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## Exhausted and exhausting: television studies and British soap opera

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I began work on this article driven by feelings of frustration. Since around the turn of the century, as convergence speeded up and the multi-channel provision finally (thanks to the depths of the Murdoch coffers and the effects of regulatory support) reached more than a minority of UK viewers, British academics in television studies (and indeed my students) have seemed resolute in their turn to US fiction, mainly watched not 'on television' but via DVD boxes. There might be a faint stir around *Queer as Folk* (UK, 1999-2000) or the new *Dr Who* (UK, 2005-present) but it was HBO which took the limelight. As I tried to hang on to notions of public service broadcasting, national identity and popular programming, I blamed this Gaderene rush on a tradition in British culture (noted, for instance, in cinema audiences in the 1930s) of seeing in American fiction, when viewed from afar, a lively, demotic and classless culture, freed from the restrictions of British hierarchies and the conventions of British manners, and shiny with the glow of money. This article then was to be my opportunity for a rant, a shot across the broadsides which, while by no means certain of any effect, would at least relieve my feelings. As I proceeded however I began to have more sympathy for this shift. I still believe that the consequent neglect of the study of British soap opera, the topic of this article, is a cause for concern. But as I hope to demonstrate the reasons for it are more complex than I had assumed. Moreover, it is only through

understanding these reasons that we might find ways of resuscitating an academic engagement with British soap opera and developing an approach that does not just rely on personal viewing habits or enjoyment of a particular programme.

It may seem rather inappropriate to write about British soaps as “invisible television” given that they are an established feature of the television studies curriculum and that they are referred to and discussed in various forms of academic writing which I will draw attention to later in this article. This would seem to indicate a level of visibility which is different from that of other programmes discussed in this issue. I will argue however that this apparent level of activity is misleading and disguises the fact that British soaps are no longer discussed, or even very much watched, in television and media studies. Soaps have become the staple of textbooks and, if they have a role in contemporary debates, it is as the standard binary against which other, more significant or engaging, programmes are measured. A similar lack of interest can be found in the broader television culture on-line and in the British press. Jan Hunt, the BBC 1 Controller has commented that

It does seem there’s a lot of snobbery at work when the media industry spends so much time talking and writing about a handful of shows that are largely watch by people like them . . . I wonder whether we are capable of having a debate about popular drama that includes other shows – shows that reach a broader audience and includes a wider part of the creative

community – or whether the media will remain obsessed with *Mad Men*, *30 Rock* and *The Wire*.<sup>1</sup>

Like the letter in Edgar Allen Poe's short story, which was hidden in a rack for holding letters, soaps seem to have become invisible precisely because they are in obvious view.

Writing in the mid-1990s and reflecting on two decades of feminist work, Charlotte Brunsdon argued that it was 'feminist interest that has transformed soap opera into a very fashionable field for academic inquiry'.<sup>2</sup> Fashionable, even in the provocative sense that Brunsdon used it, would hardly be the word now. There is still writing on soap opera as we shall see, some of it useful and valuable, but it is not at the heart of current academic inquiry in British television studies or into British television. This is particularly striking given that we are in what John Hartley has called a 'resurgence'<sup>3</sup> in television studies and that an interest in contemporary television fiction, as illustrated in this and other journals, has been a feature of recent work. This shift away from soap opera pre-dates but is aligned to debates about quality and aesthetics which for my purposes can be dated back to Jason Jacobs' 2001 article 'Issues of Judgement and Value in Television Studies'.<sup>4</sup> Looking at the output of three journals which have published on research on television drama, we find that since 2000 there have been three articles on British soap opera.<sup>5</sup> And yet the programmes themselves continue to dominate the ratings and are crucial to their production companies, including the public service broadcaster, the BBC. Although suffering from the decline in audience figures which has affected all UK terrestrial programmes,

*Coronation Street* (UK, 1960-present), *EastEnders* (UK, 1985-present) and *Emmerdale* (UK, 1972-present) are still essential to television culture in Britain and, while *Brookside* (UK, 1982) was shut down in 2003, *Hollyoaks* (UK, 1995-present), also from Mersey Television, has found its particular niche.

