Effects of watching soap operas | research

" Shaping Minds: The Soap Opera and the Power of Representation"

Abstract

In this thesis I aim to identify what the younger British public find engaging about Soap Operas, and to identify some of the processes at work during viewing, which might alter or enhance the ways in which we see the world. Focusing specifically on the relationship between popular media and the attitudes of young people towards sex and social class, research addresses the power of media representation, the use of role models, and how popular media encourages the viewer to make social distinctions and reinforces our ideas of classification. My research examines the influence of popular programmes, such as Sex and the City, and Australian and British Soap Operas, and throughout the thesis I refer to the theoretical approaches of Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, where I discuss the paradoxes latent in both the logic and language that people generally perceive to be stable and fundamental to social order. I also consider systems of classification and how the act of perceiving the validity and existence of such distinctions creates them. Conclusions drawn suggest that people consider soap viewing to be more dangerous in hindsight, whereas younger people do not recognise, or are less willing to recognise the inherent influences of soap story lines. Research does conclude that most people do consider soap operas to present an unrealistic portrayal of family life and relationships.

Introduction

Before the seventies a relatively small and largely irrelevant body of research existed that was solely based around soap operas, and it was only at that point when soaps began to assume a position as a topic of interest

(LaGuardia 1974, 1977; Stedman 1971; Weibel 1977. In Blumenthal, p. 43), as well as an area worthy of academic research (Katzman 1972; McAdown 1974; Newcomb 1974. *Ibid*). As Blumenthal openly writes ' there were those who simply were " against them," or found them " silly."' (Blumenthal, p. 43). The context for this research formed out of a perceived gap in current research topics between the effects of media on children and adults, with relatively few projects being based solely upon teenagers and young people. As noted by Hawk et al (2006) much public and scientific concern has been expressed regarding the influence of sex in the mainstream media on children's sexual development, such as Greenfield, 2004. However, fewer studies have studied in depth the relationships between adolescents' viewing of sexual content in the media and their own sexual behaviours and attitudes, and of those studies which do exist many are subject to severe limitations such as small samples, and narrow focus on a single type of sexual outcome, such as incidence of intercourse (Peterson et al., 1991. In Hawk et al, 2006: 352). An important consideration for the topic of this research also rested upon the observance that it is less common for research into sexual attitudes to be combined with attitudes towards social class; the decision to marry these two topics derived from the consideration that British soap operas more often represent the working class, whereas Australian soap operas mostly refer to middle class families. It was therefore an interesting research proposition to consider whether attitudes towards sex and class are being shaped by the type of target audience that these programmes are being aimed at. Although the present study does not focus on the extent to which women only are influenced by viewing soap operas, it does recognise that a large body of research exists on women and soap

operas, and that more useful responses might be given by women respondents.

Methodology

In considering the methodology for this project it was decided that in order to achieve a more comprehensive collection of data – with specific personal reactions to media – that primary data – in the forms of questionnaires and interviews – should be used, rather than basing the thesis purely on secondary textual and resource analyses. As some critics suggest, textual analysis cannot always enlighten us as to what goes on in the minds of viewers – and often relies upon inference and speculation (Dow, 1996). Secondary materials used for this project also include journals, articles, and books which have attempted to define the relationship between viewers and popular media. Results and findings are discussed using the research of theorists such as Adorno and Fiske; this was decided in order to encompass opinions which span a broad spectrum of relevant ideas, and are useful for how they illustrate the contrasts present in media research.

Participants

Participants who filled in only questionnaires were obtained by contacting high schools and middle schools, mostly in urban areas, that agreed to participate in data collection. Fifteen schools (who had their own colleges for 17-19 year olds) were initially randomly selected and contacted, 10 of which agreed to participate. As this project did not aim to highlight how attitudes might vary between age and race the identity and nationalities of respondents were not obtained. This was also decided upon because the '

blind' questionnaire offered school pupils more scope to provide false answers, especially concerning age and gender. In total there were 200 pupil responses with ages ranging from 12 to 18. As part of gathering primary data slightly different form of questionnaire (see Appendix Two) was presented to a random selection of young adults. This sample was achieved by approaching people on the street in a local town during rush hour. The only criteria that the second lot of respondents had to meet was that they were aged 30 or under – this was to ensure that recall of their watching soap operas during their teens would be more likely to be more accurate. Furthermore, this age limit was necessary considering the ages of the programmes themselves, many of which have been running approximately 20 years or less. In the random sample interview it was possible to make a note of gendered responses

