989.

In 1982 Greenberg and his colleagues (Greenberg et al., 1982) suggested that the empirical social sciences had neglected research on the soap opera. But not only empirical social scientists had neglected the soap opera genre, little research existed in other disciplines either.

The first empirical studies on the US soap opera were audience studies. This research was later followed by content studies. In these content studies procedure variables are isolated and defined according to a number of categories, the distribution of which is then investigated in soap operas. Subsequently, a comparison is made with the distribution of the respective variables and their categories in real life.

The World of Daytime Soap Operas

Many content studies concentrate on analyzing the demographic characteristics of the soap opera world. This approach is taken a step further by the contributors to *Life on Daytime Television*. Like some earlier studies by Bradley S. Greenberg and Nathan Katzman (Katzman, 1972), its primary method is content analysis though it also contains some work on soap opera audiences and an interview with Robert Short, Manager of Daytime Programmes for Procter and Gamble Productions.

The book emerged from a project begun in 1977 which aimed to focus attention on the neglected subject of daytime, in contrast to prime-time, television programmes. The first chapter of the book summarizes a study on soap opera characters according to their demographics, lifestyles and interpersonal conflict-management skills. The research is conducted with the assumption that soap opera characters are potential role models for viewers.

One of the findings of the study is that women are slightly under-represented (49%) in the daytime soap opera in relation to their actual share of the population (52%). In comparison with prime-time television, however, where the female: male ratio is 3:1, the daytime serials' representation of the sexes seem to be much more balanced. The representation of black characters in the soap operas (4.8%), however, was considerably lower than their representation on prime-time television (9%) and thus deviates significantly from their share in the total popul-

ation (11%). Another conclusion is that women in soap operas are more likely to have a professional position (though in most cases lower profile jobs) than in prime-time programmes. Despite that, homemaking is found to be presented as an exclusively female activity. With regard to the marital status of soap opera characters the authors come to the conclusion: 'The most surprising aspect of this category is that nearly 70% of the characters in our study were either in a single or divorced state.' The reason this result was surprising to the authors was their assumption that soap operas were determined by plots about romantic love which culminate in matrimony.

The lifestyle of soap opera characters is defined according to 13 different lifestyle categories. However, 79% of all characters analyses fall under five main lifestyle categories: the chic suburbanite (21%), the subtle single (20%), the traditional family person (19%), the successful professional (10%) and the elegant socialite (9%). The authors investigated different conflict-management skills in each life-style group and came to the conclusion 'that only characters with a predominant focus on home and family-centred interests can deal with a disagreement in a positive interpersonal fashion'. Rich, culturally oriented serial personalities whose prime interests are directed to goals outside of the family were presented as superficial, dogmatic and primarily self-serving.

Similar content analyses of other variables such as 'Images of Old Age' (Chapter 3), 'The Portrayal of Illness, Accidents, Violence and Death' (Chapter 4), 'The Portrayal of Sexual Behaviour' (Chapter 5) and 'Structures of Power in Two-Person Interactions' (this is the typical soap opera situation), were also carried out.

Crime and Sex in the Soaps

A further example of this type of content analysis is the study by Rhoda Estep and Patrick T. MacDonald which investigates the relatively new variable of crime in soap operas. Their research period stretches from 1977 to 1984, and their main sources are *Soap Opera Digests* and the memories of a substantial number of informants. One of their findings is that females and whites are represented more often as murder and rob-

bery suspects and victims than official records would indicate.

Sexual behaviour in soap operas has been looked at frequently. A recent example is the study by Dennis T. Lowry and David E. Towles. Their content analysis is based on a sample of all soap opera episodes of the three main US networks within five randomly selected weeks in 1987. In contrast to the other content analyses referred to above, their point of reference is not official statistics but the results of a comparable study on soap operas which one of the two researchers conducted in 1979.

One finding of this study is, for example, that the portrayal of sexual behaviour in soap operas increased between 1979 and 1987. However, in comparison with other programme types this increase does not appear very substantial. What had increased considerably was the portrayal of sexual behaviour involving unmarried partners while married partners were shown less often in sexual relations. According to this study, references to aggressive sexual contacts decreased from 1979 to 1987. In both research periods little evidence of homosexual relations could be elicited. Furthermore, in neither of the two studies could any physical depiction of intercourse or rape be coded. All coded sexual behaviour occurred as verbal references or was implied by relatively chaste 'pars pro toto' scenes. In 1987 the researchers could not yet code a portrayal of AIDS in their main sample, finding only one reference to AIDS in the supplemental sample of episodes. From this they conclude that in 1987 soap operas were just beginning to deal with AIDS.

Structuralist/Semiotic Studies

Robert Allen. *Speaking of Soap Operas*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985, 245pp.

Maria de la Luz Hurtado. *La Telenovela: Mundo de Realidades Invertidas*. Santiago de Chile: Maria de la Luz Hurtado, 1976. 199pp.

While systematic content analysis can provide important insights into thematic preoccupations and developments within the soap opera genre and the representation of particular social groups by that prolific form of television, it often does not pay much attention to its specific characteristics as a fictional 'text.' That is why researchers who are informed by literary criticism and cultural studies have recently stressed the importance of studying soap opera as an aesthetic construction with a specific internal organisation and narrative conventions. The main theoretical approach of these scholars is structuralism as proposed, for instance, by Lévi-Strauss in texts as developed by Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco and others. To various degrees these theories are also affected by the narrative studies of Vladimir Propp and combined with Marxist approaches, in particular those of

Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser and Raymond Williams. An early application of such a combined approach to the study of soap opera is displayed in the collection of essays in 1981 on the British social realist serial *Coronation Street* by Richard Dyer and others. (Dyer et al., 1981).