### Textbooks definitions

One place where we will find discussion of soap opera is in text books and this hidden but important work indicates how debate about soap opera has sclerosed.<sup>6</sup> It is indeed the purpose of text books to simplify and make comprehensible a body of knowledge in order to provide students with what are deemed to be suitable stepping stones at appropriate levels. Another part of that process is perhaps less inevitable but still occurs: the original ideas, developments and theoretical breakthroughs are disarticulated from their reference points and are presented as agreed positions, commonsense understandings which hide the work which was needed to create it. Text books draw attention to the key features used to identify soaps and in the process outline a generic category, soap opera, which groups together the similarities of a number of texts rather than emphasising their own histories and features. Inevitably, they run the risk of presenting genres as 'ahistorical and static'.<sup>7</sup>

A review of a number of textbooks, aimed broadly at 16+ media studies students and those on first year undergraduate courses, shows that their analyses, based mainly on British soaps (but sometimes including the Australian *Neighbours* (1985-present) which has been shown on British television since

1986), fall broadly into three categories: narrative analysis, realism and gender. This categorisation explicitly or implicitly draws on ideas developed in the 1980s and early 1990s and promotes concepts established then to be used by students in further analysis of contemporary episodes. Two books aimed at the pre-university student explicitly use a list of eight points taken from Mary Ellen Brown's 1987 article 'The politics of soaps: pleasure and feminine empowerment' of which the first four refer to the organisation of narrative while the remaining four explicitly or implicitly relate to issues of gender.<sup>8</sup> Other accounts present similar lists without necessarily referencing their sources.

Work on narrative analysis focuses on finding a definition for soap opera which will allow for a distinction to be made between series, serials and soap operas. Definitions rely on differences in the organisation of narrative time and soap opera's lack of closure is marked as a key feature:

'although soap operas are series, they have a distinctive, and possibly unique, narrative structure' because they are 'potentially never-ending'<sup>9</sup>

the fundamental defining feature, however, is that it is in principle never-ending, it is written to go on for ever.<sup>10</sup>

television soap opera is a special case of the serial form where the end of the story is indefinitely deferred.<sup>11</sup>

Branston and Stafford list out the consequences of this 'open' narrative structure which include a 'multi-strand plot', the movement of characters 'in and out of prominence . . . [and] of narrative function' partly to suit production needs, and the need for the soap to address 'experienced and new viewers'.<sup>12</sup> Other textbooks provide similar lists which are used to describe a soap's characteristic narrative organisation and hence define its genre.

Although this material is presented, in each case, as relatively uncontested, when the definitions are set alongside each other it is clear that there are differences between them. This is partly because of the changes in television fiction since the 1980s which have seen serials, series and sit coms adopt features of the soap narrative form; the boundaries that were meant to mark a key distinction between these genres have thus been blurred. The quotations above illustrate some of the confusion over the use of key terms. For Lacey, soap operas are series while Bignall indicates that they are an example of the serial form though elsewhere in his book he also suggests that they share many features with series such as *Casualty* (UK, 1986-present) and *ER* (US, 1994-2009).<sup>13</sup> Gripsrud too appears to shift position, arguing later that 'almost all US TV series are effectively soap operas' because stories unfold across episodes and 'there is a sense of a long story being slowly unfolded as seasons go by'.<sup>14</sup> Others are similarly at odds. Phil Wickham sets soap operas in opposition to the serial and sees them as a particular kind of series: 'at the opposite end of the spectrum to the serial with its cohesive narrative and sense of closure is the soap opera or continuing series'<sup>15</sup>; he therefore classifies British

series such as *Heartbeat* (UK, 1992-present) and *Casualty* with soap opera. Jeremy Butler, from a US perspective, uses the sitcom *Friends* (US, 1994-2004) to analyse the form of the series which he contrasts with the daytime US soaps; he categorises the latter as television serials along with primetime programmes such as *E.R.* and *St Elsewhere* (US, 1982-88) which he describes as 'sophisticated, sometimes quirky serials'.<sup>16</sup> Alexander and Cousens, however, asking the question 'When is a soap not a soap?', do not categorise these programmes as soaps since they provide episodic closure and have periods when they are not transmitted.<sup>17</sup> And John Ellis renames police and hospital dramas as 'precinct dramas' and argues that, while they are 'sometimes confused with soaps, or are seen as a part of the "soapisation" of TV drama . . . they are distinct from soap opera'.<sup>18</sup> Although I find narrative approaches useful in analysing both film and television texts, reading this material I am reminded of Jason Mittell's comment that the textualist emphasis in television genre studies has led to its decline; in cultural media studies, 'genre has been left behind with concerns like narrative and stylistic analysis as perceived relics of extinct methodologies'.<sup>19</sup> Analysis following such methods often results in a very limited account and students following these narrative-based approaches might be well advised to heed the warning of the authors of *How to Study Television* and 'avoid drifting into character and story summaries'.<sup>20</sup>

