Opening America?

The Telenovela-ization of U.S. Soap Operas*

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The U.S. dominance of the international television marketplace has long been a central focus for media scholars and policy leaders concerned with television's impact on national culture. Thus, research on the export of U.S. television programs has focused almost exclusively on its "one-way flow," and relatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to how programming from abroad fares in the United States or to how U.S. dominance in the global arena is affected as the industry adapts its products for export. This article contributes to the theoretical and empirical "opening up" of the cultural imperialism approach by considering how the U.S. television industry is influenced by program trends from abroad. In particular, it examines the impact of Latin American *telenovelas* on the U.S. daytime soap opera genre in the context of shifts during the past decade in the demographics of the U.S. population and changes in the practices and tastes of television audiences.

Keywords: *telenovela-ization; U.S. soap opera industry; television import/export; genre transformation*

The global market for syndicated television programming remains the focus of considerable debate by media scholars and policy leaders concerned with television's impact on national culture. A central theme in this debate is the dominance of the United States in the international marketplace (Nordenstreng and Varis 1974; Varis 1986). However, a burgeoning line of scholarship challenges the theoretical and empirical relevance of the cultural imperialism thesis for understanding the state of the television industry worldwide (see, e.g., Pool 1977; Antola and Rogers 1984; Hoskins and Mirus 1988; Sinclair, Jacka, and Cunningham 1996). According to

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Sinclair, Jacka, and Cunningham (1996), television's appeal is resolutely local, not global, and it circulates largely through exchange within geolinguistic regions. Moreover, they observe, as television programming crosses borders not only do audiences generate unanticipated meanings, the product undergoes a dynamic process of "cultural syncretism" that modifies genre conventions almost beyond recognition. "The resulting situation is not the passive homogenization of world television which cultural imperialism theorists feared, but rather its heterogenization" (Sinclair, Jacka, and Cunningham 1996, 13). A comprehensive understanding of these local adaptations calls for a middle-range theoretical approach (Cunningham and Jacka 1994) that foregrounds practices by the industry through which programming is made available to audiences.

The United States is the undisputed leader in exported television, and that fact has tended to suppress inquiry into the ways in which its dominance in the global arena is affected as the industry adapts its products for export (Bielby and Harrington 2002) and as the products are consumed by audiences in other countries (Sinclair, Jacka, and Cunningham 1996). Moreover, while research on the export of U.S. television programs has focused almost exclusively on their "one-way flow," relatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to the reverse: how programming from abroad fares in the United States. As part of a larger project on the international market for exported television, our analysis examines the impact of Latin American *telenovelas* on the U.S. daytime soap opera genre. In particular, we consider how shifts during the past decade in the demographics of the U.S. population and changes in practices and tastes of television audiences have affected how the U.S. soap opera industry has adapted to competition from other countries. Our analysis contributes to the theoretical and empirical "opening up" of the cultural imperialism approach by considering how the U.S. television industry is influenced by program trends from abroad.

The Soap Opera Genre

Uniquely capable of drawing a large and loyal viewer base, serial narratives are argued to be a global cultural form in that they are "a narrative mode *produced* in a variety of countries across the globe" and are "one of the most exported forms of television *viewed* in a range of cultural contexts" (Barker 1997, 75). While Americans are most familiar with seriality in the form of daytime soap operas, there is such a diversity of serial forms worldwide that the genre itself is increasingly difficult to define. Most commonly, serials are divided into two main types based on the presence or absence of narrative closure. Open-ended storytelling is associated with serials produced in the United States, Great Britain, and Australia, while closed-ended serials are more characteristic of Latin America, India, Japan, China,

South Africa, and elsewhere (Allen 1997, 112). Serials can also be divided thematically and / or structurally. O'Donnell (1999, 4–5) suggests that one type of serial engages primarily with emotions or melodrama (such as Mexican, Venezuelan, and U.S. serials) while others engage more explicitly with political and social issues (such as Brazilian and Columbian serials). Finally, Liebes and Livingstone (1998, 153) argue that three prototypical forms or models can be applied to different countries' soaps: dynastic soaps (focusing on one powerful family), community soaps (focusing on a number of equal, separate families and characters), and dyadic soaps (focusing on romantic entanglements, disentanglements, and re-entanglements).