Questionnaire and Interview Design

In the interviewing techniques selected for this project it was decided to use a combination of single and multiple choice options and include questions which encouraged respondents to give subjective views and opinions. Contact with sexual and class content in the mainstream media, as represented through the viewing of soap operas and popular programmes, was measured by asking respondents on a four point scale the degree to which they felt that their favourite programme had influenced their ideas concerning these issues. In order to account for the differences in age between the two sets of respondents it was decided that when questioning the elder set that questions should include a retrospective option. For example, when questioning people about the influence of soaps on their

opinions the question would read: " Would you say that watching this programme has – or might have done so in the past – altered your understanding of sexual relationships?"

Chapter One: Literature Review

The Meaning and Origins of Popular Culture

Over the last few decades ' culture' has become frequently used to denote changing tastes and popularity in appreciation of interests such as music, art, theatre. As noted by Peter Goodall the word 'culture' is consistently made use of by journalists and politicians, and especially by people studying within the Humanities (Goodall, 1995). The same author also notes that the word 'culture' has become an ' increasingly empty term […] more frequently it is used, the more regularly it seems to need another word to prop it up and define its field of reference.' (Goodall, 1995: xii). Take, for example, the term ' police culture', says Goodall, and the term ' welfare culture': does the word promise to mean more because these areas of society actually have little in common with one another? In both contexts the word ' promises much [..] but delivers little; it poses as a noun but it is really an adjective' where ' culture' means little more than ''group behaviour', ' practice' or ' shared assumptions'.' (*Ibid).*

The phenomenon of popular culture and the ease with which it has spread across the Western world, owes much to the existence of television, radio, and, more recently, the Internet. It was the Queen's Coronation that begun the television age, with half the adult population watching the ceremony on TV sets; and most of these people not owning their own television at the time (Karwowski: 2002: 281). Statistics show that in 1951, the only available

BBC channel had just 600, 000 viewers, and that by the end of the century, watching TV was the most popular leisure activity – with 94 per cent of homes having at least one colour TV and 66 per cent a video cassette recorder (*Ibid).* Karwowski highlights the following televised programmes as being central to the historical analysis of popular culture:

- the Queen's Coronation

- The Goon Show – from June 1952 to January 1960, described as ' a surreal form of humour that lampooned all forms of pomposity and hypocrisy.' (Karwowski: 2002: 281).

- Situation comedies such as Till Death Us Do Part

- 60s TV comedies, such as That Was The Week That Was and Monty Python's Flying Circus

- Independent TV (ITV) began broadcasting in 1955. The number of TV channels grew to three with the start-up of BBC 2 in 1964, to four with Channel 4 in 1982, and five with Channel 5 in 1997, while colour TV was available from 1968.

- British Costume Drama, portraying English novelists such as Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and Evelyn Waugh

- Educational documentaries such as Sir Kenneth Clark's Civilisation (1969), Dr Jacob Bronowski's The Ascent of Man (1973) and Sir David Attenborough's Life on Earth (1979)

- Walking with Dinosaurs

- Children's programmes, such as Mole's Christmas and the BBC's Teletubbies to more than 125. Quiz programmes such as the BBC's

- Quiz shows, such as The Weakest Link, and detective series such as Inspector Morse, currently being seen in 211 countries.