Although narrative is the strongest thread in the textbook presentations of soap opera, realism and the capacity to represent everyday life is also a key indicator for discussions of British soaps and is often linked to narrative



organisation. For Branston and Stafford, the 'long-runningness' of soaps has the advantage that stories about social issues 'can be dealt with and re-surface . . . over many years – as in real life'.<sup>21</sup> Ellis similarly argues that British soap operas 'tend to incorporate substantial references to everyday rhythms, and will include genuinely mundane moments like shopping and cooking'.<sup>22</sup> Like others, Ellis points to the reputation that UK soaps have 'for more concrete and realistic settings'<sup>23</sup> while recognising that this emphasis on verisimilitude can be affected by the narrative demands for a setting which provides a 'chance for storylines to meet and switch' and allows for the 'coherence and the feeling of "community" so central to soap's pleasures'.<sup>24</sup> Alexander and Cousens identify the "'surface" realism' of *EastEnders* which is 'authentically and carefully constructed' and contrast it with *Neighbours* which is 'not a social realist text'.<sup>25</sup> Their detailed scheme of work includes a lesson on 'Realism' with an essay asking the students to 'compare two British soaps, discussing the ways in which they construct the "real"'.<sup>26</sup>

'Communities [in British soaps] are bound together primarily by family and emotional relationships';<sup>27</sup> Bignall's reference to the family leads into the third broad organising principle in the textbook description of British soaps which is gender. These accounts make links between the emphasis on families and the home, the representation of 'powerful female figures or *matriarchs*' and the use of emotional problems as the source of both stories and talk about stories.<sup>28</sup> All of this can be summarised in Lacey's heading 'Genre and gender – soap opera'.<sup>29</sup> 'Soap operas are overwhelmingly domestic in setting and put relationships at

their heart' states Ellis, both factors which point towards a range of female roles and the valuing of female skills.<sup>30</sup> This emphasis on gender can lead into an identification of melodrama in soaps which is associated with the polarisation of good and evil and the emphasis on the personal rather than the public sphere.<sup>31</sup> Melodrama can function with and in contrast to the mundane everydayness of realism; 'soaps exaggerate' writes Ellis, 'because they are melodrama, using clearly defined emotions to explore complex moral issues'.<sup>32</sup> Although text books are largely wary about suggesting that British primetime soaps seek out female audiences in the same way as US daytime soaps, the combination of extended, open narratives and stories which engage with emotions do, it is generally argued, lead to a particularly close engagement with the audience.

Because of the demands of the textbook format, these three defining features of (British) soap opera are often asserted rather than argued. Space generally does not permit, for instance, more detailed accounts of critical debates about realism and melodrama and the reasons for the association between melodrama and certain generic forms including soap opera. Textual analysis, when it is used, tends to be generalised and it may be left to the student reader to find and work through examples in accordance with the checklists of soap characteristics.<sup>33</sup> It is also relatively rare for the textbook analysis to move to the kind of visual analysis of a soap opera which would be expected in, for instance, a film studies textbook. Selby and Cowdery are the exception to this, basing their general account of 'The TV soap' on an account of a single episode of *Neighbours* which includes analysis of the use of space, camera work and

lighting. Such analysis fleshes out the bare bones of narrative and grounds it in specific observation. This helps to mitigate the sense of fixity and timelessness which comes to characterise soaps in these textbook accounts. It is rare for change in the textual features of soaps to be acknowledged and even rarer for change to be identified in the visual organisation of a programme as Alexander and Cousens do when discussing *EastEnders*:

In recent years, *EastEnders* in particular, has experimented with visual conventions borrowed from film, such as extravagant crane shots for overheads of characters in crisis.<sup>34</sup>

They go on to note that in 'intense storylines' *EastEnders* abandons the convention that the time between episodes is filled by a lapse in narrative time. Even here though there is no discussion about what these changes might signify in broader terms.<sup>35</sup>

This framework for discussing British soaps, identifiable clearly in the pared down approach of the textbooks, is also evident in Dorothy Hobson's full-length study, the first for over a decade. It contains some valuable new material in the production interviews and some of the audience interviews; the discussion of the responses of the young men in a young offenders institution is shrewd and based on a careful reading of their comments. But the overall analysis of the programmes is marked by an emphasis on narrative and characters who have a 'verisimilitude which defines them as being "true to life" for the audience'; a discussion of the handling of recognisable social issues; and a re-iteration of the realism of British soaps which enables them to 'reflect aspects of the British

character and regional identity'.<sup>36</sup> She defends the genre against the charge of escapism, arguing that the audience's pleasure in the soap opera text 'is not escapism, but an engagement with a cultural form which connects with experiences and recognizable emotions and situations from the lives of the audience.'<sup>37</sup> When elements other than narrative and character are commented on, there is a tendency to assert rather than to debate; 'the writing and acting was of the highest standard'<sup>38</sup> Hobson tells us in a discussion of how a story of sexual abuse was handled in *EastEnders* in 2001 but there is no discussion of what excellent acting or writing might look like in the context of the programme nor is it demonstrated in textual analysis. Hobson does identify change in the greater prominence given to male characters and a greater willingness by certain male viewers to express enjoyment of the programmes but this does not affect the conceptual framework that she uses which remains rooted in the 1980s and in the categorisations identified in the textbook descriptions.