Soap Operas as Texts

The most comprehensive book so far on the soap opera genre which is informed by a structuralist/semiotic approach combined with the reader-response theory proposed by Wolfgang Iser and others, is Robert Allen's 1985 book *Speaking of Soap Opera*.

Allen focuses on the North American daytime soap opera as a textual system with a specific history and historical variations brought about by social and commercial influences. He strongly rejects a simple and immediate relationship between soap opera and reality, a relationship reflected, from his point of view, in the research based on the US tradition of empirical social science. Allen maintains that '...grasping what soap opera has come to mean requires that we examine the discursive contexts within which it has been used'. He illustrates the different light that his approach can throw on some of the results from quantitative content analysis. According to him, the disproportionately high number of characters with middle-class, professional identities in soap opera (compared to their share of the US population) has to be related to the rules of the genre because soap opera is determined by talk and preoccupied with social interaction. Middle class milieus and work environments cater for these genre prerequisites more than, for instance, a working class setting. Likewise, Allen suggests that the meaning of accidents, diseases, sexual behaviour, death and childbirth, etc. depends on their function within the narrative.

It is interesting to note that Allen explains the under-representation of black characters and characters from other minority groups which has been revealed in content analysis by referring to the paradigmatic dilemma' which such characters apparently create. According to Allen, non-white characters can be employed without major difficulties in an immediate plot line. Yet, their full incorporation into the long-term soap opera associative structure which is mainly built around kinship, romantic and social relationships, seems to be problematic. Allen comments: 'Unless a particular soap opera were to embrace interracial romance, marriage and parentage as a community norm, the admission of a non-white character into full membership in the soap community would be impossible, since two of the three relational modes would be all but closed to him or her'. This 'paradigmatic dilemma', however, is affected by external forces. 'Especially, the producers' desire not to 'upset' large numbers

of their target audience (white women) by extending the narrative boundaries of the soap opera world too far'. This conclusion implies that despite his concept of soap opera as primarily a textual construction, Allen has the entire system in mind from which soap opera evolves. The system which brings about the 'soap opera text' is, in turn, determined by its own historical evolution which is determined by the respective production systems, commercial requirements and audiences.

Another insight which Allen derives from structuralist theory is that of soap opera's paradigmatic structure. This refers to the web of associative meanings that link characters, settings, plots and stories together. The viewer's knowledge of the rules of the genre as a whole imparts additional meanings to the narrative elements of individual episodes. The viewer is able to interpret present happenings on screen by reference to his or her store of accumulated knowledge about the previous interactions of the characters and past events. This is particularly true if the soap opera has been running for a long time.

Following Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory, Allen uses the idea of the 'implicit reader', thus drawing attention to the fact that a soap opera 'text' is always put together with a particular audience in mind. Allen proposes that changing soap opera audiences and their changing attitudes had a share in transforming the genre, for example in affecting the ways young people or women were presented. Another concept used by Allen is that of 'narrative excess' or of 'an over-coded narrative'. By these phrases, Allen attempts to emphasise that soap opera texts contain many more meanings than those that would be required simply by the demands of the plot. Soap opera texts create realms of meaning and association which their audiences can absorb and explore.

Ideology and the Telenovela

Maria de la Luz Hurtado's study of the telenovela in Chile is an early example of the application of the structuralist/semiotic approach to the telenovela (i.e. earlier than the semiotic studies on soap operas in Britain and the United States). It reflects a Latin American challenge to the dominant North American approaches to the study of media content. Luz Hurtado's primary objective was to develop a model for further analysis of the telenovela based on semiotic theory. She applied this model to the analysis of the form and content of three telenovelas shown in Chile.

According to her, the central social institution of the telenovela is the extended family. The key element in the narrative structure is the binary opposition between 'love' and 'hatred', which brings about two elemental conditions of human

existence: 'happiness' and 'suffering'. However, the telenovela is not, in the classical sense, tragic; it owes much more to the traditional melodrama in which social rules and taboos may be wildly disrupted but are eventually reaffirmed. Luz Hurtado describes the typical telenovela narrative as a movement from a superficially secure initial state in which the protagonist couple who represent the 'good', possess love and happiness, through an intermediate state in which a number of adversary forces and events destroy that happiness, to a final state in which the couple find a much stronger emotional equilibrium (this is an obvious difference to the narrative structure of the Anglo/American soap opera).

Like Robert Allen in regard to the North American soap opera, the author stresses that the telenovela is not a direct but a mediated form of social representation. The main mediating factor is genre, into the structures of which a number of social norms and values have become absorbed and are now firmly inscribed.

Luz Hurtado's analysis of those norms and values brings her to the issue of ideology (in the Marxist sense of ideology as the deliberately distorted world view of the ruling class by which they justify their dominant position). She exposes the ideological nature of the restricted world-view of the melodramatic telenovela and its limited set of norms and values, which, according to her, are presented as more or less absolute, one dimensional and in isolation from historical and socio-economic contexts. Thus she draws attention to the fact that telenovela protagonists are subjected to a variety of ill-defined supernatural powers (a mixture of Christian concepts, superstition and magic) which de-emphasises the capacity of individuals to take an active role in changing their lives. Men and women follow traditional role models, and a romanticized ideal of motherhood is put forward as the supreme goal of a woman's life. Moreover, the telenovelas endorse the traditional double moral standards for men and women in sexual matters.

Luz Hurtado acknowledges that the telenovela is a prolific form of popular fiction with great appeal to a majority of people, but she is pessimistic about its likely impact on viewers. Thus, she suggests, for instance, that through its very repetitiveness, the telenovela helps to stabilize and further enculturate traditional, or to her, reactionary, values, especially among the socially deprived.