These distinctions between forms or models do not imply, of course, that the serial genre (or any genre) has a fixed set of conventions or impermeable boundaries. Genres are not fixed and immutable. Rather, genres evolve and new ones appear "by transgressing the formulae of their predecessors" (Cunningham, Miller, and Rowe 1994, 14). Genres are socially constructed through relationships between artists and audiences in specific social, historical, and ideological contexts, and they are modified as they are produced and received (Feuer 1987; Fiske 1987; Griswold 1987; Taylor 1989).[1] Explains Gledhill, "we find a sliding of conventions from one genre to another according to changes in production and audiences. This sliding of conventions is a prime source of generic evolution" (1997, 357). In this article, we explore factors contributing to, and implications of, one such evolution: the "telenovela-ization" of U.S. soap operas.

Why Evolve? The U.S. Industry Context

U.S. daytime soap operas air five days per week, fifty-two weeks per year, are only rarely repeated by their home networks,[2] and can remain in production for decades.[3] Since their transition from radio to television in the 1950s, soap operas have been a reliable source of revenue for the U.S. television networks. Despite their continued low cultural status (because they target the female audience and are regarded as women's texts), soaps' enduring popularity and resulting profit-making potential have consistently paid for other less popular or more expensive forms of network programming. Indeed, soaps have arguably been the single best "deal" in the history of American television, "serving large audiences at comparatively low costs and providing an impressive yield for its investment" (Matelski 1999, 2). During the past two decades, however, changes in the paid labor market, increasingly limited leisure time, expanded channel capacity, the growth of the Internet, and the growing fickleness of American viewers (among other factors) have contributed to rapidly dwindling domestic audiences for the genre (Allen 1996). The decline in viewership was particularly noticeable in the 1990s. Since 1991, soaps have lost 33 percent of their

viewers, and there are 27 percent fewer women between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine (daytime soaps' target audience) watching today than in 1994 (Baldwin 1999).[4] From an all-time high of nineteen soaps on the air in the 1969–1970 television season, there are currently only ten airing.

Initially, industry members responded to the slide by blaming factors outside the industry. A key target was the months-long, live coverage of the O. J. Simpson preliminary hearing and murder trial in the mid-1990s, which preempted most daytime serials for the duration of the proceedings. If not the O. J. trial, it was the explosion of daytime talk shows; if not talk shows, then the lure of the Internet was blamed for soaps' decline (Foulk 2000, 27). But as ratings continued to fall through the late 1990s, the industry recognized that the lost audience was not going to return and that new strategies were needed to restore its ability to generate revenue for the networks.

Some shows now market merchandise tied to storylines, others have developed online support, and almost all have slashed production costs.[5] But perhaps the most significant adaptation of consequence to the genre is the courting of the Spanish-speaking audience as a way of bringing in additional revenue. *TV Guide*'s resident soaps critic, Michael Logan, succinctly notes, "The Hispanic population has surpassed 35 million, and that vast audience, already nuts for telenovelas, has American soap programmers drooling" (Logan 2002, 36).

As has been well documented, the history of U.S. television is characterized in part by a strong resistance to foreign programming and is "informally closed" to television from other cultures (Allen 1996, 124; see also Barker 1997; Cunningham and Jacka 1994).[6] Network television continues to be "resolutely monolingual," with virtually all programming directed toward an English-speaking audience (Allen 1996, 124). However, a viewing revolution has taken place in the United States during the past decade. Largely as a result of the expansion of the cable industry, the proportion of the television audience traditionally commanded by the major broadcast networks plummeted. In the 1970s, the share of primetime viewership held by ABC, CBS, and NBC stood at more than 90 percent; by August 1998, that percentage was around 47 percent (Lowry 1998). With the plethora of channels now comprising the multichannel media universe, American audiences have an astonishing array of special-interest networks from which to make viewing choices. The rise of Univisión as the largest Spanish-language cable network in the U.S. (with Telemundo as its chief competitor) is widely attributed to the long-standing neglect of Latino and Latina viewers by the major U.S. networks. Despite efforts to diversify programming in the past few years, telenovelas remain a staple at both Univisión and Telemundo, airing mornings, afternoons, and evenings, and earning consistently high ratings (Barrera and Bielby 2002; Lopez 1995). As such, U.S.