In the work on soap opera described here, we can trace out the lineaments of the 1980s accounts of British and US programmes which had put soap opera into the central place in Television Studies ascribed to it by Brunsdon. Such work drew on concepts being developed in film studies which were tested out on television with the intention of marking out difference and establishing the specificity of the newer medium.<sup>39</sup> The work on narrative was concerned with television's propensity to run its stories (factual and fictional) through segments and episodes; the importance attached to the continuous serial's lack of narrative closure was due to the contrast with cinema's imposition

of an ending which performed ideological as well as narrative closure. The emphasis on realism, a concept under attack in film studies of the 1970s, spoke to debates about ideology and representation which also related to television's public function and to the interaction between television fiction and other generic forms including documentary and the news. Representation also was a factor in the work on gender which, unlike comparable work in cinema studies, also led researchers into studies of what particular female audiences of soap opera (and by implication television more generally) did as viewers. All of this was underpinned by the desire to redeem ordinary television as an object worthy of study and to map out modes of analysis which drew on but were markedly different from concepts and approaches developed in film studies. While there was a commitment to working on soap opera, the purpose was also to defend popular television and its audiences. However, as television studies moved on, work on soap opera was doubly denigrated. By the 2000s, it was old-fashioned broadcast television associated with old-fashioned methodological approaches, tied up neatly in textbook accounts.

#### Seen from elsewhere

Outside British television studies, however, work on British soap opera has been referenced, both in television studies analyses done outside the UK and in research undertaken in other disciplines. One feature of this work has been research into 'soap operas' outside the British /US axis which dominates the textbooks. There has, for instance, been an increasing emphasis on the

international variations on soap opera though, as I have discussed elsewhere, lack of closure and long-runningness are not as characteristic of these programmes as of British and US daytime soaps.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, in India Purnima Mankekar, drawing on anthropological methods, has explored the relationship between television and soap opera audiences in the context of public education and Shoma Munshi has re-worked soap opera theory into an informed and vivid account of Indian prime time soaps in the 2000s.<sup>41</sup> The New Zealand soap *Shortland Street* (1992-present) has been examined for its representations of teenage femininity and sexuality and its use of cultural diversity and social issues to demonstrate its 'localness'.<sup>42</sup> A research project based in Catalonia, with strong links to Scotland, has 'focused on the nation-building process through serial fiction' from the 'experience of stateless nations'.<sup>43</sup> A special issue of *Television and New Media* in 2006 focused on soap operas and telenovelas created in Latin America, Australia and New Zealand while looking at the interactions with British and US programmes and production situations.<sup>44</sup>

The vitality of some of this work stands in contrast with the view taken of British soap operas from outside the UK. In this context, it is striking that the association of realism with British soap opera often operates as a point of comparison with indigenous programmes in these accounts. Castello refers to characters in *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street* as 'displaying the main discourse about British working class in soaps for British audiences'.<sup>45</sup> For Jackson, British soap 'adopts a "real life" genre that references seasons and events as they occur in the "real" world'<sup>46</sup> while Dunleavy cites *Coronation*

*Street* as particularly influential in an Australian and New Zealand context because of 'its blending of . . . Northern realism with established, universal conventions of soap opera'.<sup>47</sup> Psychologists Anna Madill and Rebecca Goldmeir cite Dyer's account of *Coronation Street* when describing *EastEnders* with its 'strong female characters, a nostalgic respect for working-class life and a serious attempt to deal responsibly with contemporary social issues'.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, it was *EastEnders*' deployment of 'soap opera within the social realism genre' which made it the 'ideal catalyst'<sup>49</sup> for their empirical study of US and British viewers accessed through specialist websites.

The interest in identity, representation and audiences demonstrated in these studies can also be found in work on British soaps being undertaken in other disciplines. Articles about British soap opera in 2000s are scattered across a wide range of journals concerned with psychology, anthropology, social work, medical issues, health care, education and public policy. Many of these articles, with their content-analysis approach and their focus on transmission of social behaviour, are unlikely to be relevant to readers of this journal but this on-going work serves as a reminder that it is unwise to speculate on audiences on the basis of the text alone. Within a methodological framework owing much to cultural studies, Chris Barker's study of how British Asian and Afro-Caribbean teenagers use *EastEnders* and other soaps on British television provides insight into 'soap talk' and identity formation. Story and character are important because of the conversations they invoke; the young women ignore or reinterpret the textual positions offered by the narrative and 'use soap opera as a stimulus for

discussions about ethics which form the basis of a self-fashioning project'.<sup>50</sup> Lesley Henderson's *Social Issues in Television Fiction* picks up one of the key characteristics of realism in British soaps, the handling of contemporary social problems, and explores how the representation of social issues is produced and experienced by television practitioners, lobbyists and audiences.<sup>51</sup> More perhaps than Barker's study, this account offers material of interest to those concerned with textual analysis. The production interviews offer insight into the processes of researching and writing popular television drama while the audience research (in which focus group members (re)engaged with the text through being asked to write dialogue to accompany photographs taken from a year-old *Brookside* episode) demonstrated that the impact of a storyline was experienced through its visual organisation as well as its narrative and characterisation.

