Final Paper: Case Study of Soap Opera Viewers

By Beverley Yu (#206236269)

Dorothy Hobson's concept of the "active audience"

Theories of the TV audiencehood have often been divided into two divergent camps: those who perceive the audience as a passive and uncritical mass of consumers and, in stark contrast, those who understand the audience as composed of individuals who actively make meaning from the text, in a continuous process of negotiation. The passive audience member, then, is subject to manipulation by television, as they are seen as merely absorbing the text without deconstructing meaning from it. The implicit assumption is that of a "hypodermic needle" model of effect, meaning that the consumption of television would lead to direct and substantial effects on the passive recipient. On the contrary, active recipients deploy a range of "decoding" skills as well as bring their own experience, knowledge, preferences and understanding when engaging with the television (Hobson, 242). Thus, audience research, from the perspective of the audience as active makers of meaning, entails an understanding of *how* audiences consume or interact with the text, with regard to differential responses of individuals.

Adherents from both sides of the argument have attempted to use "mass media texts" from popular culture to support their claims, such as those who correlate the incidents of violence in society with the prevalence of violence on television to demonstrate the vulnerability of the passive audience. Dorothy Hobson is one of the proponents of the active audience argument, supporting the claim with her studies of the soap opera watching audience. In her cases studies, she examines the process in which soap viewers engage in, which comprises of "reading" the text for the overall meaning to later be extracted into particular forms of interest (Hobson, 242). Pertinent to this process was the aspect of realism, as the storylines and characters were assessed for realism or relevance to one's life. Consequently, each soap viewer's

experience will differ, depending on how they "decode" the text in relation to their life experience and, thereby, demonstrating the need to understand the audience in idiosyncratic terms.

One of the salient features of the soap opera narrative, which is also inextricably linked to the aspect of realism, is the way it allows for particularly strong bonds to develop between characters and the audience. Audiences will often find characters to cling on to or identify with, and in conjunction with regular encounters of a daily nature, creates a unique relationship between the viewer and the fictional creations. Furthermore, soap operas, like no other genre, have fused the public and private spheres; that is, soap opera discussion is often merged with discussion of one's own life stories (Hobson, 245). Using her findings on the soap audience, Hobson attempts to debunk certain myths about soaps and further, to substantiate claims of an active, soap opera viewing audience.

Myths About Soap Opera Audiences

With the widespread and diverse appeal of soaps, making their audiences a vital market for broadcasters, the genre has faced its share of critics. More often than not, they have been regarded as "representing some of the worst excesses of popular television" because of their predictable and formulaic nature (Kilborn, 9). In particular, soap operas have often been criticized for their low-degree of intellectual simulation, essentially regarding them as a mindless form of entertainment. Viewers, under such a view, are simply surrendering themselves to mindless drivel. In addition, there are those who take a moral watchdog approach, believing in soap opera's potential harmful, if not corrupting, influence on viewers; accordingly, viewers that consume the often violent or immoral images on soaps will adopt such behaviour in their real

lives (Kilborn, 10). In essence, these perspectives parallel the view of the audience as a passive mass, assuming there is no active engagement or negotiation between viewer and the media text.

With soap operas being held in such low regard, it is no surprise that the syndrome of "guilty pleasure" has surfaced amongst soap viewers. However, in my study, I will focus on the latter part of the term "guilty pleasure", as the appeal of soaps is primarily based on the pleasure derived from the assimilation into the fictional. Although Hobson touches upon the pleasure factor, there was more emphasis on the way in which soap viewers related to the narratives or characters, largely depending on the realistic value. Instead, I will examine the ways in which this particular genre allows for audiences to fulfill certain needs and gain a range of pleasures, but not necessarily resulting from its relevance to everyday life. My method of research will be to use a combination of qualitative methodologies, in the form of interviews and ethnography, with the aim of uncovering both the discursive and practical knowledge of the audience.

Uses and Gratifications of Soap Watching

The uses and gratification theory of the audience maintains that audiences are made up of individuals who actively consume texts for different reasons and in different ways. Uses and gratifications theory presupposes the notion of an active audience who are motivated by a particular and often set of "needs" (Kilborn, 75). These particular "needs" are far and many to list, however, certain broad categories can be established in regards to the soap opera watching audience; for instance, social interaction and integration, escapist fantasy, and personal identity are oftentimes regarded as the dominant set of needs to which soap viewing gratifies. In the process of fulfilling these "needs", by means of consuming media, audiences simultaneously experience a range of pleasures. Thus, by applying the U&G approach to my analysis, it will

illustrate not merely the active process of reception, but as well, the conscious process of engaging with the text.