networks' burgeoning attempts to woo Latino and Latina viewers face stiff challenge from Spanish-language cable channels.[7]

Evolving the Genre

The format of the U.S. daytime soap opera genre, which is structured as open-ended narratives that never achieve closure, has remained unchanged since its inception in 1930 (Intintoli 1984; Cassata 1985; LaGuardia 1974). Despite its well-defined characteristics, however, the genre is hardly static. While its basic narrative premise has not changed—soap storylines are structured around the creation, development, and dissolution of increasingly complicated social, familial, and romantic relationships (Allen 1985, 74)—it has undergone "distinct shifts in character, style, and setting" during the past decades (Patterson 1995, 104). Some of these changes have resulted in subgenres, such as soaps that specialize in medical dramas (e.g., ABC's *General Hospital* and the defunct *The Doctors*) or those that incorporate supernatural elements (e.g., NBC's *Passions* and the defunct *Dark Shadows*). Changes have also occurred in lighting and camerawork, such as the unprecedented "prime-time look" of *The City* (ABC) before its cancellation in the mid-1990s. Most notably, the overall focus of daytime soaps has evolved since their early days to celebrate heterosexual romance, marriage, and family life. Indeed, contemporary U.S. soaps have evolved into the best example of what Liebes and Livingstone (1998, 153) refer to as the dyadic model of the serial genre:

> a destabilized network of a number of young, densely interconnected, mostly unigenerational, interchanging couples, with past, present and future romantic ties, continually absorbed in the process of reinventing kinship relations.

Soaps' preoccupation with romantic coupling, decoupling, and recoupling has rendered them particularly resistant to depictions of "otherness" of any kind, whether racial, ethnic, sexual, or religious. As Allen notes, "The problem of including [difference] in soaps is not of working them into plot lines, but of dealing with the paradigmatic consequences of their entry into the community of the soap opera world" (1985, 7).

To understand the significance of the networks' current focus on wooing Latino and Latina viewers, some historical context is useful. Until 1980, the only racial groups represented on daytime shows were African Americans and whites (Cassata and Skill 1983). Although ethnically differentiated groups—such as Poles, Jews, and the Irish—were explicitly incorporated into *One Life to Live* (ABC) when it premiered in 1968 and *Ryan's Hope* (ABC) when it debuted in 1975, Latinos were not introduced as central characters until 1984, when the soap *Santa Barbara* debuted on NBC, with a Mexican American core family. In the 1990s, ABC's *All My Children* and *One Life to*

Live introduced core Latino characters, families, and plots, a move that proved popular with the viewers. However, scholars and industry critics (as well as some audience members) considered the characters stereotypical, despite their expanded presence onscreen and best of intentions by head writers (see, e.g., Jenrette, McIntosh, and Winterberger 1999). From a production standpoint, as noted above, narratives that incorporate a multiracial or multiethnic tapestry of characters and plots make writing more complicated because of the added challenge of preserving authenticity in a multicultural context (Allen 1985). Without a demonstrable effect on ratings, then, such adaptations are rarely perceived as worth the expense and extra effort. From the industry's point of view, attempts at multiculturalism were not worth sustaining until the eroding economics of the daytime industry literally forced it to search for additional avenues to expand the audience.

The 2000 U.S. Census revealed that the Hispanic or Latino and Latina population grew by nearly 60 percent in the past decade, with more than 32 million Hispanics currently living in the United States. In total numbers, it has almost caught up with African Americans, the largest racial-ethnic minority group in the United States, and it is expected to surpass them by 2005. The rapid growth of the Hispanic population, half of which is younger than twenty-seven years old, has, in turn, attracted the attention of advertisers seeking to capture the purchasing power of the burgeoning Latino market (Hassell 2001). Responding to the gradual loss of daytime's key demographic audience (women between eighteen and forty-nine years old), at the present time, there are three notable, ongoing developments in network attempts to grow the Hispanic daytime audience.