The Subversive Potential of Melodrama

However, Luz Hurtado's view regarding the ideological impact of the telenovela differs decisively from that proposed by later semiotic/structuralist studies of both the telenovela and the Anglo-American soap opera.

Thus, Robert Allen, for instance, is equally aware of the ideological implication of the restricted social reality of the US serials (e.g. a preoccupation with middle-class life styles and omission of references to socio-economic conditions). Allen warns, however, that 'we must not confuse presumed ideological intent with either reader response or ideological effect' (Allen, p. 94). A point made earlier by Terry Lovell in his analysis of the British soap opera *Coronation Street* (1981). He suggested that some readings of a soap opera text might actually be subversive of the dominant ideology. This recognition of the subversive potential of soap opera was also highlighted by Jane Feuer (1984) in her comparison of *Dallas* and *Dynasty* with the Hollywood melodramatic films of the 1950s.

This more positive view of the potential openness of the soap opera text to different readings by different audiences has been developed in the Latin American context by Jesús Martín-Barbero, a Columbian scholar who has played a key role in Latin American communication research. He has helped influence the theoretical shift away from the 'powerful media', 'powerful ideology' thesis toward a more nuanced theory of cultural development. His book, *De Los Medios a Las Mediaciones*, (1987) discussed the telenovela as one - perhaps the most important - phenomenon of Latin American popular culture (cf *Communication Research Trends* Vol. 8, No.2 (1987).

Martín-Barbero's approach combines structuralist/semiotic ideas with theories on cultural hegemony. He sees the interaction between the socially dominant and the poorer classes as a complex process of mutual adaptation and conflict, in which, according to him, the people use the media to help construct their own culture. In this context, he proposes his concept of mediation, which constitutes a shift away from the study of media content alone to an analysis of factors which operate between the text and the viewer.

He distinguishes between three different types of mediation: the context of daily life, temporal rhythms and genre. With regard to the latter, he sees the continual replay of genres, such as the telenovela, as the mediating point of interaction between the forces of mass, commercial, competitive TV and the experience of recognising cultural identity or of forming interpretations which resist the dominant ideology.

Martín-Barbero's suggestion that the telenovela expresses a popular cultural identity is related to his concept of the telenovela as an extension of the melodramatic aspects of Latin American culture. He thinks that key elements of the telenovela preserve ideas, including that of struggle against oppression, which have been sustained over centuries in the popular cultural memory.

One of Martín-Barbero's central theses is that the telenovela operates within cultural matrixes which have been enculturated through popular melodramatic forms of the past. The examples which he cites are the 19th century French and English melodramatic theatre, the French 'colportage' or feuilleton novel and the Spanish 'cordel' (ballad sheets). Martín-Barbero thinks that the radionovela and telenovela have more in common with oral narratives than with literature.

Unlike Luz Hurtado, Martín-Barbero sees the extravagances of melodrama in a positive light. Though cultural elites may view melodrama as a debased form of entertainment, Martín-Barbero sees its excesses as a form of victory over social repression. Furthermore, the primacy of the family and the local community which is so characteristic of the telenovela conserves the idea of an older social solidarity. This is seen as having particular importance for Latin American viewers, many of whom are subjected to economic hardship and brutal, uprooting migration. The older forms of melodrama which the telenovela preserves help the socially and politically marginalized and economically devalued to stay at least culturally alive and better able to resist the dominant forces of commercialization. (Martín-Barbero, 1987).

Soap Opera and Womens' Culture

Tania Modleski, 'The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Opera'. In: T. Modleski, *Loving with A Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*. Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1982.

Ellen Seiter, Hans Borchers, Gabriele Kreutzner and Eva-Maria Warth, 'Don't Treat Us Like ... Towards An Ethnography of Soap Opera Viewers'. In: Ellen Seiter et al. (Eds.) *Remote Control: Television Audiences and Cultural Power*. London/New York: Routledge, 1989.

Dorothy Hobson, 'Soap Operas at Work'. In: Ellen Seiter et al. (Eds.), op. cit.

Mary Ellen Brown 'The Politics of Soaps: Pleasure and Feminine Empowerment'. *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol.4 No. 2 (1987).

Mary Ellen Brown and Linda Barwick, 'Motive Moments: Soap Opera, Carnival, Gossip and the Power of the Utterance'. In: *Mary Ellen Brown (Ed.), Television and Women's Culture*, (forthcoming from Sage Publications' Polity Press).

The fact that soap operas and telenovelas were originally designed as advertising vehicles to attract housewives has dubbed them a female genre. This image is only barely modified by the fact that men, in particular young men (e.g. college students), also watch soap operas if they are at home during the time of broadcast. Part of the reason for the general disdain of soap operas and telenovelas may be, as some researchers suggest, because they are associated with the world of women. This is truer of American daytime serials than prime-time serials. Derry suggests that the mere words 'soap opera' (meaning daytime serial) in the United States binds those programmes to a sphere which is held to be socially unimportant, namely that of women's work. Furthermore, they are held to reflect a 'sentimental, escapist and/or hysterical sensibility'. (Derry, 1985). Some of the earlier US

research even tends to suggest that soap opera viewing has a pathological quality. (Allen, p.25).

In recent years a number of scholars from different schools of critical studies have studied the soap opera as a form which has a particular appeal to women. Thus, Horace Newcomb was prepared to call the soap opera form the furthest advanced television art because it combines intimacy and continuity, two of the most important elements of the television aesthetic. (Newcomb, 1982a).