Soap opera watching can hardly be considered an isolating activity because, if anything, it allows for the social interaction and integration like no other genre. The soap opera's narrative form promotes a variety of communicative activities, ranging from interjections to post-program debates, among viewers (Kilborn, 77). Pleasure is derived from exchanging views and opinions in regards to storyline expectations, plot twists, "super couples" and characters, to name a few. In the audience research I conducted amongst young women between in their early 20s, the act of viewing was more that of a social, than as it was an individual, activity. The opportunities for participating in various forms of exchange arose plenty of times during the episode, such as that of a recount of a character's infidelity. Storylines and characters were discussed, assessed and often criticized. Interesting to note, though, the audience response to the soap was not of such high level of sustained and undivided concentration that it inhibited possibilities for social exchange, seeing as the women often took intermittent glances at the screen whilst commenting on what was happening. The slow plot developments and frequent repetition inherent to serials allowed for such a form of distracted viewing.

> *J*: Kate is seriously making me despise her more and more every day. If I have to hear her lecture Belle and Shawn about how horrible they are one more time I will scream! I so hope Roman dumps her sorry butt when he returns home.
> *Jo*: I actually hope "Stan" wrecks her marriage like she is trying to wreck everyone else's. "Stan" is back this upcoming week and I can't wait so see what havoc he/she creates! I really think I'm going to like this "Stan" storyline.
> (*Note: "Stan" is actually Sami, a female character, cross-dressed as a man*)

In my participatory observer role, I observed a few random comments related to what was on screen, which was seemingly directed to no one in particular, during the course of the show. Oftentimes, it was a comment related to particular character's actions, demeanour or even

attire, may it be resulting from a sense of attachment to said character or otherwise. Comments were usually blurted out, such as one woman exclaiming, "she's such an idiot", and solicited further comments on the subject from others. However, comments were more or less kept concise during the show, allowing for further discussion during commercial breaks.

Moreover, immersion into the "soap world" also requires a certain set of skills and archival knowledge in order to "read" the text for overall meaning, allowing the viewer to critically assess whether a storyline is implausible, mediocre or has errors in continuity. For example, SORAS or "Soap Opera Rapid Aging Syndrome", a fan term for when an infant or young child in a soap opera is aged very abruptly by the writers, is one of the prevalent errors in continuity discussed amongst soap viewers. One of the women I remarked on the plausibility of a character's affluent lifestyle, saying, "How [do] these people can live like that, when they rarely go to work?" and later opening up discussion on the absurdity of soaps in general. Additionally, a large part of the enjoyment for many fans resides in the soap's narrative format itself, which encourages participants to engage in an elaborate guessing game as to which of several directions the narrative will take (Kilborn, 16). The endless speculation inherent to soaps, in the form of cliff-hangers and tease devices, thus allow for an opportunity for viewers to share ideas and conjecture with fellow viewers as to what will happen on the program in the future. The popular "*who's the daddy*" and "*who's the murderer*" storylines in soap operas, in particular, create much heated discussion, with each viewer formulating plausible theories based on their continuous involvement in the storylines. According to the women, one of the particular pleasures of watching soaps is closely linked with the various expectations elicited by these cliff-hangers and tease devices, with a subsequent sense of accomplishment in the unravelling of narratives in sync

with their expectations. Accordingly, my accumulated data demonstrates the large extent of

interpretation, as well as involvement, on the part of the viewer during soap watching.

The "soap talk" also lead to what Marie Gillespie refers to as "real talk", with the two

being inextricably linked and oftentimes indistinguishable (Gillespie, 322). Soap talk was not on

its own, confined in the realm of fiction; rather, the topics often quickly shifted to issues and

happenings of real life, with little regard to "appropriateness" in interweaving the public and

private spheres. The events and experiences of soaps characters are relatable to a large extent,

with the soap opera functioning as a collective resource through which individuals can compare

and contrast, evaluate and judge in relation to one's real life (Gillespie, 322). As the group of

women were watching clips of *Coronation Street*, one of them remarked on Todd, one of the gay

characters on the show, being very attractive. Soon thereafter, it fluidly moved to a more

personal discussion, resulting from a simple comment about a soap character.