First, NBC's *Days of Our Lives* and *Passions* began closed-captioning their shows in Spanish in July 2001 (*Soap Opera Digest* 2001a, 14). A second, more significant development is the simulcast of *Bold and the Beautiful* in Spanish and English, from May 2001. This marks the first time a network has used a secondary audio program (which provides Spanish translation) for a daytime serial; the move will make *Bold* available to almost half the Latino homes in the United States (Calvo 2001). *Bold*'s executive producer and head writer, Bradley Bell, made his intentions behind this development explicit when he stated in a recent soap fan magazine, "We're hoping to be the first to capitalize on introducing [the Hispanic] market to American soap operas" (*Soap Opera Digest* 2001c, 6).

The decision to simulcast the show in both English and Spanish coincides with the addition of a new central Latino character, "Antonio," who is tied to the core family through marriage to one of their daughters. Whether this character will truly amount to a breakthrough in nonstereotypic ethnic representation remains to be seen, but the critical reaction in some corners has been quite positive. For example, *Soap Opera Digest* Editor Lynn Leahy

admitted in a recent column that while initially skeptical of the Antonio storyline, "It would appear that B&B, which has never tried to be more than a classy, highly entertaining diversion has found a way to remain that . . . and then some" (Leahy 2002, p. 22).[8]

The third and perhaps most significant development within the U.S. daytime industry has occurred on ABC's half-hour soap *Port Charles*, which debuted in 1997 as a spin-off of the network's popular and long-running *General Hospital*. Faring poorly in the ratings since its premiere, cancellation rumors were swirling when *Port Charles* shifted to a twelve-week story-arc format in March 2000.[9] The first "book," titled *Fate,* was told in three chapters: "Desire," "Deception," and "Destiny." When the second book, *Time in a Bottle*, debuted, the show had dropped the chapter format but offered something new to U.S. daytime television by thematically linking the story to popular musician Jim Croce's song by the same name. Subsequent books have also been named for popular songs—*Tainted Love* (sung by Soft Cell), *Secrets* (Madonna), and the current book, *Superstition* (with pop reggae band UB40)—with the songs featured in primetime promotional spots. According to one editorial, "Using musical themes was a brilliant marketing tool, that resulted in record downloads of the corresponding theme songs from MP3 song-swapping services" ("SOC Names Port Charles Best Soap of '01," www.soapcentral.com, December 20, 2001).

Although widely regarded as introducing the telenovela-ization of U.S. soaps, *Port Charles*'s twist on the genre was clearly driven by a need to stanch the declining daytime audience and its own poor ratings. In this instance, the change in format was an attempt to capture distracted, short-attention-span viewers with story arcs that capitalize on popular themes and remain apart from the overall show rather than an effort to adapt the genre to the traditional story interests of Latino and Latina viewers. Although Latin American telenovelas air complete narratives in 100 to 120 episodes, their storylines characteristically "tend towards the romantic and melodramatic with an emphasis on upward social mobility usually through romantic attachment, and they are expected to have a happy ending" (Patterson 1995, 105).[10] But *Port Charles* stories have been anything but tales of upward mobility, romance, and happy endings; the two most popular books to date, *Tempted* and *Tainted Love*, featured vampires, time travel, and other supernatural elements. After creating buzz within the industry and a guarantee to air at least through summer 2002 (Dawn 2002, 49), the latest ratings show that the short-arc format has helped *Port Charles*. As of February 2002, Nielsen ratings show a 10 percent improvement over last year in the key demographic of eighteen- to forty-nine-year-old women (Freeman 2002).[11] In regard to the telenovela-ization of the show itself, a nonscientific poll in *Soap Opera Digest* reported that 72 percent of viewers

"loved" the story-arc format while 28 percent "hated" it (*Soap Opera Digest* 2001d, 58–59).

Audience Considerations: Revolution or Compromise?

