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What is a soap? – Different definitions in short

A soap opera is a serialized drama which runs for 52 weeks of the year with continuous storylines dealing with domestic themes, personal or family relationships and a limited running characters. Soap operas or serials are open-ended ... Soap operas are one of the few genres where weddings, for instance, are not a happy ending but the beginning of a marriage that may be troubled or even doomed to failure.¹

A dramatic program usually presented daily, with continuing characters and multiple plots. The action, which deals with contemporary problems and their solutions, continues from episode to episode called soap opera because many of the original sponsors were soap manufacturers. Also called daytime drama, soap, and soaper.²

Television soap operas are long-running serials concerned with everyday life. The serial is not to be confused with the series, in which the main characters and format remain the same from program to program but each episode is a self-contained plot. In a serial at least one storyline is carried over from one episode to the next. A series is advertised as having a specific number of episodes, but serials are potentially endless.³

These definitions can be seen as a sort of introduction to the whole field of soap operas. In the following chapters I will deal with this topic in detail.

A historical overview

The term „soap opera“ was first used in the 1930s to describe radio serials which were sponsored by the soap powder industry such as Procter and Gamble. These 15-minute „commercials“ were about women and concentrated on emotional situations. By sponsoring radio programmes about women, their families and their everyday life, the sponsors hoped that they would reach a big audience of housewives who then would add their certain soap powder to their shopping lists.

These `never-ending´ stories became very popular and so these programmes switched to television programmes in the 1950s. Their length expanded from 15-minute productions to 25 minute long ones and later they even lasted 60 minutes.

Soap opera is an international phenomenon because almost every country has its own soap. The German-speaking area has its *Lindenstraße* or newer versions like *Gute Zeiten, Schlechte Zeiten* or *Marienhof* and *Verbotene Liebe*. Britain´s soap opera fans are watching *Coronation Street* or *Eastenders*; in Australia the soap *Neighbours* enjoys great popularity. Locally

¹ David McQueen: *Television – A Media Student´s Guide* (London, Arnold 1998), 32f

² R. Terry Ellmore: *NTC´s Massmedia Dictionary* (Lincolnwood, National Textbook Company 1995)

produced soap operas are almost more popular than even the most successful imports. However, the USA is very successful at exporting its soaps.

The soap imports have an important effect on the development of the local soaps, e.g the great popularity of the Australian soap *Neighbours* with young actors (school ages) led British producers to bring younger characters into their serials. As a result, a new generation of viewers was attracted, who can also be seen as a new group of buyers (especially for the advertisers). Today not only soap powder is sold with soaps; the range of products grew and also the range of buyers, men and women, young and old, people of various status.

What makes a soap a soap?

First of all, there are two types of soap operas. They differ in the time of broadcast:

- ◆ daily soaps: they dominate the late-morning and the early-afternoon slot (11am-2pm) and are broadcasted, as the name says, daily.
- ◆ prime time soaps: in comparison to the daily ones their production is more expensive and therefore they are screened just once a week between 6.30 pm and 10.30pm.

The following characteristics refer to the category „daily soap“, which does not mean that some of them are not typical for prime time soaps too.

To begin with, the production costs are very low, therefore almost every country with own television stations has its own soap. „It is claimed that the large audiences that *Eastenders* guaranteed for the BBC saved it from privatization.“⁴ The reasons why they are so cheap to produce are firstly the small cast and secondly the limited studio sets.

The next important feature is the structure of soap operas. Soaps begin with a hook – here the most important scenes of the previous episode are taken up – , but they also end with a cliffhanger – here several dramatic situations are left open to encourage us to view the following episode to see what happens.⁵

The next characteristic feature is the slow development of the plot – storylines are often developed over several hours of programme time. It is easier to write for an soap than for series because for the writers there is not the problem to write a particular storyline that lasts exactly 40 or 50 minutes. The emphasis is rather on talk than on action. Emotional situations are tested out, there is an emphasis on reflecting the personal problems.