However, KarwowskI observes that ' all these genres become mere niche markets when compared to the ' soap opera', which has around a third of the nation addicted to its multifarious expressions.' (2005: 282). In the UK, the most popular soap is Coronation Street, longest running since 1960, is as popular in Canada and New Zealand, with the Coronation Street web site having more ' hits' from Canada than anywhere else. (*Ibid).*

What we see in soap operas is often designed to provoke an empathic response in the mind of the viewer. Soap viewing can offer very contrasting experiences – sometimes alienating or even shocking the viewer, and other times offering emotional support and guidance concerning difficult issues. It is perhaps this ' mixed bag' effect of soap viewing – when a person is never sure what content will shape their viewing experience – that make soap viewing so popular. Media theory questions how knowledge is received and understood by the audience. Charlotte Brunsdon once said that " the pursuit of the audience" can be characterized " as a search for authenticity, for an anchoring moment in a sea of signification" (1990, p. 68). The interpretations of the complex relationship between the viewer and the viewed have been controversial and often, contrasting; for example, Theodor Adorno believed that the influence held over the public by mass media was potentially harmful and brainwashing, whereas John Fiske wrote that work should focus on viewers' interpretation of what they saw – that the viewer

had autonomy over the extent to which they would absorb and articulate the information presented (Gauntlett, 2002). Fiske also used the term ' polysemy' to refer to the potential for audiences to decode texts in varying ways (Fiske, 1986). Dow presents her idea that the viewer has almost complete autonomy over how they interpret what they see, saying that:

" The most powerful claim of audience studies has been that " real" viewers often resist the dominant messages of television and interpret programming in ways that suit their own interests [..] Intentional or not, such judgments cast the differences between approaches within the framework of a zero-sum game in which only one party can be right, making the other automatically wrong." (Dow, 1996: 2)

Dow also suggest that it is not possible to completely disassociate oneself from the object of criticism because of the cultural and social interests which are shared by both the critic and the creator of the media in question. Furthermore, criticism becomes less about discovering meaning in texts and becomes more of a performative activity that is about creating meaning.

Sex and Identity

Part of the idea for this project was born out of the premise that there exists a strong link between ideas about sexual relationships and a young person's sense of identity. It is an aim of this project to explore the degree to which hindsight might affect a person's belief as to whether they have been influenced by what they have seen on soaps. Research has been conducted into the damaging nature of representation in popular media – especially into the use of models or ' ideal' body types; what Virginia Blum calls the '

yardstick' of the ' Other Woman' against which women measures their imperfections. For the ' twenty-first century Western woman,' says Blum, ' who is always evaluating her appearance (intimately bound up with her identity) in relation to some standard that must be Other in order to function as a standard' (Blum, 2005: 27). Gauntlett cites research findings on women in prime time TV in the early nineties as being ' young, single, independent, and free from family and work place pressures' (Elasmar, Hasegawa and Brain, 1999: 33. In Gauntlett: 2002, 59). Gauntlett goes on to suggests that the 1990's saw the use of inoffensive models of masculinity and femininity, which were generally acceptable to the majority of the public, and that this reflected producers' beliefs that they no longer needed to challenge gender representations (*Ibid).* In the case of the sitcom *Friends* the use of male and female models of represnetation were equal. As Gauntlett explains:

" The three men (Ross, Chandler and Joey) fit easily within conventional models of masculinity, but are given some characteristics of sensitivity and gentleness, and male-bonding, to make things slightly refreshing. Similarly, the three women (Rachel, Monica and Phoebe) are clearly feminine, whilst being sufficiently intelligent and non-housewifey to seem like acceptable characters for the 1990s. The six were also, of course, originally all characters with a good set of both male and female friendships – i. e. each other – and the friendship circle was a refreshing modern replacement for the traditional family. (It was not long, of course, before they spoilt that by having Ross and Rachel, then – more implausibly – Monica and Chandler fall in love.)" (Gauntlett, p. 59)

In most soaps there exists a core set of characters who form the firm basis of the on-screen reality. If these core characters were to change too often then the soap loses credibility, and becomes an unreal parallel of the world that it is trying to represent. It is important that themes such as sex and class are presented in a coherent and consistent way. As Gauntlett's comment on *Friends* suggests – this is sometimes not the case as the idea of quasi family is ' quashed' by the sexual dynamics within the group, thus complicating the original idea.