### Soap opera and contemporary television studies

It is clear from this account that, on the one hand, we have a version of soap opera written into textbook accounts which has become static and generalised while, at the same time, the work that does go on is largely based on sociological and anthropological methods. Within television studies, I would suggest, the over-determination of work on soap operas has led to the rehearsal of old questions and approaches rather than the search for new ones. The study of soap opera is currently trapped in a bubble, outside the critical studies of



television fiction, with one of the major writers on British drama arguing that soaps are a 'phenomenon which exist apart from the rest of television drama'.<sup>52</sup>

What reasons might we give for this exhaustion of interest by television scholars? In part, television studies, as is often the case, followed television production in the 1990s when factual television and reality television took over as the dominant mode. It was assumed that soap opera was no longer the prism through which television could be understood as a medium and it was *Big Brother* (2000-present) that became the subject of special issues and major books. But there are other reasons. Firstly, while soap opera was central to engagement of feminists with television in the 1980s, that connection did not survive the interest in postfeminism in the late 1990s/2000s. The associations between work on soap opera and essentialist notions of gender were perhaps too strong and the political project of engaging with what the ordinary woman viewer watched seemed to involve an uncomfortable process of 'othering' as Brunsdon explored in *The Feminist, the Housewife and the Soap Opera*.<sup>53</sup> Sue Jackson's article on *Shortland Street* is a rather rare example of a soap opera being used to discuss the construction of the 'post-feminist girl'. It was published in a journal special issue on 'new femininities' which sought to 'explore social formations structured by neo-liberalism . . . in which femininities are increasingly produced through post-feminist discourses of choice, empowerment and (sexual) pleasure'.<sup>54</sup> British soap operas, despite their continual emphasis on the dilemmas of young women, have not been part of that exploration.

Secondly, what one might see as the return to close textual analysis involved in debates about quality has tended to set soaps up as the (sometimes unspoken) other. When Nelson contrasts the everydayness of much TV with the risks and edginess of high-end drama, soaps fall into the first category; he argues that

the kind of pleasures offered by formulaic television output offering ‘ontological security’ [which includes soaps] differ markedly, however, from those at the other end of the spectrum where viewers might seek aesthetic visual pleasure or the frisson of risk.<sup>55</sup>

The binary suggests that textual analysis seeking visual interest or originality in a soap opera would not be worthwhile. In her call for the use of close reading as a method, Robyn Warhol suggests that, since the method was

invented as a means of evaluating and interpreting canonical texts [in literary studies]. . . it favours texts that are written according to its premises. A “closely-read” popular text – one that operates conventionally like a detective novel or television soap opera – can only end up looking bad.<sup>56</sup>

While in television studies the prejudices against soap opera are less pronounced than in literary studies, I would argue the framework in which soap opera is positioned by the textbook account of its conventions has mitigated against close reading by over-determining the outcome and creating the idea that there can be few surprises in soap opera analysis.

In addition, the complex audience engagement which was once associated with soaps is now much more readily deemed a characteristic of *Lost* and *The Wire*. Audience studies of soaps in the 1980s suggested that they rewarded those viewers who were able to handle close and detailed reading practices over a long period of time, understood how the programme's past informed the present, appreciated the layering of different character types in relation to complex story lines and debated with each other about how to interpret the meaning of particular events in a world of endlessly deferred resolutions. This kind of complex activity is now deemed to be the norm for viewers of high-end drama but the same attention (by audiences and academics) is not deemed necessary for soaps. I think it is still the case that that scholars and commentators 'are themselves not competent "readers" of the codes, conventions, and accumulated narrative of soaps'.<sup>57</sup>

What kind of new directions might work on British soap opera take given this background? Lez Cooke has argued that soap operas 'need to be considered on their own terms and not as debased forms of television drama'.<sup>58</sup> At the moment, however, 'being considered on their own terms' seems to mean being ghettoised and largely ignored. I am wary of appearing to fall in with Jacobs' mocking suggestion, in response to a similar complaint of genre negligence, that 'instead of following their enthusiasms perhaps television studies scholars should be forced to write about those shows that suffer from . . . oppressive neglect'<sup>59</sup> but the following might help clear out some of the undergrowth for a new start.