In 1997, when anticipating the shift to short-term arcs by *Port Charles*, former president of ABC daytime Patricia Fili-Krushel observed that "the best cure for the audience's attention deficit is also the oldest: compelling stories. . . . On the other hand, a plot can't move so slowly that frequent viewers get bored" (Schmuckler 1997, 13). In the same vein, Mickey Dwyer Dobbin, former head of CBS daytime, now executive in charge of production at Proctor & Gamble Productions, stated, "Many people don't want to get hooked on a new show, so maybe we should be thinking about [the telenovela] form—doing a story over a thirteen- or twenty-six week period" (Schmuckler 1997, 13). In what is perhaps a preview of how the entire ABC lineup will change as a result of *Port Charles*'s success with the short-term arc, Felicia Minei Behr, senior vice president for programming at ABC daytime, says that the network plans to bring the new format to all its shows in the coming year (*Soap Opera Digest* 2001b, 6). Indeed, on February 11, Ms. Behr announced that *One Life to Live* will be the next ABC soap to experiment with the novela format by year's end (Freeman 2002). However, the adaptation of the new format to the hour-long *One Life to Live* is expected to be more of a challenge because of the greater number of characters and subplots and its decades-long history (see below). With an eye toward those challenges, Ms. Behr and Angela Shapiro, president of ABC daytime, plan to withhold conversion of the other ABC hour-long serials, *All My Children* and *General Hospital*, until the waters are more fully tested with *One Life to Live* (Freeman 2002).

As for *Port Charles*, despite its increase in the key audience demographic of eighteen- to forty-nine-year-old women (Freeman 2002), it remains the lowest-ranked soap currently on the air. In still another attempt to avoid cancellation, the show recently shifted to a more cost-effective production schedule common to prime time—taping two episodes a day for six months and then going on hiatus for the rest of the year. While this will reduce production costs, it jeopardizes the show's ability to tweak storylines in response to audience feedback as stories unfold, thus potentially undermining the established give-and-take relationship between the soap opera industry and its loyal and vocal audience (see Harrington and Bielby 1995). Shorter-arc storytelling does have an upside, however: "at least plots will be wrapping up every few months. So, if reaction is negative, viewers will not have to watch something they don't like for long" (*Soap Opera Digest* 2002, 10). Speculation about the possible cancellation of *Port Charles* is still widespread in the industry (*Soap Opera Digest* 2001e, 5; Pursell 2001).

Revenue problems aside, the adaptation of the telenovela format within the United States is predicted to have genre-altering consequences. These changes are not necessarily positive in the opinion of some industry observers and long-time audience members. Former *Soap Opera Weekly* critic "Marlena De Lacroix" (in real life New York University journalism instructor Connie P. Hayman) raised several concerns shortly after *Port Charles* debuted its telenovela format. As she put it, "It's apparent already that the people behind the show aren't so much revolutionizing the art of soap operas as they are compromising it" (De Lacroix 2001, 12). Hayman bases her criticism on considerations that are central to the U.S. serial format. One is that soaps' endless middle and five-days-per-week airing schedule allow stories to be told in real time. Says Hayman (or De Lacroix), "Since soaps are experienced day-to-day, they mimic real life, strengthening viewers' feeling that a soap's story is real" (p. 12). She argues that *Port Charles'* fast-paced plots feel "surreal," and viewers are "clobbered over the head with key turning points at least once a week" (p. 12). Traditionally, U.S. soaps incorporate key plot transitions once every thirteen weeks or so. A result of this slower pacing is that it holds the audience (and attracts new viewers along the way by word of mouth), which continues to watch to follow the incremental buildup to resolution. The payoff for the audience lies within that resolution, which entails multilayered significance through its outcome. But there is an additional benefit to the audience of the U.S.'s form of the genre, according to Hayman: "one of the aspects of traditional soap opera that keeps the audience coming back is consistency in both story and character" (p. 12). Hayman suggests that one of the compromises from the change in format for *Port Charles* has been the rewriting of history and of character to come up with "ubermelodramatic" events for the sake of story. Hayman continues, "Reinterpreting history is a writer's prerogative, but it has a serious downside: It makes viewers feel deceived" (p. 6). For long-term viewers, those most familiar and comfortable with the established conventions of the U.S. form of the genre, the modification of the traditional soap opera form might be a hard sell.