> *J*: Oh my god, Todd is *so* hot! But too bad he's gay…
> *Lesley*: Well he's just a character!
> *J*: Yeah, but did you ever notice all the good, hot guys are either gay or taken?
> *Lesley*: I know! That really sucks, it makes me depressed about being single. I don't want to end up being a spinster or the cat lady.
> *J*: I guess you can either just settle or…
> *Lesley*: Or not and hope Mr Right eventually comes around.

Social awareness of issues brought up by storylines, such as the rape of Bianca on *All My*

Children or Mark's AIDS on *East Enders*, also lent themselves to discussions of topics often

considered "taboo" by society's standards.

> *B*: What did you think about Bianca keeping the baby?
> *Jo*: I don't think I could ever keep the baby of the man who raped me. It would be a constant reminder. Too traumatizing and depressing.
> *J*: So you would get an abortion?

Jo: Well, I don't know… it's too tough to say. I mean, I'm all for pro-choice, especially in such circumstances, but then the baby itself is an innocent being. You can't judge another person on *how* they were brought onto the earth. I'm conflicted.

Technology has also facilitated in soap opera's role in social cohesion across boundaries and space. The Internet, in particular, has allowed viewers to converge in forums and chatrooms to discuss the soap operas they follow. Forums such as www.turtle-run.com, a soap opera resource with the catchy slogan of "*Soapdom: Where Soap Operas Rule*", offer an arena for fans to weigh in the day's episode, spoilers, cast news, rants and raves and speculations. Such Internet resources were apparently quite familiar to the majority of the women, with one noting that synopses found on the web also help her catch up on the occasionally missed episodes – almost inevitable with the daily format of a soap. Clearly, with the amount of soap chatter activity observed online, face-to-face interaction is not the lone form of interaction resulting from soap watching. Bypassing physical barriers and ideological differences alike, the soap opera functions as a launch pad for discussion and social interaction on the World Wide Web.

Thus, the features of a soap opera allow for it to be enjoyed as a peer group activity, with discussions unconfined to neither the fictional realm nor the realm of the everyday. In other words, it encourages social cohesion and togetherness amongst other viewers, just as if it were a launch pad for personal and social interaction. Soap watching, in this sense, is far displaced from the images of a passive, uncritical, "couch-potato" viewer.

Parallels between the fictional world and the everyday world

It is important to note, Hobson's analysis of the soap opera audience was predominantly based on British soap operas, which are known to aspire to a high degree of social realism in their narrative accounts of supposedly everyday life (Kilborn, 75). In this sense, her studies are

somewhat skewed and ethnocentric due to the focus on realism-based soap operas from a particular area. Principle to her theory is the aspect of personal identification, seeing as much of her argument is emphasized on the way in which viewers actively select content with relevance to "real" life (Hobson, 247). Her approach assumes that that there is in fact a close parallel between the two domains of the fictional world and the everyday world, which thereby allows audiences to develop a strong sense of identification with characters and the places they inhabit. However, in American soaps, with their "glossy fictional extravaganzas", offering escapist entertainment rather than a look into the more mundane but realistic world in which viewers themselves are situated, the personal identification component of the U&G theory can be seen as lacking in many ways (Kilborn, 74). Suffice to say, soaps operas, notwithstanding their origins, are not intended to be documentary accounts of situations or events, but rather an attempted illusion of a reality (Kilborn, 85). Nevertheless, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the audience's relation to the soap opera, we must also consider the differences in the measure of realism within the British and American formats of the genre.

A theme that was continuously brought up in my audience research was that of affluence amongst the majority of characters, of which, seemingly, never actually participated in the labour force. One woman remarked, about the paradoxical relationship between wealth and soap characters, "It's too bad I'm not soap character because then I wouldn't have to go to school or find a job. I'd just have money for doing absolutely nothing!". Moreover, the "jobs" of the main characters on the these soaps are usually that of a CEO of a company (such as Erica Kane of *All My Children*), a police officer (Bo Brady of *Days of Our Lives*), a doctor (Dr. Marlena Evans of *Days of Our Lives*), or even as unorthodox of a job as mob boss (Sonny Corinthos of *General Hospital*); by and large, there is very little depiction of the characters actually performing their

duties, choosing to rather show the characters partake in frivolous activities deemed more "interesting". Related to the lack of active labour force participants, who just happen to be affluent nonetheless, is the lack of representation of lower classes. The central core of characters depicted in American soap operas are of upper or bourgeoisie class; in the occasional representation of lower class characters, these are more often than not the characters that are expendable or secondary in the narrative plot. On the contrary, as one of the interviewees noted, British soap operas tended to portray socio-economic discrepancies, spending as much time focusing on the activities of the working class characters as those of a more affluent class. Regardless, for the one individual I interviewed who was exposed to both British and American soap operas, the lack of realism depicted on soaps was not a factor for tuning in.