³ <http://cct.georgetown.edu/curriculum/505-98/students/joanna/104pics/presnewest/soappres.html>

⁴ cf. David McQueen, Television, 35

The organisation of place is an easy one, because there is always the same setting (the livingroom, the bar, the hall in school, the shop at the corner... very typical locations, that occur in every soap opera). The organisation of time depends on the type of soap. Day-time soaps mostly refer to the one day one hour or less scheme. Prime-time soaps build their own kind of calendar to help the audience to orientate themselves.

A very important feature of soap operas is that the audience gets familiar with the characters and the settings very quickly.

With soaps you can speak of a certain kind of predictability. As the audience knows the characters as well as their behaviour the plot is predictable. New characters and changing storylines prevent the plot from being too predictable and getting boring.

British Soaps

One chapter I want to dedicate to the British soaps. I was amazed to learn how large their supply is. There are soaps for everybody from everywhere. In the chapter „What makes a soap a soap“ I told that soaps differ from the time of broadcast – prime time and daily soaps. However, they can also be distinguished in a geographical sense. So there are three different kinds of soaps:

- ◆ Local Soaps that are seen on a national basis like many of the US daytime soaps or the South African soap *Generations*.
- ◆ Regional Soaps that serve a regional or same-language community like the UK produced *Coronation Street*, shown in Australia, New Zealand, Canada. Other examples are the Mexican versions of the "Telenovelas" (that actually originated in Brazil), that are usually seen in Spanish-speaking countries.
- ◆ International Soaps that can be seen across the globe in many different languages, like prime time soaps, *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Beverly Hills 90210* or extremely successful US daytime soaps like *Days of Our Lives* and *The Bold and the Beautiful*.

On British TV I came across the whole range described above. To illustrate this I searched TV-Guides in British newspapers and marked all the soap operas I could find. For comparison I took a German programme, which has regional soaps like *GZSZ* and *Unter Uns*, but even more international ones.

⁵ cf. David McQueen, Television, 33

In Britain there are local soaps like *Highroad* and *Shortland Street*. Under the term „regional soap“ fall *Coronation Street*, *EastEnders*, *The Bill* and *Family Affairs*. International Soaps on British TV are *The Bold and the Beautiful*, *Sunset Beach*, *Neighbours*, *Home and Away*, *Dallas* and *Dynasty*.

The brief introductions⁶ to the following soap operas should give an insight into the great variety of soaps in Britain.

Highroad

... is about the lives of the residents of the small Scottish village Glendarroch.

Shortland Street

... focuses on the lives and emergencies of the staff and patients of Shortland Street medical clinic.

Coronation Street

The longest running TV soap ever is still as strong and as amazingly addictive as it was back in the 60's. It is watched by about one-third of the British population. The soap is based in a fictional suburb of Manchester. It is broadcast in Ireland, Sweden, Australia, New Zealand, the U.S., Canada.

EastEnders

From the beginning, *EastEnders* was a soap to go where no soap had gone before – it danced with danger as it tackled issues such as teen pregnancy, prostitution, drug abuse, homosexuality, adultery, suicide - each one usually for the first time in a prime-time slot. It was the first soap to address the issue of HIV and AIDS. A cast made up of mixed cultures and lifestyles reflects the true spirit of east-end London and its reactions to them.

EastEnders first debuted in the UK on BBC1 in 1985. It is broadcast in the following countries worldwide: Australia, New Zealand, United States, Canada.

Home and Away

Home & Away began in 1988. The show was first shown in Australia at the beginning of 1988. Since then it has been screening every week night for half an hour. *Home & Away* is screened in 25 countries worldwide.

⁶ found at: <http://www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/1533/>

Neighbours

The soap opened much the same as it stands today - a cul-de-sac made up of down-to-earth Australian families and friends. Kylie Minogue and Jason Donovan, two main characters, became famous worldwide and found their way into music business.

Neighbours first hit Australian Television screens in March, 1985. In October, 1986, *Neighbours* was first screened in the UK and was an instant hit with viewers. *Neighbours* has since been sold to 49 countries and is reported to be watched worldwide by at least 80 million people.

The audience

The profile of an soap opera viewer:

The industry considers regular soap viewers to be those who watch at least 2.5 times per week. For most of these viewers privacy is the most important aspect of watching a soap. They want to be alone when they are watching a soap opera.