In addition, there are real costs and complications associated with introducing a different genre form into a long-running and established genre concept. One problem that may not have been fully anticipated by the industry is that character and plot developments of the short-term arcs need to be reintegrated with the long-term bible for the show, and continuity of character has to be balanced against the requirements of the short-term story. The editors at SoapCentral.com,[12] who proclaimed *Port Charles* the best soap opera of 2001, suggest that while storytelling in early books was disjointed and somewhat belabored (as Hayman argued above), later books maintain the story integrity and character consistency familiar to U.S. soap viewers:

> To assume . . . that every three months means something entirely new on *Port Charles* is a mistake. There are common threads that transcend each book and the continuity level is extremely high. New stories are set up during the course of each book so that by the time the next story arc rolls around, there's already a new story brewing, one that the viewer has already been lured into watching. (http://www.soapcentral.com/soapcentral/news/2001)

It is perhaps too early to say whether the telenovela-ization of U.S. soap operas is a genre adaptation or a new competing subgenre. Whether this genre form takes hold in the U.S. context depends, obviously, on whether network executives view it as a business success in terms of ratings and revenues. In the absence of clear markers of business success, the experiment in bringing telenovela-like elements into U.S. soaps will be abandoned. On the other hand, the networks can afford to alienate segments of the loyal viewership if the innovations bring in new audience constituencies in large enough numbers. It is a difficult balancing act for the networks, since critics and loyal viewers are invested in the genre and are closely monitoring any radical departures from established convention. Whether that segment of the audience is expendable cannot be known until after the fact, and it is especially difficult to introduce changes that both remain true to what established audiences seek and address the demands of a changing marketplace.

Reformatting Pleasure and the Portability of the Soap Genre

There are at least two significant issues at stake with the widespread reformatting of U.S. soaps: one speaks to viewer/fan pleasure, and the other speaks to the global market for exported television programming. First, we believe a move to short-term story arcs requires scholars to retheorize the meaning of pleasure in open-ended serial narratives. Our concern is not so much with casual soap viewers but with long-term dedicated fans of the genre. As we argued in "Soap Fans: Pursuing Pleasure and Making Meaning in Everyday Life" (Harrington and Bielby 1995), viewer and fan must be understood as conceptually distinct categories; fans make an affective investment in the genre that speaks to central issues of play, creativity, and personal identity. A key source of pleasure for dedicated U.S. fans is soaps' ability to act as "transitional objects," allowing them to play with the boundaries between internal and external, between the "real" and the "nonreal" (Harrington and Bielby 1995).[13]

The U.S. soap industry—its directors, writers, actors, and fans themselves—have a long-standing investment in cultivating and maintaining this form of emotional boundary playing, which seems threatened by telenovela-ization. The praise of *Port Charles* from the editors at SoapCentral.com (as noted above) is heartening in that it appears, to some viewers at least, that a relatively new show (*Port Charles* is only five years

old) *can* switch to short-term story arcs without losing character and narrative consistency. But what about shows with a thirty-, forty-, or fifty-year legacy? To transform characters, communities, and narratives that were designed to go on endlessly (as real life does) into twelve-week segments risks a central source of pleasure and identity available to U.S. soap fans for more than seventy years. Without question, *Port Charles* has been an interesting experiment; the telenovela-ization of *One Life to Live*, if it occurs as predicted, should give us greater insight into audience considerations surrounding genre reformatting.[14]

A second issue at stake with the proposed reformatting is its impact on the exportability of U.S. soaps to the global syndication market. One of the biggest drawbacks to the export potential of U.S. serials is their open-ended format. While providing a large pool of episodes for buyer selection, with long-running, domestically successful products, the text literally becomes unwieldy to export. How many episodes constitute the story? Importing markets prefer programs without a long history, and in the United States, this typically applies only to cancelled programs or recent entrees into the daytime lineup. Of soaps currently airing in the United States, CBS' *The Bold and the Beautiful* is by far the most popular globally. Not coincidentally, it has a relative short history in the U.S. context (first airing in 1987) and is a half-hour program. *Port Charles*, while still garnering fairly dismal domestic ratings, seems well poised to enter the global market: like *Bold*, it is a half-hour show, it has a very short history, and most importantly, its reformatting could allow each book to be exported as a self-contained package. We question whether the telenovela-ization of *Port Charles* speaks to a recent trend in the U.S. daytime industry to prioritize global audiences over local ones. While a full discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this article, there have been several indications that as a result of declining domestic profits, network decisions are increasingly oriented to the global marketplace. For example, in 1999, NBC debated whether to cancel *Sunset Beach* or *Another World* to make room in the schedule for its new show, *Passions*. While both shows drew low ratings, *Beach* had been on the air a mere two years, while *World* was one of the grande dames of U.S. daytime television, with thirty-five years on the air. NBC elected to cancel *World* but gave *Beach* a six-month extension before finally canceling it in December 1999. U.S.-based fans were outraged over this decision, confused as to why *Another World*, given its legacy, was not granted the extension. However, a major difference between the new shows was the substantial foreign sales of *Beach*, which NBC coproduced with Spelling Productions. NBC had no financial stake in *Another World*, which was owned by Proctor & Gamble.[15] A question for future research is, How might the reformatting of U.S.-based soaps enhance their export potential?