Soap Opera and the Feminine

Tania Modleski uses Newcomb's positive assessment of the aesthetic form of the soap opera for her attempt to discover what is feminine about soap opera. Her study uses psychoanalytical approaches and she considers soap opera as product of a patriarchal society. But soap opera, because of its emphasis on dialogue and a slow-paced narrative movement, is according to Modleski, much more open to female ways of seeking pleasure than the classic film narrative, which has maximum action and minimum dialogue.

Furthermore, Modleski suggests that in soap opera climaxes are secondary (her psychoanalytical approach alluding to female sexuality) and any solution already bears the seeds of new disorder. The visual style of the soap opera with its numerous close-ups underlines intimacy. According to Modleski, it provides the spectator with training in 'reading' other people, in being sensitive to their (unspoken) feelings at any given moment. She suggests that the relation of the female viewer to the text is that of 'an ideal mother who watches her children' and 'whose sympathy is large enough to encompass the conflicting claims of her family (she identifies with them all), and who has no demands or claims of her own (she identifies with no one character exclusively)'. It has to be stressed that Modleski sees the position of 'the ideal mother' as a textually inscribed abstract reader position.

There is, however, one character which Modleski thinks is ambiguous. This is the soap opera villainess. On the one hand the spectator's anger is directed against her but on the other hand she acts out the spectator's fantasies of power. This ambiguity is enhanced by the Anglo-American soap opera's avoidance of a final resolution, so that the villainess is never finally punished. It is obvious that Modleski's concept would need modification if applied to Latin American telenovelas with a more finite narrative structure. It is also problematic with regard to British soap operas where a clear distinction between villain/ess and good characters is not easily possible.

Modleski also suggests that the narrative structure of the day-time soap opera fits into the work-routine of housewives, as indeed it was

specially designed to do. But through matching the repetitive, de-centred and often disrupted work of the housewife, soap opera, according to Modleski, may also help to condition women to be satisfied with this kind of work. Modleski also thinks that soap operas reveal some aspects of a collective female fantasy. She believes that many women dream of a fully sufficient family or community, since in reality most of them find themselves at the centre of an isolated nuclear family.

Modleski sees soap opera as a useful source of information for feminists on how a female aesthetic can operate. But since soap opera emerges from the patriarchal system, the ideas gained should be applied in the development of alternative narratives for women.

The study by Modleski has fertilized a range of subsequent research. This is especially true as regards her notion of the potential of soap opera to subvert patriarchal values. John Fiske draws on Modleski and later studies when he argues that the Anglo/American soap opera is only superficially about marriage and the family (in a feminist view marriage and the family are patriarchal institutions). The constant need for new story-lines in a continuous narrative is bound to create unstable marriages and disrupted families (Fiske, 1987). Despite his basic approval of Modleski's theses, however, Robert Allen criticizes her concept of the ideal mother. He thinks it does not take enough account of the potential of the soap opera to elicit a variety of responses from different audiences (Allen, p. 94).

The Female Audience

The ethnographic research conducted by Dorothy Hobson in Britain among six Birmingham office-workers suggests that soap operas are a part of women's working as well as domestic lives. According to Hobson, talking about soap opera at work fulfills several functions: firstly, it provides moments of leisure in work; secondly, it helps to keep viewers informed on soap opera events and strengthens their critical ability; thirdly, it is part of the group process at the place of work.

The oral dimension of soap opera as constituent of a feminine discourse is also discussed by Mary Ellen Brown (1987) and by Mary Ellen Brown and Linda Barwick (1989). Both treatises draw on qualitative research conducted among female viewers in the United States and Australia. Both articles stress the role of gossip in soap opera and about soap opera. Contrary to the established tradition (Stedman, 1971) of linking the early radio soap operas to the literary tradition of the domestic novel, Brown (1987) suggests that they are much more connected with a domestic oral tradition, such as passing on recipes and lore about childbirth.

According to her, women are still frequently excluded from public discourse, which is largely

held to be a male preserve. But women's private discourse is often depreciated as 'gossip'. Nevertheless, men have traditionally found female gossip threatening and have frequently associated it with witchcraft. Consequently, Brown and Barwick (1989) suggest that female gossip can be subversive of the patriarchal system and a source of female power. The soap opera as source and object of female gossip can therefore play a positive role in a group process, the result of which may be female empowerment, also in a political sense. This possibility is again attributed to the relative narrative openness of the endless soap opera text. This allows women to use the patriarchal myths which soap operas convey on the surface for their own purposes (Brown, 1987, p. 23). Soap opera helps to 'validate the value of a feminine culture which in masculine culture has been invalidated but not suppressed'. (Brown, 1987, p.23).

In the 1989 article Brown and Barwick compare soap opera and the role of gossip to the role which some scholars attribute to carnival in

medieval society. The medieval carnival is seen as a source of subversion and resistance for the oppressed mass of the people. According to the two authors, the cultural patterns of soap opera like those of the medieval carnival are potentially out of control. They engender an apparently purposeless, phatic discourse and constitute a playful crossing-over of established boundaries. They evoke communal laughter, which mocks the rationality and apparent logic of the dominant order (Brown and Barwick, 1989). More than Ien Ang (1985), Brown and Barwick seem to see a political significance in the pleasure which women can derive from watching soap operas. While Ang's study of Dutch viewers of *Dallas* recognizes that it gives pleasure, she finds few progressive elements in the pleasure that *Dallas* gives. Brown and Barwick (1981, p.21) are able to comment that 'This playful 'breaking of the rules' is a source of pleasure, and the act of taking that pleasure entails awareness and defiance of dominant reading practices'.

III. Soap Opera as Myth and Folk-tale

Helena Sheehan. *Irish Television Drama: A Society and Its Stories*. Dublin: Radio Telefís Éireann, 1987.

Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz. 'Dallas and Genesis: Primordality and Seriality in Popular Culture', In *Media, Myths and Narratives: Television and the Press*. James Carey (Ed.). London/ New Delhi/ Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988.

Roger Silverstone. *The Message of Television: Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Culture*. London: Hienemann, 1981.

Myth as a Collective Dream

Helena Sheehan builds her approach to the study of Irish television drama on the concept of myth as manifestation of the collective dream life of a culture or a society. However, as far as popular television serials such as *Dallas*, *Dynasty* or *Falcon Crest* are concerned, she is hesitant to call them myths in the full sense of the word. She is of the opinion that 'by the standards of the great classical myths, their characters are so shallow and so glib, their imagery is so stereotyped and debased, their plots are superficial and contrived. They produce neither illumination nor catharsis. They carry no parabolic conviction. They do not embody the values of a whole society' (p.25). She thinks that the commercial success of soap operas is due to the fact that they capture key elements in the mass psyche in that they reflect the collective fears and aspirations, neuroses and nightmares of Americans. According to this author, it becomes even more complicated, as the images of television serials from one culture 'enter the dream life of other cultures and interact with their own indigenous images'.

Soap Opera and Biblical Myths

A somewhat different concept of myth is employed by Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes. This concept is based on Claude Lévi-Strauss' work on myth and Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco's

theory of semiotics. Lévi-Strauss sees myth as engendered by fundamental, insoluble questions of the human existence in general. Nevertheless, the different myths are imbedded into a particular culture or social structure and one basic myth can bring forth different variations in different cultures. Barthes emphasizes the mythological dimension of any discourse once it enters an oral state and is appropriated by society. Liebes and Katz see these concepts of myth reflected in the text of *Dallas* and the way viewers from different ethnic backgrounds respond to it and they draw parallels to the book of Genesis.

Central notions in their analysis are 'primordality' and 'seriality'. Primordality with regard to *Dallas* means that it is basically about family, kinship and the continuation of the lineage and the struggle for power between two antagonistic clans. Liebes and Katz see the same structure reflected in Genesis: 'Just as our forefathers were the giants of their time, dividing the world among themselves, so the characters in *Dallas* fill the whole of the frame dwarfing governments and shutting out any aspect of the real world that they do not control' (p.118).

Likewise, the two authors see an analogy between such archetypal pairs of brothers as Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau and others and J.R. and Bobby in *Dallas*. The authors contend that in

Canaan and in *Dallas* there is concern for the continuity of the house, and in both stories the key women have fertility problems repeatedly failing to produce an heir (p.119). The cross-cultural appeal of *Dallas*, according to Liebes and Katz, is due to the fact that 'all viewers - each at his own level of sophistication and embedded in his own culture - will find familiar the narrative of the embroilments of kinship, and can become involved in how these characters are organizing their lives by comparison with all the other kinship texts we know' (p.120).

The second key notion expounded by Liebes and Katz is 'seriality'. According to them, the serial form allows for greater character development, more ambiguity and more complexity. Furthermore, they stress that the serial form parallels reality and contains the potential to evoke para-social interaction with the characters who also enter the oral world of the viewers (through gossip).

Again they see some principles underlying the serial also operating in the Bible. 'If repetitiveness is essential to seriality, one may say that *Dallas* re-enacts the same story with the same characters (they marry, unmarry, remarry continually; they die and are resurrected, and so on), while *Genesis* repeats the same stories in successive generations' (p.120).

A similar concept of myth to that of Liebes and Katz is also expounded by Maria de la Luz

Hurtado. For her the myth and ideology of the telenovela, with its circular, ahistoric sense of time, works in Latin American society because there are strong residues of non-scientific thinking in Latin American culture. (Luz Hurtado, 1976).

Soap Operas, Folk-tales and the Mythic

Silverstone suggests that such residues exist in any industrialized society and are located in a sphere which he defines as 'the mythic'. He thinks that television programmes in general, and soap opera in particular, have more similarities to folk-tales than myths. Silverstone follows Meletinsky when he suggests a transformation from myth to folk-tale which is a movement from the cosmic to the social and individual level. He stresses, however, the difficulty in defining what myth, folktale and ritual are. All three are supposedly preserves of 'primitive', pre-literate societies and cultures.

Silverstone, therefore, develops the idea of the 'mythic' sphere, constituted by those features which myth, ritual and folk-tale have in common. His objective is to locate the mythic in contemporary, industrialized societies. He sees the mythic located in the borderline areas between a common-sense system of beliefs, and the realm of specialist or scientific knowledge and that of the unknown. Silverstone himself applies his concept only to the analysis of a 13 episode television series and not to a continuous long-running serial.

IV. Recent Studies of the Soap Opera/Telenovela Audience

Empirical research on soap opera audiences was pioneered by Herta Herzog, Frank Stanton, Rudolf Arnheim and other researchers at the Paul Lazarsfeld Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University in the 1930s and 1940s. That research, which for over thirty years remained the definitive study of the soap opera audience, was, in part, inspired by the interest of the commercial radio networks NBC and CBS (Lazarsfeld and Stanton, 1944). Another early study was that undertaken by two Chicago University anthropologists, W. Lloyd Warner and William E. Henry, into the audience for radio serials (Warner and Henry, 1948).

In contrast to the early studies on the radio soap opera audience, more recent scholarly research on the soap opera and the telenovela which started to emerge in the 1970s and which has become more frequent in the 1980s was initially preoccupied with contents. Only from about the middle of the 1980s onwards have

empirical studies on the soap opera audience gradually become the dominant research trend.