Some interesting facts⁷:

- * 76 % prefer to watch alone.
- * 51 % watch three or more
- * 96 % talk with others on a regular basis
- * 82 % subscribe to soap opera publications

(From a group of regular soap opera viewers)

Soap operas, ..., are part of the everyday lives of their audience⁸. Soap operas influence organizing and structuring of the viewers' everyday lives. Not only watching soap operas but also talking about them with their friends is important to the viewers. Very often the audience associates the things seen on TV with real life. So the process of watching soap operas is in no way a passive operation and it continues after the viewing time and is extended into other areas of everyday life⁹

Dorothy Hobson interviewed women office workers in Birmingham and found that their free-time conversation was often based on their soap opera viewing. Some had begun watching simply because they had discovered how central it seemed to be in lunchtime discussions. It involved anticipating what might happen next, discussing the significance of recent events

⁷ <http://cct.georgetown.edu/curriculum/505-98/students/joanna/104picts/presnewest/soappres.html>

⁸ out of: Remote Control: Dorothy Hobson: Soap operas at work (London, Routledge 1989) 150

⁹ *ibid*

and relating them to their own experiences. Hobson argues that women typically use soaps as a way of talking indirectly about their own attitudes and behaviour¹⁰

She asked the women why people watch soap operas. One predominant reason is that this type of programme is quite easy to watch. The group said watching American soaps is interesting because you get an idea of how their housing and clothing. That is also true for me. I think, e.g. when talking about *Beverly Hills 90210*, it is so fascinating to watch because everybody would like to visit Los Angeles sometime. Personally I liked watching this soap because I wanted to see how they wear their make-up, how they have done their hair and what clothes they wear, how they combine it. I was searching for some good new ideas.

The women make distinctions between American and British soaps describing British soaps as 'down-to-earth' and American ones as 'fantasy'.

My own experience as a viewer – who at that time wasn't reflecting about this genre:

When I missed an episode or the end of one, I asked friends about what had happened because we had no video recorder to tape it. It sometimes was like talking about real people, people you know, who could be your friends or neighbours (I just realized there are serials that are called „Friends“ and „Neighbours“ – so is it any wonder?). In those moments you don't differentiate between actors and characters. However, I believe that is not only characteristic for soaps because we also chatted about movies we had seen. It was not always the case that we didn't differentiate e.g. when there was a situation where it was obvious that would never happen in real life. These are the moments when you talk objectively about soaps and wonder why you are watching something so much insipid. But in the evening you sit down in front of the TV set because you want to know how the stories go on and what will happen with the characters.

Experts say there is no confusion, only an interweaving. The audience compares events in soaps with events which have happened in their own experience and those of people they know¹¹

There are several answers to the question why people keep watching soap operas. First of all because soaps are light entertainment. This was also a reason why to start watching soaps. Second, the case of identification is a reason. The viewers identify with one or the other

¹⁰ cf. Remote Control, 150-67

¹¹ *ibid*, 167

character because they may have the same or similar problems. This is very likely because the topics that arise in soap operas like friendships or relationships are part of everybody's life. Finally, there is another reason which is connected with previous one: In some situations the viewer begins to wonder how s/he would have solved a certain problem or cope with it, also how s/he would react if something like that would happen to him/her. So the viewers get involved.

Woman as viewers

Soaps in general have a predominantly female audience, although prime-time soaps such as *Dallas* and the most recent British soaps are deliberately aimed at a wider audience. In *Dallas* the main interest for men was in business relations and problem and the power and wealth shown, whereas for women were more often interested in the family issues and love affairs. In the case of *Dallas* it is clear that the programme meant something different for female viewers compared with male viewers.

Certainly soaps tend to appeal to those who value the personal and domestic world. The audience for such soaps does include men, but some theorists argue that the gender identity of the viewer is 'inscribed' in programmes, and that typically with soaps the inscribed viewer has a traditional female gender identity.¹²

However, there is also the historical background of the genre. It promotes a female audience since it was first sponsored by soap manufactures. The stereotypically domesticated nature of women meant that they were the target audience of these programs for the reasons that they were spending the most time in the home to watch the programmes and were also the target consumer for the products which sponsored them.