The Concept of Transformation

It is a premise of this project that women might be more likely to have experienced closer identification with soaps than men. Although it was beyond the scope of this project to direct an in-depth inquiry into this premise, the questionnaire nevertheless attempted to explore whether there was a gender divide, although this attempt was limited due to the size of the questionnaire. As academic and soap viewer, Danielle Blumenthal, is quoted as saying:

Soap operas . . . a connection with other women, beloved to me: my mother, grandmother, aunt, sister . . . a steady stream of modern folktales that symbolically link us together. Memories abound: racing off the schoolbus to catch the last ten minutes of *General Hospital* ; laughing with Grandma over the plotline antics of *Days of Our Lives* ; worrying over the lives of characters I cared about; endless feverish conversations with girlfriends, sister, aunt over who should do what, how, and with whom. (Blumenthal, 1997: 3)

In her publication on feminist perspectives and soap operas, Blumenthal refers to soap opera viewing as a ' specific cultural activity' questioning how much the activity is an ' empowering practice–or, " praxis"–for women to engage in.' (*Ibid,* p. 4). The term praxis, Marxist criticism has been defined as meaning " conscious physical labor directed toward transforming the material world so it will satisfy human needs" (Rothman 1989: 170. In Blumenthal, 1997: 3). Blumenthal extends this interpretation to mean not only physical, but also mental labour, ' which transforms images and experience to meet human needs.' (*Ibid).* The concept can also be interpreted as a belief that ' social objects do not simply exist " out there" in space, but are mediated through a continual process of interpretation and construction by the subjective and socially oriented mind.' (*Ibid).* ' Girl Power,' and themes which identify the strengths in women's attitudes are not limited to the sitcom or the soap opera, in fact they occur, to some degree, within just about every form of visual media – and are mediated by the minds of the programmes creators to be received by the viewing public.

The concept of transformation is prevalent in most media – where women use their new image to take control of their lives and turn around situations. For example, Barbra Streisand's 1996 film, *The Mirror Has Two Faces* , uses the idea of a before and after to provide tension and contrast within the film. In this film, the character Rose is transformed by losing weight and dying her hair – this secures the physical adoration of her husband who married her for her ' inner self.' While the film encourages viewers to identify with Barbara Streisand it also reinforces the ideal of transformation, where the heroine does not settle for less, but dares to achieve more. Rachel Moseley, in her

publication on feminist cultural perspectives, fashion, and media, observes that within these Cinderella stories there exists a ' moment of increased visibility which provides a space for both the visual pleasure offered showcasing of the transformation, but also for the articulation of the anxiety and emotional resonance of 'coming out' in relation to class, as well as gender.' (Moseley, 2002: p. 40). In British and Australian soaps the concept of transformation is readily embraced – not least within the lives of individual characters, but within each episode itself – so as to create a mini section of a greater storyline. The world of the soap opera is fluid and dynamic – it moves along at a much faster rate than reality off-screen, with new ideas and events constituting change on many levels. Blumenthal's ideas concerning the ' transformation' of images is particularly useful here as it might help to explain how the serial relationships of soap characters are interpreted by the viewer. In soaps, it is often the case that characters who are not married engage in a string of successive relationships, which sets an unreal precedent to viewers, especially younger viewers. Media critic Mary-Lou Galician, in her publication *Sex, Love & Romance in the Mass Media* lists twelve false premises which are regularly promoted within, and associated with, mass media; all of which she defines as ' myths and stereotypes' (2004: p. x):

1. " Your perfect partner is cosmically predestined, so nothing/nobody can ultimately separate you.
2. There's such a thing as " love at first sight. "
3. Your true soul mate should KNOW what you're thinking or feeling without your having to tell.

4. If your partner is truly meant for you, sex is easy and wonderful.

5. To attract and keep a man, a woman should look like a model or a centerfold.

6. The man should NOT be shorter, weaker, younger, poorer, or less successful than the woman.

7. The love of a good and faithful true woman can change a man from a " beast" into a " prince. "

8. Bickering and fighting a lot mean that a man and a woman really love each other passionately.

9. All you really need is love, so it doesn't matter if you and your lover have very different values.

10. The right mate " completes you" — filling your needs and making your dreams come true.

11. In real life, actors and actresses are often very much like the romantic characters they portray.

12. Since mass media portrayals of romance aren't " real, " they don't really affect you." (2004: ix)

Many social critics and relationship therapists have blamed the mass media for brainwashing viewers with portrayals of unrealistic love that are ' unattainable as a goal and unhealthy as a model and, thereby, contributing to the construction of these unrealistic expectations' (Dyer, 1976; Fromm, 1956; Johnson, 1983; Norwood, 1985; Peele, 1975; Russianoff, 1981; Shapiro & Kroeger, 1991; Shostrom & Kavanaugh, 1971. In Galician, 2004: p. 13.). Certainly, many soap operas under discussion in this thesis are guilty of this

phenomenon, and are suggestive of the idea that it is unfashionable or abnormal to be single. For example, as Glass writes:

" Who can take seriously a character saying, as one does in the televised version of Candace Bushnell's column, " We're not dating. It's a fuck thing"? Or, " I've been fucked every way you can be fucked"? These characters are not serious, not even interesting, certainly not funny. With that type of woman, romance, with its necessary belief in an ideal, is impossible. [..] Bushnell's women cavort aimlessly in New York, trying different sex games to see which they can win. When they lose, they move on. There is no reflection, no despair, no consequence of any action. The tragedy is that nothing in their lives is tragic." (Glass, 1999: 14)

This sort of promotion of casual sex could be potentially damaging to younger people, who are in the earlier stages of forming opinions about themselves and the world, as it could encourage them to find partners before they are comfortable to do so. Furthermore, in a school environment, where children are exposed to the same sorts of mass media, these ideas are discussed and reinforced within a social reality that is far different from the reality on-screen. As author of *Sex and the City,* Candace Bushnell, said of her creation:

" No one has breakfast at Tiffany's, and no one has affairs to remember – instead, we have breakfast at 7 am and affairs we try to forget as quickly as possible. How did we get into this mess?" (cf Glass, 1999: 14)

During its popularity SATC was responsible for liberating the ideas of many women, and even their male partners, who watched it. The character of

Samantha, played by Kim Cattrall, has been highlighted as an importnat portrayal of a sexually assertive woman in her forties. As Cattrall once said in an interview, ' I don't think there's ever been a woman who has expressed so much sexual joy [on television] without her being punished. I never tire of women coming up and saying, " You've affected my life"' (Williams, 2002. Found in Gauntlett, 2002, p. 61).

Unfortunately the themes of casual sex is unsustainable and will not hold viewer's attentions for as long as say, family dramas, which can be played out over a much longer period of time and have far more complex dynamics. Thus, the heyday of *SATC* is over, while *Emmerdale* continues. As suggested by Goldenberg et al the themes of sex is both intriguing and disturbing:

" Despite its potential for immense physical pleasure and the crucial role that it plays in propagating the species, sex nevertheless is sometimes a source of anxiety, shame, and disgust for humans, and is always subject to cultural norms and social regulation. [..]We argue that sex is threatening because it makes us acutely aware of our sheer physical and animal nature. Although others (e. g., Freud, 1930/1961) have also suggested that human beings are threatened by their creatureliness, following Rank (1930/1998) and Becker (1973), we suggest that this motivation is rooted in a more basic human need to deny mortality." (Goldenberg et al, 2002: p. 310)

Indeed, there is nothing safe about the themes of sex in soaps – it is an unpredictable world, where things are more likely to go wrong, in comparison to the world of family life, where there are obvious boundaries and limits within which to localise behaviour.

In terms of class, which is the other distinction that this project is addressing, the idea that most soaps represent a particular group of people from a particular area, means that they represent the social structure of that particular area. In turn, this means that most soaps are unable to present a cross section of society from any area wider than that which it chiefly represents, and often only manages to represent the lives of either working class or middle class people. Soaps which concentrate on more elitist tastes or narrower, more inaccessible stratas of society do not often gain such a high level of popularity.