There has long existed, however, a considerable amount of quantitative research on soap opera audiences by the broadcasting companies, at least in those countries where regular audience research is firmly established. In a number of countries this quantitative research has been refined by the uses and gratifications approach developed by academic researchers.

Uses and Gratifications Research

Dafna Lemish. 'Soap Opera Viewing in College: A Naturalistic Inquiry'. In *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*. Vol. 29, 3 (Summer 1985). pp.275-293.

Alan M. Rubin. 'Uses of Daytime Television Soap Operas by College Students'. In *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*. Vol.29, 3 (Summer 1985). pp.241-258.

The pioneering study on the radio daytime-serial listeners conducted by Herta Herzog in 1942 (Herzog, 1944) is an early example of the application of a uses and gratifications approach. This approach envisions an audience which uses

the medium to gratify its specific needs. It was developed in opposition to the stimulus/response approach common in those days.

Herzog's study, which was commissioned by broadcasting networks, is still often cited as the foundation of more recent research on the soap opera audience. She postulated three primary reasons why listeners tuned into radio serials: emotional release, fantasy fulfillment and a desire for information and advice from favourite serial characters.

Although Herzog and her colleagues found that listening to radio soap operas was an activity predominantly pursued by women of all social classes, there was a tendency in their research to define the 'typical' soap opera listener. She was a married woman between the ages of 18 and 35 who lived in a rural area. Her formal education had ended with a high school diploma or less. Her interests were mainly home-directed, and she had little outside entertainment or other hobbies. (Matelski, 1988).

Since then, the uses and gratifications approach has been applied extensively and a range of more or less universal typologies has emerged. Dafna Lemish summarizes three main sources from which viewers' gratifications are generally supposed to stem. 1. The content of the medium; 2. exposure to the medium; and 3. the social context of media use. According to her, these three dimensions comprise three clusters of gratifications, which can be grouped under the three categories: information, entertainment and social functions.

Students and Soap Operas

Lemish's and Rubin's studies reflect the extension of the US soap opera audience, for example, to include college students. Lemish conducted an exploratory on-campus study among students of Ohio State University, watching the daytime soap opera *General Hospital*. Through participant observation and relatively open interviews, she identified different types of soapopera viewers with different roles in the reception process: leader, follower, challenger and observer. She also observed ritualized use (habitual, undifferentiated, for diversionary reasons) and instrumental use (more goal-directed use of specific content) of the soap opera.

Alan Rubin conducted a survey of a random sample of 1023 students from 11 US universities. An interesting finding was that the more students expressed dissatisfaction with life, the more involved they seemed to be with soap opera stories and characters. Dissatisfaction with life, however, did not necessarily imply a higher consumption of soap operas. On the other hand, those students with a higher level of satisfaction with life seemed to be more interactive with others and appeared to watch fewer soap operas.

Soap Opera Watching and The Cultivation Process

Rodney Carveth and Alison Alexander. 'Soap Opera Viewing Motivations and the Cultivation Process'. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*. Vol. 3 (Summer 1985). pp. 259-273.

Carveth and Alexander's research is informed by cultivation effects theory, as proposed by George Gerbner and colleagues, and some aspects of uses and gratifications. Their study of 265 students of one US university, had similar results to an earlier study by Buerkel-Rothfuss and Mayes (1981). Both studies found that frequent viewers of soap operas are more likely than non-viewers to overestimate the size of certain occupational groups in the real world, such as doctors, lawyers and similarly frequent soap opera professions. They found also a tendency to overestimate the incidence of behaviour such as divorce or having illegitimate children. But there was only limited evidence to correlate such apparent effects with the number of years the students had watched regularly. The authors hypothesize that the main cultivation effect of the soap opera genre is a distorted perception of certain types of human relations.

Relating viewing motives to cultivation effects, the study found the strongest links between viewing as escapism and the amount of soap opera watching. They conclude that individuals who frequently and ritualistically select the soap opera genre as an undemanding activity, may be most vulnerable to its message.

Ethnographic and Other Qualitative Approaches

Ellen Seiter, Hans Borchers, Gabriele Kreutzner and Eva-Maria Warth. 'Don't Treat Us Like We're Stupid and Naive: Towards an Ethnography of Soap Opera Viewers'. In Ellen Seiter et al. (Eds.) *Remote Control: Television Audiences and Cultural Power*. London/New York: Routledge, 1989.

Leoncio Barrios. 'Television, Telenovelas and Family Life in Venezuela'. In James Lull (Ed.). *World Families Watch Television*. London/New Delhi/Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988.

Rosa Maria Alfaro Moreno. 'Los Usos Sociales Populares de Las Telenovelas en el Mundo Urbano'. *Estudios Sobre Las Culturas Contemporaneas*. 1988. nos. 4/5)

The articles reviewed in this section represent research on soap opera viewers which uses methods such as open interviews with individuals or groups, small group discussions or participant observation in viewers' homes. This research can be tentatively labelled as critical and is uneasy with the dominant empirical audience research tradition. These studies share the concept of the active viewer of the uses and gratifications approach. But they do not focus on individual or psychological needs which soap opera watching may gratify. Rather, they see the reception of soap operas linked to the social, historical, cultural and ideological contexts of viewers' lives.

There seem to be two major strands in this type of critical qualitative research. The first is derived from the structuralist/semiotic concept of the text and its presumed role in the production of cultural and social patterns. In addition, a

number of Latin American researchers are particularly influenced by Martín-Barbero's concept of mediating cultural factors which operate between the viewers and the television contents (Martín-Barbero, 1987). Important key themes in this strand of research, which were partially anticipated by textual analysis are: critical competence, the negotiation of meaning, the production of meaning and the pleasure of watching. The second strand is the family sociological approach to the uses and functions of the media in everyday life. Important key themes in this research are: mediation of media contents by the communicative structure of the family, different styles of media use and the role of the media in the everyday routine of family life.

