

Popular Culture Forms: Soap Operas

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While “serial” and “soap opera” are often used interchangeably, serial narratives are not specific to any medium or genre and appear across film, radio, comics, television, and novels, and in genres including comedies, science fiction, mysteries, Westerns, political satire, and melodrama. Serial narratives were crucial to the development of national broadcast systems around the world in their ability to promote continuous consumption of subsequent episodes of a program and generate product loyalty. Seriality is thus crucial in transforming mediums into mass mediums. Serial forms worldwide include US daytime and primetime soap operas, Latin American telenovelas, India’s devotional serials, Japan’s *dorama* series, and Britain’s naturalistic serials.

In the United States, serials in the form of daytime soap operas emerged in radio of the 1930s and became one of the most effective broadcast advertising vehicles ever created, by facilitating daily listening habits across decades. They were deemed “soap operas” due to their early sponsorship by soap companies such as Procter & Gamble who sought a consistent means of advertising household products to housewives via melodramatic or “operatic” programming. Fifteen-minute radio “soaps” of the 1930s shifted to television in 1952 and lengthened to 30- to 60-minute programs. Targeting the 18–49 age demographic of women, TV soaps gradually expanded their casts, production budgets, and narrative scope. The high point of the genre was in 1969 when 18 soaps aired across CBS, ABC, and NBC. Soaps began rapidly declining in the 2000s as a result of factors such as increased competition from cheaper-to-produce reality shows, talk shows, and home/cooking shows;

resulting budget constraints leading to lower-quality productions; unanticipated programming interruptions; and the growing dominance of serialized narratives on primetime, cable, and digital platforms. As of 2021, there are only four broadcast network daytime soaps airing in the United States.

What makes a serial a soap opera? Distinctive characteristics of traditional US daytime soaps include a format that resists narrative closure; numerous characters and plots; “use of time which parallels actual time and implies that the action continues to take place whether we watch it or not”; segmentation between parts; emphasis on intimate dialogue and problem-solving; powerful female characters and sensitive male characters; and “the home, or some other place which functions as a home, as the setting for the show” (Brown, 1987: 4).

US soaps’ distinct mode of delivery (airing five days per week, 52 weeks per year, with few repeats and no seasons) yields a vast and ever-flowing data stream for scholars interested in studying soaps’ narratives, industry, and/or viewership. Initially overlooked by critical analysts, soaps eventually proved significant for the emergence of multiple scholarly perspectives including the uses and gratifications approach in media theory, audience reception studies, feminist media studies, research on cultural globalization, studies of online communities, and fan studies. Contemporary soap scholarship is multidisciplinary and multimethodological, engaging both the social sciences and the humanities and ranging from literary theory to content analysis and from ethnographies of soap fan communities to industry assessments.

The study of US daytime soaps engages core sociological issues including social identity, sociality/community, and cultural legitimacy. The immediacy and intimacy offered by television as a whole are exaggerated in soap operas in that they offer unique opportunities for fictional and “real” selves to unfold in tandem. Soaps’ lack of episodic closure allows characters to grow and develop much as viewers do, and the genre’s longstanding focus on familial and romantic relationships

generates sustained on-screen explorations of gender and (mostly hetero)sexuality. Feminist scholarship emerging in the 1970s examined the relationship between women's pleasures in soap consumption and female empowerment, with early scholars skeptical of the genre's transformative potential but later scholars embracing its valorization of traditional feminine principles as a source of legitimate pleasure in the context of patriarchy (Brunsdon, 1995).

A related sociological concern is sociality or community – that is represented on-screen but, more importantly, that is cultivated off-screen through shared viewing practices. Traditionally, daytime soaps inspired multigenerational audiences with parents (mostly mothers) introducing their children (mostly daughters) to the pleasures of soap texts, thus facilitating social bonds. More recently, soap viewers were at the forefront of establishing online fan communities, taking advantage of the rise of electronic bulletin boards in the mid-1990s and inspiring influential scholarship on the formation, maintenance, communicative practices, and normative experiences of online groups (Baym, 2000). Recent soap scholarship explores issues such as the relationship between fans' online and offline activities, the development of ancillary soap content, and user-generated content. Sociality both on- and off-screen remains a hallmark of the genre and its reception, regardless of the media space in which it appears.

A third sociological issue is soaps' cultural or artistic legitimacy (or lack thereof). Daytime soaps have long held a paradoxical status in US culture – decades of longevity, beloved by millions, commercially profitable, but never widely accepted as works of art. Soaps gained economic legitimacy over the course of the twentieth century by effectively establishing the model for commercial broadcasting in the United States, but never succeeded in gaining artistic legitimacy. Artistic legitimization is not a singular event but an ongoing social process, and any cultural object has the potential to be named and accepted as art. What succeeds locally might not more generally, and an analysis of 80 years of soap opera coverage in the *New York Times* concludes that this is what

happened with soaps: they received local artistic legitimacy among certain groups, such as fans and professional daytime critics, but never gained widespread validation among the general public (see Harrington *et al.*, 2015).

The decline of US daytime soaps is mourned by many viewers and critics but offers significant research opportunities for sociologists interested in the rise and fall of organizational forms. The genre has always been an active site for both industrial and artistic experimentation, and the challenges soaps have faced over the past few decades – including changing audiences and viewing habits, increased competition for eyeballs, rising production costs, technological shifts, and market saturation – are at the center of contemporary debates about many entertainment forms.

SEE ALSO: Legitimacy; Media; Media and Consumer Culture; Popular Culture; Social Bond; Social Identity Theory; Television

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Further Readings

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