This can be seen in the case of Eldorado, a soap set in Spain about the lives of British expats, that lasted only a year before being axed. A different approach to the soap opera came alon gin 1997 with the airing of *Family Affairs,* a soap that focused on one family. The description of the soap read as follows:

" The biggest, and riskiest, decision they made was to break away from the communal concept that underpins other soaps, whether it is the village (Emmerdale), the close (Brookside), the square (EastEnders), or the local streets and pub (Coronation Street). Family Affairs will centre on one family, and examine in intimate detail the struggles and tensions within the four walls of the Hart household. The other difference between this soap and its rivals will be that Family Affairs will not be geographically characterised. It is set in a neutral town, and will lack the northern atmosphere that permeates " Corrie" or Brookside. Class differences within the family will play a big part. The personal experience of Young and Hollingworth influenced them to base the soap around a family that had an ex-miner at its head (Hollingworth's

grandfather was a miner), whose son had become a self-employed builder, and whose four grandchildren were variously a trainee lawyer, an entrepreneur, a shop assistant and a schoolboy." (McDonald, 1997: 1)

This soap underwent a complete change in setting and in characters, before it was axed after only seven years. These example show that there is not enough of a market for specialised soaps which dare to do something a little different. It appears that it is the grittiness of urban landscapes or the character of places which people enjoying watching the most. Furthermore, it is interesting how similar themes – such as teenage pregnancy, underage relationships, and people seeking to break the boundaries of their family's class can all assume a different meaning, or at least be interpreted differently, according to the different locations and environments in which they are set.

Mass Media and the Body
Gauntlett observes a similarity between the malleability of the self and the late modern attitudes to the body:

" No longer do we feel that the body is a more or less disappointing ' given' – instead, the body is the outer expression of our self, to be improved and worked upon; the body has, in the words of Giddens, become ' reflexively mobilized' – thrown into the expanding sphere of personal attributes which we are required to think about and control." (In Gauntlett, p. 104). Perhaps one of the greatest power centres behind both of these arguments is Hollywood, which in its history has seen the changing representation of women, and more recently, the increasing number of women, and men, who

have surgery to preserve the image of their youth. These ideal images of women are not always positively received. For example, speaking in 1973, Marjorie Rosen commented that ' the Cinema Woman is a Popcorn Venus, a delectable but insubstantial hybrid of cultural distortions' (1973: 10), and upon the changing representation of women Rosen observed the presence of rebellious natured commentaries against working women in the 1940s and 1950s, and against female sexual emancipation in the 1960s and 1970s. Whereas women have been consistently promoted as ' sex objects' – in varying styles throughout Hollywood's history (Rosen, In Gauntlett, 2002). It would be an interesting line of enquiry to explore the degree to which feminist literature can help to explain the presence of the perceived gender gap in the process of idolisation and representation, and the influence of these processes on ideas concerning sex and sexuality. Some critics suggest that popular media have over-simplified debates which are essentially feminist in nature, and, in some cases, wrongly consider the feminist movement retrospectively, encouraging viewers to do the same. For example, in her article exploring the different definitions of third-wave feminism emerging in the U. S, Amanda Lotz comments that ' simplistic popular media constructions of third-wave feminism' are misleading to feminists, and that study of the ' third-wave feminist ideas may be understood as distinctive of new social movement organization.' (Lotz: 2003, p. 3). Other critics pay close attention to the different psychological constitutions of women – what Jane Gerhard terms ' ideas about the distinctive psychological reality of women' – especially concerning our definition of post feminism, which makes a significant contribution to the re-assessment of heterosexual power relations. (2005: 41). With proponents of

equality still battling with what Susan Faludi refers to as lackadaisical nature of post-feminism and the unfair 'backlash' against the feminist movement itself (1992) the idea of feminism and soap opera viewing is topical and extensive, and, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this thesis to explore.

Foucault

Foucault's work is useful in the discussion of soap operas and the effects of viewing popular television as it comments on the damaging nature of ' normalization.' Foucault argues that there is no such thing as a singular fixed meaning, and that meaning is understood on many levels – most often through the historical, retrospective interpretation of rational and reasonable behaviour (Danaher et al, 2000). For example, he suggests that the nineteenth century witnessed a preoccupation with correctness – where all things ' wrong' had to be ' righted' in some way in order to fit into a box of classification. This phenomenon has had long-lasting effects on Western culture – to the extent where ' norms' have been established, and exceptions to these norms ' cured' or corrected. In the discussion of class and attitudes towards sex we might consider how the media has portrayed the image of the ideal woman or man. The difference between the historical normalisation of beauty to contemporary is that such images have been popularised through the media on an increasingly global and interpersonal scale. With the advancement of technology, advertising reaches people even within the private space of their own homes – through television, radio, and the Internet. This is all the more dang