Women Viewers and Soap Opera Characters

The German and American research team of Seiter, Borchers, Warth and Kreutzner conducted 26 ethnographic group interviews with viewers in western Oregon as part of a more extensive project on American soap operas. The majority of the interviewees were working-class. Borchers et al., tried to find empirical evidence of the ideal mother reader position which Modleski thinks is prescribed by the soap opera narrative. Seiter and Kreutzner contend that the reader position of the ideal mother is taken by some middle class women but this position is also, especially by working-class women, consciously resisted and rejected vehemently.

While Modleski suggests that the anger of the female viewer is directed at the villainess in an ambivalent love/hatred relationship and thus neutralized, Seiter and Kreutzner present evidence that hostility is also often directed at presumably sympathetic characters. On the other hand, supposedly despised villainesses frequently enjoy fond admiration. 'It is not the villainess whom these working-class informants despise. It is the woman who suffers despite her middle-class privileges, a character type they call the 'whiner' or 'the wimpy woman'. A number of the Oregon interviewees expressed their desire that at least a few ordinary soap opera characters in more difficult social situations, similar to their own social positions, should be included. This suggests that similar interviews would probably have different results in Britain where the main indigenous soap operas feature working-class or lower-middle class characters.

Interpreting the Soap Opera Text

Hans Borchers deals primarily with viewers' genre competences and three points seem of particular importance: 1. The fact that viewers draw on the viewing of others to master the huge amounts of soap opera texts. Borchers that 'soap opera texts are the products not of individuals and isolated readings, but of collective constructions, collaborative readings, as it were of small

social groups such as families, friends and neighbours, or people sharing an apartment'. 2. The interviews revealed that viewers generally had a strong sense of the artificiality of soap operas. This kind of genre competence also showed itself in a playful handling of the soap opera texts, in which the use of video recorders played a role (segments classified as unexciting or meaningless were simply skipped). 3. Borchers also reports, however, direct responses to and feelings of intimacy with characters. He points out, furthermore, that experienced viewers 'commute with considerable ease between a referential and a purely fictional reading - even if these readings appear to be mutually exclusive'.

Patterns of Viewing in the Home

Eva-Maria Warth looked at the West Oregon interview material to find evidence of the relation between daytime soap operas and house-work. She suggests that in the temporal organisation of industrialized society, which also embraces the domestic sphere, soap operas, like television and radio in general, help to structure the housewife's working day. A number of women in the interviews conceded that they arrange their house-work around their favourite soap opera.

Warth, like other ethnographic researchers, stresses that there is no clear spatial demarcation between work and leisure for the housewife. Watching soap operas can therefore mark an interval of leisure for the housewife. But the mode of watching differs considerably according to the style of work of different housewives. Only those whose work is highly organized (similar to a non-domestic work routine) can afford the luxury of sitting down and watching their favourite soap opera with undivided attention; housewives who do their work in a less structured way (similar to a pre-industrial way of working) often do not manage to preserve a small space of leisure to watch a soap opera with full attention. In the latter case, Modleski's notion of the de-centred viewing-experience is empirically confirmed. 'The soap opera text becomes reduced to what can be heard while working in different parts of the house'.

The research of Leonico Barrios in Venezuela seems to suggest that there the watching of telenovelas is a more recognized space of leisure for the housewife than soap opera watching for the US housewife, though it is problematic to generalize on the basis of limited ethnographic research. Barrios writes: 'Most of the housekeepers watch TV while cooking, cleaning, or sewing. But this behavior changes at the time of the telenovelas. While watching telenovelas, viewers do not do anything else, they do not want to be disturbed, and, if possible, they isolate themselves'. This seems to happen even in large families who have a minimum of living space.

Leoncio Barrios' study was based on participant observation and open interviews in 13 urban Venezuelan families of different social conditions. His research considers the modes and functions of watching television in general. He found that the telenovela had the most important position in the viewing habits of families, especially for women, but also for men and children. Among other things his findings suggest that the telenovela constitutes an important factor in the time organization of the families and is a source of social learning.

In contrast to Leoncio Barrios' general research, Maria Alfaro Moreno's ethnographic study focusses exclusively on the telenovela. Her sample comprised 18 families of different social backgrounds in Lima, Peru. She used participant observation, in-depth interviews with a biographical dimension and group analysis of individual episodes of telenovelas.

Like Barrios, Alfaro Moreno also finds the activity of watching telenovelas firmly tied in with the rituals and habits of work and leisure of families. According to her, the afternoon telenovelas are mainly watched by women and, especially in the poorer families, is often a public occasion where people from the neighbourhood (the *barrio*) join in. In the evening watching telenovelas becomes a more private activity which in most cases is restricted to the family circle, inclusive of men and children. The telenovela also becomes a factor in the emotional structure of the family and the interaction between individual members.

On a more cognitive level, Alfaro Moreno found, again especially in the poorer families, an astounding memory for details from the telenovelas and a remarkable capacity to imagine scenes continuing storylines. In this context she suggests that there is evidence of a continuation between the melodrama of life and that of the genre. Furthermore, she reports evidence that the para-social interaction with characters and contents of the telenovela helps viewers to develop their social identities. This was found to be particularly significant with the members of lower class families who had recently migrated to the city and in whom the telenovelas helped to develop an urban mentality and identity.

Cultural Studies and Empirical Psychology: A Synthesized Approach to the Study of The Soap Opera Audience

Sonia Livingstone. 'Viewers' Interpretations of Soap Opera Characters' in Philip Drummond and Richard Paterson (Eds.), *Television and Its Audience: International Research Perspectives*. London: British Film Institute, 1988a.