So the history of soaps has meant that it is traditionally a woman's genre. In addition, the format of the genre is that of a serial; an ongoing plot with no foreseeable conclusion. This is mainly appealing to women whereas men prefer the dramatic tension and conclusion of action dramas.¹³

Furthermore the narrative form of soaps is very much like gossip: Gossip as a form of discussion of knowledge of the characters retards the plot. And the search of knowledge always open to further development – for me this is the addictive component.

Gossip can be classified as a type of feminine discourse. So, the more obvious thing would be considering the reasons mentioned above to ascribe this genre the female audience.

¹² cf. David Morley: *Television Audiences and Cultural Studies*. (London, Routledge 1992) 129

¹³ cf. Sonia Livingstone: *Making Sense of Television*. (Oxford, Pergamon 1990)

Soap operas & housewives

Because of the history of the soap opera, a special group always was related to this genre: the housewives. As mentioned above, in the early beginning they were the main addressees of soap operas.

Today this genre still is thought to be very much of interest for housewives: partly because of the time of broadcast and partly because of the stories and structures of soaps. Both is somehow true. The simple storylines are easy to follow even if you are doing some work while watching. Some women say it is more hearing than watching when they are doing some housework on the side. The structures of soap operas are perfect for this way of „watching“: the names of the characters who are talked to are often repeated, when talking about somebody the characters frequently repeat how the person is related to the others, e.g. „You know Paul, the eldest son by my husband’s first marriage, ...“.

For housewives „the home primarily represents a place of work rather than a sphere of leisure“¹⁴. So soap opera viewing is somehow a part of female pleasure or relaxation in midst of their work which is a kind of potentially endless task. For women in the home, leisure activities such as watching TV must be viewed as complementary to work.¹⁵

There are two different group of housewives: Those who feel guilty when watching because they don’t get anything done and those who can easily manage because they have a good organized schedule.

One interesting point of view is that „the constant repetition of plot themes [...] can be seen as a formal equivalent of the domestic routine imposed upon housewives. In this view the multiplicity of characters and plots is equivalent to the multiplicity of the simultaneous tasks that make up housework.“ Furthermore, the interruptions of the television text (by different plotlines or by commercials) are like the constant interruptions of housework, and the lack of narrative closure is comparable to the unending nature of housework.¹⁶

¹⁴ Remote Control: Eva-Maria Warth et al.: „Don’t treat us like we’re so stupid and naïve“ (London, Routledge 1989) 228

¹⁵ Hans Borchers: Never-Ending Stories. American Soap Operas and the Cultural Production of Meaning. (Trier, WVT 1994) 220

¹⁶ John Fiske: Television Culture (London, Routledge 1987) 196

Fieldwork

When I read the chapter „I was thirteen and my best friend got me hooked“: An Interview with Karen and Jane¹⁷, I thought it would be a good idea to interview some of my friends about the topic soap operas. Reading this interview, I could easily identify with the things they said. So I wanted to know if people in my surroundings share this experience.

I asked about 10-15 people, all female aged between 15 and 24, about their experience with soap operas.

The very first observation I made was that everybody who didn't know me (and the fact that I enjoyed watching soaps quite a lot) was reluctant to confess watching soap operas. I think the reason is that soap operas has always been miscredited as trivial, so nobody would admit watching it.¹⁸ This is what Jane in the interview with Gabriele Kreutzner also stated. Once you start telling people why you are asking or that you also like watching they open.

Five girls (aged 15) told that other girls at school in the break are regularly speaking about soap operas. Not watching these serials is a form of being alienated – that's a way of becoming an outsider. So there are girls in the class who are just watching to join in the conversation. There was one girl among the ones I questioned who began watching because of her classmates. By the time she really enjoys it and would not stop even if the others would not speak about soaps anymore.

The five young girls also told me their critical views – so I noticed they certainly don't just watch without ever thinking about what they are watching. One of them said: „Even if I think that what is happening is stupid I keep on watching. Because in the end they arouse your curiosity with this „cliffhanger“ that you almost can't wait to see next episode. There you can see that this girl sees through the way how soaps are made.