Soaps constitute very difficult and exhausting texts in the sense that the duration and narrative complexity of the most successful examples make even *Lost* (US, 2004-present) or *The Sopranos* (US, 1999-2007) seem manageable.<sup>60</sup> It is the refusal to acknowledge and think through the implications of this which makes their preservation in aspic by the textbooks so frustrating. But the fact that soaps are neither conceived nor experienced as a whole makes it the more important that we understand their production and textual history in a much more detailed way as it has changed over time. Anthony McNicholas's account of the development history of *EastEnders* provides important insights into a particular moment in the history of that programme which could be matched against early episodes and press material.<sup>61</sup> The association of *Coronation Street* and what Dyer called the cultural moment of *The Uses of Literacy* is persistently recalled<sup>62</sup> but an examination of other moments and other programmes would help to dethrone that insight. A tracing of the work of key writers and producers and an analysis of the use of soaps as professional training grounds would provide a more accurate picture of how soaps have themselves developed and changed and how they relate to a broader television production culture.

Textual readings of soaps need to become more nuanced and to be unhooked from questions of representation. The 1980s practice of reading for ideological positions and contradictions needs to be reinforced with (or undermined by) an account of their visual and aural textual features (including performance) and an assessment of how such features work with or against the grain of the particular stories being told. Textual analysis of this kind would need

to be taken across episodes to look at the rhythms, repetitions and changes in style and would need to incorporate an account of the way in which these elements have changed over time. It is significant that the 'cinematic "tag"' is used by academics and practitioners alike in describing 'the enhanced visual style' <sup>63</sup> made possible by modern technology and strongly associated with US quality television. Yet, the 'look' of the different soaps has changed over time and technological changes has had its effect on their visual possibilities as could be seen when Roxy and Sean plunged into the frozen lake in *EastEnders* on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2009 or when a superstitious Becky made a vain attempt to get married on Friday 13<sup>th</sup> (*Coronation Street*, 13<sup>th</sup> March, 2009). The moments from soaps which feature on YouTube often seem to be picked for their visual effects as well as for their dramatic impact.

We also need a more considered approach to the way in which soaps are assigned to the broad analytical categories of realism and melodrama, complex terms with histories of use within film and television studies as well as elsewhere. Melodrama is certainly at play in British soaps but too often the term is used as a label for soaps' association with emotional responses and personal dilemmas without taking into account the complexity of the term or providing evidence of how it is deployed in particular instances. Within the broad framework of melodrama, more imagination and care could be used in analysing the emotional resonances of soaps. Warhol, for instance, treats US daytime soaps as one of a number of sentimental formulaic fictions to which readers/viewers respond often in a physical way (through tears, excitement, anger) and focuses her analysis on

'generic textual patterns that structure the feelings of fans of specific popular genres'.<sup>64</sup> This approach allows her to look at the triggers for a wider than usual range of feelings including boredom and relief and her detailed textual work allows her to map, in the narrative organisation of daytime soaps, an 'emotional wave pattern [which] cuts across the familiar five-day pattern of narrative organisation' and creates 'a pattern of affect' which is 'constantly moving'.<sup>65</sup>

Kristyn Gordon has used Warhol's work to discuss the way in which Kay Mellor uses certain devices, ' "full face, writing, music . . . and casting" ' <sup>66</sup> to generate emotion and Warhol's methods could certainly be tested out with British soaps.

Warhol is one of a number of writers on soap opera who have used audience studies in interesting ways. Audience work on soap opera tends to be dominated by research into identify formation and social effects and television drama scholars committed to textual work have perhaps continued to share Brunsdon's suspicions in the late 1980s that work on audience would mean too great a move away from the text. Research into US daytime soaps has been more adept at using fan response to feed back into textual accounts.<sup>67</sup> Thus, although I am arguing for a renewed attention for British soap opera, I am suggesting that we need to break out of the nationally specific ways in which they have been studied and search out concepts and methods which have been applied elsewhere. This could involve acknowledging the change driven by the internet and working out whether and how, as Hartley expresses it, '*Corrie* [on the web] is a very different animal from *Coronation Street*'.<sup>68</sup> But I am also

arguing that we are very far from having a good understanding of *Coronation Street* on which we might base an assessment of change.

Finally – and this, like much else here, is a memo to self – work on soaps needs to pull back from its mission of redeeming soaps and re-presenting them as worthwhile television. Television scholars often seek to demonstrate the value of television (or at least to show that it is not all bad) and those of us writing about television fiction are often trying to convince readers of the value (however defined) of a particular programme. It is this missionary aspect, the driving principle that soaps must be defended from (unnamed) detractors, which mars Hobson's account and, because it is over-generalised, actually makes her claims for the importance of British soaps less convincing. But my argument that research into soap opera needs to continue to take place in television studies is based on its status as an important element of television fiction drama. That stands whether or not they are inevitably and intrinsically worthwhile viewing.