Conclusion

What makes opening America to imported programming or new programming concepts such a challenge? Hoskins and Mirus (1988) observed in writing about the cultural discount factor that in any given country, the audience's preference for familiarity is paramount. Our research conducted on the U.S. soap opera audience demonstrates clearly that storytelling that portrays emotional authenticity, that relies on elements of melodrama as a stylistic form, and that unfolds in "real time" is crucial to audience pleasures. Our research on the international market for television points also to the importance of technical quality, visual style, and other aesthetic considerations in attracting audiences. Another factor related less directly to audiences and more to the industry itself is the sheer difficulty of introducing innovation of any sort. In an industry where the costs of production are considerable and the commissioning or purchase of new programs is made in a business context of ambiguity and uncertainty, industry decision makers demand that any new product be framed as familiar or otherwise knowable in some way. Moreover, increasingly, because of industry deregulation that took effect in the United States in the 1990s, any imported series or concept competes with a network's ownership stake in its own shows and in keeping them on the air as long as possible to sell them to the domestic (and international) syndication market (Bielby and Bielby, 2003). In short, even when the genre properties of an import are familiar and production quality is excellent, the American television industry has its own interests at heart, which in this case is a bottom line in which revenue flows accrue to the established stakeholders. However, as we see with the telenovela-ization of U.S. soaps, even the otherwise closed American industry is willing to open up when confronted with opportunities it perceives as potentially improving the bottom line.

Notes

1. Consensus between creators and audiences over genre boundaries is probably greater in television than in any other area of popular culture, in part because of the industry's aversion to the risks that accompany innovation and in part because of the audience's preference for familiarity when seeking popular entertainment (Bielby and Bielby, 2003).

2. Networks will occasionally repeat so-called classic episodes when certain segments of the market anticipate scheduled preemptions, such as during NCAA basketball playoffs or during coverage of the Wimbledon tennis tournament (see Harrington 1998). SoapNet, the twenty-four-hour soap opera cable network launched by Disney / ABC in January of 2000, shows same-day repeats of all four ABC-owned soaps (*Port Charles*, *All My Children*, *One Life to Live*, and *General Hospital*), as well as NBC's *Passions* and CBS's *As The World Turns* and *Guiding Light*.

3. For example, ABC's *General Hospital* is currently celebrating its thirty-ninth year on the air, NBC's *As The World Turns* has been airing for forty-six years, and in June 2002, *Guiding Light* celebrated its fiftieth birthday on radio and television—the longest story ever told.

4. Despite declining ratings, however, soaps continue to be profitable in the domestic market. An average hour-long show costs $60 million per year to produce, and the most popular earn $150 to $200 million per year (McAvoy 1999).

5. In the past decade, for example, networks have begun licensing soap memorabilia, such as coffee mugs, T-shirts, key rings, and specially produced videotapes devoted to favorite villains or memorable weddings (Bellafante 1995, 74). They have also begun promoting soap operas on prime-time television in the hopes of attracting new viewers. *Port Charles* (ABC) premiered in a two-hour primetime movie-of-the-week format, and it is now typical for a show's twentieth or twenty-fifth anniversary to be commemorated with a prime-time special; such exposure would have been unthinkable even a decade ago. More recently, CBS increased exposure for its daytime lineup through an arrangement with American Airlines to feature CBS soaps in its in-flight magazine (Stanley 2000), and ABC's *All My Children* and Revlon have agreed to a deal "in which the cosmetics company will be the focal point of a three-month storyline in exchange for buying several million dollars' worth of advertising time on the show" (*Soap Opera Weekly* 2002, 5; see also Flint and Nelson 2002).