Sonia Livingstone. 'Why People Watch Soap Opera: An Analysis of the Explanations of British Viewers.' *European Journal of Communication*, Vol 3.1 (1988b).

Sonia Livingstone's research, is also partially motivated by the desire to find empirical evidence for the conclusions of textual analysis

concerning the viewer. Livingstone, however, who as a social psychologist stands more in the research tradition of uses and gratifications and cultivation theory proposes to synthesize elements from semiotic/structuralist text analysis with the dominant research paradigm of the empirical social sciences. Her research shares some characteristics with the research conducted in Israel and the United States by Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz (see below Soap Opera Part of National or International Media Culture?)

According to Livingstone, the soap opera experience has proved too complex to be grasped in its totality by the uses and gratifications approach and the soap opera text with its multiple messages makes it 'difficult to identify the message required by cultivation analysis'. (Livingstone, 1988b). That is why she deems it necessary to combine those approaches with a knowledge of textual semantics.

The articles discussed here summarize three exploratory studies on how viewers in Great Britain perceive the soap opera genre, or some of its textual elements. In those studies Livingstone proposes, in contrast to the traditional effects research, to first advance knowledge on the mechanisms of the modes in which television achieves its effects. (Livingstone, 1988a). Furthermore, she sees her research as a step in the direction pointed out by Kim Schroeder (1987), to devise a method 'which combines the insightfulness and detail of the qualitative approach with the generality and economy of quantification'.

The first article listed above (1988a) summarizes two exploratory research projects on British viewers' characterisation (since character is a key element in the textual structure of soap opera) of the people in *Dallas* and *Coronation Street*. Her two research panels comprised socially varied groups of 45 regular viewers of *Dallas* and 58 regular viewers of *Coronation Street*. The subjects were asked to group the regular characters of the two serials according to their perceived personalities. The researcher then used multidimensional scaling methods to uncover viewers' implicit representation of characters. In a second phase one smaller sample of viewers were asked to allocate pairs of oppositional qualities derived from semiotic text analysis to the respective serial character. One result of this research is that a number of the postulations of semiotic text analysis concerning the viewers (e.g. in the semiotic analysis of *Coronation Street* of Dyer et al.) were confirmed in the way in which viewers' represented the characters. Femininity in *Coronation Street*, for instance, was allocated by the viewers to a different space than psychological gender stereotyping theories would normally presume. 'Femininity in *Coronation Street* is not of the traditional variety which is related to irrationality, softness or weakness, as social psychologists propose, but is more matriarchal in

character. Femininity is related to maturity, warmth, centrality to the community and sociability, in contrast to the rather more cold and childish masculinity of the male characters'. However, a similar confirmation of the suppositions of textual analysis in viewers' expressed perception was not found to be true of the category 'class' in *Coronation Street*. Livingstone concludes that class was irrelevant for viewers who did not discriminate among characters implicitly in terms of their class. She suggests that there are several possible reasons for this but one conclusion could be 'that theorists and viewers simply have different knowledge and interests and therefore make divergent readings'.

The second article (1988b) summarizes an explanatory study in which 52 soap opera viewers were asked to write down the reasons 'Why soap opera is so popular'. In a first stage the researcher could elicit eight superordinate categories encompassing a range of subordinate categories from the answers. The answers, in these categories, were then coded by two different coders independently. The eight superordinate categories were in order of frequency of mention: escapism, realism, relationship with characters, critical response, problem-solving, role in viewer's life, emotional experience and entertainment. There were some differences in the perception of and relation to British and American soap operas.

(To be continued in vol. 10, no. 2.)

COMMUNICATION RESEARCH TRENDS

Published four times a year by the Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture ISSN 0144-4646

Editor-in-Chief: Leo A. Murray S.J.

Editors: William E. Biernatzki S.J.,
James McDonnell, Maria Way

Subscription:

Individual 1 Volume US\$12.00 (UK£ 7.00)

Institutional 1 Volume US\$18.00 (UK£10.00)

Student 1 Volume US\$10.00 (UK£ 6.00)

Payment in US\$, UK£, International Money Order or Giro Transfer 52 596 0805

Address all correspondence to:

COMMUNICATION RESEARCH TRENDS

221 Goldhurst Terrace, FAX NO: 071-372-1193

London NW6 3EP, England TEL NO: 071-328-2868

E-Mail (BITNET): UTAD001@MVS.ULCC.AC.UK

Typesetting by ULCC Typesetting London

Printing by Roebuck Press, Mitcham, Surrey.

The CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF
COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

is an international service for communication research
established by the Jesuits in 1977.

Executive Director: Leo A. Murray S.J.

Documentalist: Stuart Way

International Board of Advisors: Joseph A. Munitiz
S.J. (Oxford), Carlos Valle (London), Nim Gonzalez S.J.
(Manila), Rüdiger Funiok S.J. (München), Peter Henrici
S.J. (Rome).

A REQUEST TO OUR READERS

The Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture is in the initial stages of preparing a book designed to highlight areas of communication research of priority interest to religious communication specialists and others concerned with the interactions between communication questions and religion. We should like to invite anyone with a special interest in religious communication or in the effects of secular communication on religious or moral matters to write to us giving the writer's opinions about what research topics or areas ought to receive special attention during the 1990s. We would also like to know some general information about the writer's own background in communication matters (practitioner, researcher, student, teacher, etc.), and any other information which may seem relevant, in order to help us understand the perspective from which the remarks are made.

Please send your views to:

'Topics'
CSCC

221 Goldhurst Terrace
London NW6 3EP
England