Work on British soap operas has, in conclusion, suffered from having a generic identity established early and passed on in teaching and learning practices without much challenge to its key textual components. Opening up soap opera study to different methods and conceptual understandings is a key to further work. Mittlell's call for us to look at the 'cultural operation of genres'<sup>69</sup> is pertinent here but he overlooks the way in which 1980s work on television genres such as soap opera was underpinned (if not always adequately) by such an approach<sup>70</sup>. Mittlell calls for a television genre studies which focuses less on

'theoretical models of a genre's formal mechanics' and more on its cultural practice through case studies which incorporate 'industrial practices', 'textual features', 'press sites' and 'audience voices'.<sup>71</sup> This is a tall order for programmes which can run for a lifetime but the suggestion that genre studies needs to balance out its generalising tendencies with the specificity of case studies seems a useful reminder for work on soap opera. A variety of linked case studies, organised synchronically across the programmes at a particular period or diachronically tracing the changes in particular elements within programmes would work effectively for soap opera, combining some of the approaches I have outlined above.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Stephen Armstrong, 'Under the Wire', *MediaGuardian*, 6<sup>th</sup> April 2009, p. 3.



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<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Brunsdon, 'The Role of Soap Opera in the Development of Feminist Television', in Robert Allen, ed., *To Be Continued . . .*, Routledge, 1995, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> John Hartley, 'Less Popular but More Democratic? *Corrie, Clarkson* and the Dancing *Cru*' in Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay, eds, *Television Studies after TV*, Routledge, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Jason Jacobs, 'Issues of Judgement and Value in Television Studies', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4: 4, 2001, 427-47.

<sup>5</sup> The journals were *Television and New Media* (2000- present), *Journal of British Cinema and Television* (2004-present) and *Critical Studies in Television* (2006-present). One article was an overview but the other two introduced new material: Paul Newland 'Global Markets and a Market Place: Reading *EastEnders* as the Anti-Docklands', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 5:1, 2008, 72-87 and Stephen Coleman 'The Depiction of Politicians and Politics in British Soaps', *Television & New Media*, 9:3, 2008, 197-219.

<sup>6</sup> I should say that I admire many of the textbooks that I refer to in this article and believe that often the authors present material in interesting and useful ways. However, as will be clear, I do think there is a general problem with the handling of the discussion of soap opera and I could have taken examples from other textbooks.

<sup>7</sup> Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*, Routledge, 2004, p. 5.

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- <sup>8</sup> Mary Ellen Brown, 'The politics of soaps: pleasure and feminine empowerment', *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4:2, 1987, pp. 1-25.
- <sup>9</sup> Nick Lacey, *Narrative and Genre Key Concepts in Media Studies*, Palgrave, 2000, p. 38.
- <sup>10</sup> Jostein Gripsrud, *Understanding Media Culture*, Arnold, 2002, p. 215.
- <sup>11</sup> Jonathan Bignell, *An Introduction to Television Studies*, Routledge, 2004, p. 94.
- <sup>12</sup> Gill Branston and Roy Stafford, *The Media Student's Book*, (4<sup>th</sup> edition), Routledge, 2006, pp. 57-58.
- <sup>13</sup> *An Introduction to Television Studies*, p. 119.
- <sup>14</sup> *Understanding Media Culture*, p.301.
- <sup>15</sup> Phil Wickham, *Understanding Television Texts*, BFI/ Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p.113
- <sup>16</sup> Jeremy Butler, *Television: Critical Methods and Applications*, Routledge, 2002 p.27.
- <sup>17</sup> Lou Alexander and Alison Cousens, *Teaching TV Soaps*, BFI Education, 2004, p.31
- <sup>18</sup> John Ellis, *TV FAQ Uncommon Answers to Common Questions about TV*, I B Taurus, 2007, p. 104.
- <sup>19</sup> *Genre and Television*, p. 7.
- <sup>20</sup> Keith Selby and Ron Cowdery, *How to Study Television*, Palgrave, p. 182.
- <sup>21</sup> *The Media Student's Book*, p. 59
- <sup>22</sup> *TV FAQ*, p.108

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Branston and Stafford, *The Media Student's Book*, p. 58.

<sup>25</sup> *Teaching TV Soaps*, p. 52 and p. 61.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>27</sup> Bignall, *An Introduction to Television Studies*, p. 118

<sup>28</sup> V Clark, J Baker and E Lewis, *Key Concepts and Skills for Media Studies*, Hodder and Stoughton, 2002, p. 87.

<sup>29</sup> *Narrative and Genre*, p. 221.

<sup>30</sup> *TV FAQ*, p.106. See also Clark et al, *Key Concepts*, pp. 87-92.

<sup>31</sup> See for instance the discussion of melodrama and soaps by Selby and Cowdery, *How to Study Television*, pp. 177-178 and Alexander and Cousens, *Teaching TV Soaps*, pp.29-31.

<sup>32</sup> *TVFAQ*, p. 106.

<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, Branston and Stafford, *The Media Student's Book*, p. 60.