Others told that in their families watching a soap belongs to the daily schedule of every member of the family e.g. watching after dinner. First the whole family has dinner and then they are watching TV together.

I also asked if they think if there are differences in gender when speaking about soap operas. They all agreed that this depends on the soap. *The Bold and the Beautiful* would hardly ever be watched by males. Here we also came to the question what soaps the group of girls I asked prefer to watch. Most of them like the Saturday afternoon serials like *Beverly Hills 90210*,

¹⁷ Hans Borchers: Never Ending Stories, 170

¹⁸ Martha Nochimson: No End To Her – Soap Opera and the Female Subject (Berkeley, University of California Press 1992) 12

Melrose Place, *Party of Five* and *Models Inc.* These are broadcast just once a week and so it's easy to manage to watch them regularly.

All the girls I was talking to are pupils or students and they claimed watching a daily soap is more difficult because sometimes they are not back from school or have to learn. Then one of the girls said that she prefers the daily soap *Unter Uns* for the reason of being more down-to-earth. There she could find more parallels to her own life. The American soap operas are too far away from reality for her but she also likes them because the world of the rich is somehow fascinating. Also the fact that these are set in L.A. makes them interesting. This statement met with unanimous approval.

The girls also told that they would never watch soaps like *The Bold and The Beautiful* because they are too old fashioned. But in their opinion this special soap is *the* soap at all. Those they are watching they consider not as much as a „real“ soap because soaps like *Beverly Hills 90210* are produced at a big cost. So for all of them the serials they are watching are not „real“ soaps.

When I told them about the characteristics of soap operas they all agreed that their serials would fall in this genre. Then they insisted that there are differences in quality and that the older ones are of low quality in contrast to the new ones.

Under Observation

Since I also watched some soaps, I thought I could write down the observations I made.

Before going into detail I would like to restrict the soaps I am writing about to *Gute Zeiten*, *Schlechte Zeiten* (= GZSZ), *Marienhof* and *Verbotene Liebe*. The concept is always to be very young, dynamic and fashionable. In German soaps a trend developed: Out of those soaps young artists, musicians become famous, e.g. in GZSZ the boygroup „Caught in the Act“ had its early beginnings, also the band „Just Friends“. In *Marienhof* the actress Judith Hildebrandt sang her first song during the soap and so a record company became aware of her. In Germany the part in a soap may be the springboard for a greater career in the entertainment business. However, this phenomenon also happened to U.S.-soap-actors. For new soaps unknown actors are casted and later when the soap is successful the actors get parts in TV-films like the stars of *Beverly Hills, 90210* and *Melrose Place*.

The competition between the soap operas is growing bigger and bigger. So the soap operas have to be very special and unique because they all have almost the same target group. Popular with soaps today is styling them up with stars or famous special guests. *Melrose Place* has its Heather Locklear - only then the soap got really successful. *Sunset Beach* has

Leslie Ann Down in its cast. The German soap *GZSZ* invite famous guests regularly, e.g. the last time it was the German Chancellor Schröder.

Another example of styling up showed up in the soap *Beverly Hills*: Here the whole cast was at the Rolling Stones concert and they showed scenes from the stagershow of the Stones and how the actors enjoyed the concert.

A very important term that occurs in combination with soap operas today is merchandising. Almost every successful soap has its own magazine appearing every month, soundtracks, books and lots of other fan-articles. At the time of internet you should also pay attention to this media. In the internet you can find fan-pages, lots of official homepages of the different soaps, pages about the soap opera actors and actresses, pages where can chat with others about what has happened in the last episode and what you think about it. You find informations about how the stories will go on and what had happened three years ago. You find everything about the actors and actresses. For example the webpage <http://soaps.about.com> provides information about over 20 American soaps and links to Australian ones. If you feed a searchengine only with the term „soap opera“ you will find hundreds of fan-sites or even an online-soap (www.renc.igs.net/~drollins/footprints.htm), but almost no scientific material about them.

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