6. The lack of imports on U.S. television is typically blamed on American viewers' rejection of low(er) production values, slow pacing, unfamiliar settings and accents, and dubbing and/or subtitling (Allen 1996; Antola and Rogers 1984; Cunningham and Jacka 1994).

7. As Barrera and Bielby (2002) point out, while considerable scholarly attention has focused on the study of *telenovelas* within their countries of origin, far less is known about their reception in other cultural contexts. Through an analysis of interviews with *novela* watchers in the United States, they find that telenovelas are much more than "entertainment" for viewers. Rather, they "assist Latinos who reside in the United States in recreating and maintaining a strong cultural bond to Latin America" (Barrera and Bielby 2002, 13). Through the visual representation of Latin American styles, the use of the Spanish language, and the unique scenery and storytelling devices, telenovelas allow viewers in the United States to "remember" or "revisit" Latin America.

8. *Bold and the Beautiful* also hired Erik Estrada to play Antonio's father in fall 2001. Well known to American viewers for his role in the classic 1970s primetime series *Chips*, Estrada also appeared on the Mexican serial *Dos Mujeres, Un Camino* (see www.tv.com/erik-estrada/person/20070/appearances.html).

9. In a departure from the new model, the show's fifth story arc, which debuted December 3, 2001, was only four weeks long.

10. This is an overgeneralization, of course. As noted earlier, telenovelas differ significantly in theme, structure, and realism, depending on country of origin.

11. In fact, the soap genre as a whole is experiencing a small but promising rebound; ABC's overall soap lineup, for example, is up 3 percent during the past season in the eighteen-to-forty-nine demographic (Diliberto 2002, 30). These ratings are obviously important to the network and to the stabilization of the industry more

broadly, but they also point to networks' increasing success in appealing to the youth market. Says Felicia Behr of ABC, "*PC* [*Port Charles*] has grown enormously; I think it's [up] 340 percent in the last year in the 18–24 demographic. . . . We're interested in bringing in young viewers, because every day in the 18–49 demographic somebody reaches their 50th birthday and goes out of the demographic. So we're interested in bringing in somebody at the 18-year-old level to balance off the people that are falling out of that ever-precious demographic advertisers want" (quoted in Diliberto 2002, 31). The ability to appeal to the younger audience's taste may speak to an important transformation of the genre.

12. Founded in 1995, SoapCentral.com is one of the Internet's first all-encompassing Web sites for U.S.-based soaps.

13. Noted psychologist D. W. Winnicott (1971) proposed three realms of life: "internal" reality, "external" reality, and an intermediate realm of experience that keeps the inner and outer worlds separate yet interrelated. The intermediate realm is neither "inside" nor "outside," but in between. Winnicott links this realm to a specific stage in child development (between four and twelve months) in which infants first become capable of perceiving the self as both subject and object. This stage is characterized by the appearance of transitional objects, which the infant becomes emotionally attached to but is unable to realize are not fully "real" (such as a favorite blanket or toy). This intermediate realm, characterized by creative play and pleasurable affect, remains with us as adults, though we learn to experience it privately rather than openly. In *Soap Fans*, we proposed that soap operas are uniquely positioned to serve as transitional objects for adults: "While many genres aim at fictionalizing the real, serials are uniquely situated to offer a fictional community to viewers who then, quite knowledgeably, bounce the real off the fictional and the fictional off the real. If television programs can act as transitional phenomena [as Lembo and Tucker (1990) first proposed], then soaps are the easiest type of programming for us to use in this way" (Harrington and Bielby 1995, 135).

14. As noted earlier, another source of viewer pleasure in the U.S. context has been transformed by *Port Charles*'s shift to a six-months-on, six-months-off production schedule. While mimicking the production schedule of primetime programming, the shift also mimics one of the main limitations of prime time to engender the intense audience loyalty characteristic of daytime: viewers' inability to give ongoing feedback to the unfolding narrative. As we argued in *Soap Fans* (Harrington and Bielby 1995), the daytime industry in the United States deliberately cooperates with the secondary press to foster and maintain a sense of participation on viewers' parts: "we are all in this together." While obviously illusory to some extent, this sense of participation in the storytelling process is a key element of fan pleasure and loyalty and will be transformed through telenovela-ization.

15. For a full discussion of the issue see, Harrington and Bielby (2002).

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