<sup>34</sup> *Teaching TV Soaps*, p. 28

<sup>35</sup> I have tried to relate these changes in visual organisation and an increasing use of melodramatic conventions in *EastEnders* to an ebbing away of trust in the community. See Christine Geraghty, 'Discussing quality: critical vocabularies and popular television drama' in James Curran and David Morley, eds, *Media and Cultural Theory*, Routledge, 2006, pp. 221-232.

<sup>36</sup> Dorothy Hobson, *Soap Opera*, Polity Press, 2003, p. xiii.

<sup>37</sup> *Soap Opera*, p. 202.

<sup>38</sup> *Soap Operas*, p. 211.

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<sup>39</sup> See *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism* in Robert C. Allen (ed), Methuen, 1987, for early examples of this.

<sup>40</sup> Christine Geraghty, 'The study of the soap opera' in Janet Wasko, ed., *A Companion to Television* Blackwell, 2005, pp. 308-323.

<sup>41</sup> Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: an Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India*, Duke University Press, 1999; Shoma Munshi, *Prime Time Soap Operas on Indian Television*, Routledge, 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Sue Jackson, "'Street Girl'", *Feminist Media Studies*, 6:4, 2006, 469- 86; Trisha Dunleavy, 'Coronation Street, Neighbours, Shortland Street: Localness and Universality in the Primetime Soap', *Television & New Media*, 6:4, 2005, 370 – 82.

<sup>43</sup> Enric Castelló, 'The Nation as a Political Stage: A Theoretical Approach to Television Fiction and National Identities', *International Communication Gazette*, 71:4, 2009, 307.

<sup>44</sup> *Television & New Media*, 6:4, 2005.

<sup>45</sup> Castelló, 'The Nation as a Political Stage', p. 310.

<sup>46</sup> ' "Street Girl" ', 475

<sup>47</sup> 'Localness and Universality in the Primetime Soap', 373.

<sup>48</sup> 'EastEnders: Texts of Female Desire and of Community', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*; 6:4, 2003, p. 472.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* p. 474.

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<sup>50</sup> Chris Barker, *Television, Globalization and Cultural Identities*, Open University Press, 1999, p. 140.

<sup>51</sup> Lesley Henderson, *Social Issues in Television Fiction*, Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

<sup>52</sup> Lez Cooke, *British Television Drama A History*, BFI, 2003, p. 83.

<sup>53</sup> Charlotte Brunson, *The Feminist, the Housewife and the Soap Opera*, Clarendon Press, 2000.

<sup>54</sup> Rosalind Gill and Jane Arthurs, 'Introduction', *Feminist Media Studies*, 6:4, 2006, 445.

<sup>55</sup> Robin Nelson, *State of Play Contemporary "High-End" TV Drama*, Manchester University Press, 2007, p. 19.

<sup>56</sup> Robyn R Warhol, *Having a Good Cry Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms*, Ohio State University Press, 2003, p. 25.

<sup>57</sup> 'Conversation with Professor Robert C. Allen', *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture (1900 to present)*, Spring 2004, <http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/index.htm>.

<sup>58</sup> *British Television Drama*, p. 83.

<sup>59</sup> Jason Jacobs, 'Television Aesthetics: an Infantile Disorder', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 3:1, 31.

<sup>60</sup> I am aware that there are very considerable problems in finding sufficient material from British soap operas in television archives to subject to close

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analysis. While this is important, I nevertheless think that the neglect of these programmes has other causes which this article tries to analyse.

<sup>61</sup> Anthony McNicholas, 'Wrenching the Machine Around: *EastEnders*, the BBC and Institutional Change', *Media Culture Society*, 26, 2004, 491 – 512.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Dyer, Introduction' In R. Dyer, C. Geraghty, T Lovell, M Jordan, R. Paterson and J Stewart, eds, *Coronation Street*, British Film Institute Publishing, pp. 1-8.

<sup>63</sup> Nelson, *State of Play*, p. 11.

<sup>64</sup> *Having a Good Cry*, p. 22.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>66</sup> Kristyn Gorton, 'A Sentimental Journey: Television, Meaning and Emotion', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 3:1, 75. The words quoted are Mellor's.

<sup>67</sup> See, as well as Warhol, Nancy K. Baym, *Tune in, log on: soaps, fandom, and online community*, Sage, 1999; S. Elizabeth Bird, *Everyday Life Living in a Media World*, Routledge, 2003; and Christine Scodari, *Serial Monogamy Soap Opera, Lifespan and the Gendered Politics of Fantasy*, Hampton Press, 2004.

<sup>68</sup> 'Less Popular, but More Democratic?', p. 26.

<sup>69</sup> *Genre and Television*, p. 4.

<sup>70</sup> And I would suggest that Robin Nelson's *State of Play*, which offers textual accounts of US and UK "high-end" drama in the context of production and audience framing, is a more recent example of what Mittell is calling for.

<sup>71</sup> *Genre and Television*, pp. 25-6.

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