> *J*: Everything they show on soaps like Y&R and Days of Our Lives is so chi-chi and wacky…especially with Passions. Seriously, they don't seem to do anything that real people do…like doing the laundry, cooking food, taking care of the children, GO TO WORK. It's too unbelievable.
> *B*: So you *want* to watch people doing boring stuff like that?
> *J*: No, I don't. No one wants to see their lives re-enacted on TV. TV is there for fantasy, not a mirror [of] your life. I want an escape from my reality…not to be reminded of it whenever I turn the TV on.

There appeared to be a sense of detachment, in that regard, between the fictional text and the audience, whereby enabling the viewer to adopt a more critical stance. However, it also demonstrated to me that although there is acknowledgement of supersoaps' often far-fetched premises, it was not necessarily the relevance to realism that viewers were drawn to in soap operas; rather, it was the exact opposite, an opportunity to detach oneself from the troubles and concerns of real life. Therefore, entertainment value and escapism play a significant role in why and how audiences consume the soap opera text, which apparently is of more significance than its realistic value as Hobson asserts. When asked about the reason, then, *why* she watched these "more realistic" British soaps:

J: I like the British way of life: wake up go to the pub, work, back at the pub, then go home. It's not a lifestyle I know first hand so it intrigues me. [In that sense,] I can't say I relate to it like that. But I guess I can relate to the interpersonal stuff, 'cause that's stuff that most people have encountered in life. At one point or another.

Consequently, in the research I conducted on the soap audience and their relation to the fictional world, I discovered that even soap operas based on a world far and beyond the viewer's frame of reference were still pleasurable to watch on a continuous basis. In spite of far-fetched storylines, character's lifestyles or a general way of life unfamiliar to one's own, audience involvement is still very much so evident. Hobson insinuates a necessity for the presence of realism, in order for viewers to truly experience a soap opera in an active capacity; however, the data I gathered from interviews implies that realism is not imperative for the enjoyment of soaps. Realistic value on soap operas, though, is assessed and "read" using one's own understanding of reality, but all things considered, viewers tended to turn to soaps for an escape from the "ordinary".

The challenges of interviews and ethnography

The reason I chose to go the route of a multimethod approach of interviews and ethnography was largely due to each method alone not being suffice for my audience-oriented research. Ethnography as a research methodology alone is, more or less, an interpretive and inaccurate account of how people watch television in their natural setting. As noted by Antonia C. La Pastina, the goal of audience studies is to "build a solid understanding of the reception processes, establishing a basis for a better analysis of the long-term impacts that media texts might have on viewers" (La Pastina, 311). By basing my research purely on observations, which have in fact been compromised to a certain degree as a result of my presence, it does not permit an adequate understanding of how the audience, themselves, make sense of the text.

Furthermore, soap opera watching is by no means an alienating or isolated activity, and hence, the research required to be in a more "focus group" type setting so as to capture the real-life data in a social environment. Accordingly, qualitative interviewing was also used to disclose the "unobservable", discursive knowledge of the participants. Yet, interviews alone are also fraught with limitations because of the artificiality of setting and the possibility of pretentiousness in dispensing the discursive knowledge. In using the two methods interchangeably, it will offer a better grasp of the "complex and multilayered" viewer-text relationship, with as much regard to the social context as the personal account of the viewer.

An issue that arose in my research was related to the fact that soap opera watching requires the viewer to have some archival knowledge of the program in order for the text to be "read" and understood. As a result of this, the individuals with prior investment in the particular program were highly involved in the reception process; alternatively, those unfamiliar with the particular program, but familiar with the general conventions of a soap, appeared to be lethargic or disinterested in the narratives and characters for the most part. However, regardless of their lack of "skills" to decode and meaningfully "read" the program, they still participated in the social interaction within the group, particularly in the "real talk" mixed with "soap talk". Moreover, actively watching presupposes the viewer to have a certain degree of familiarity with the standard conventions of the soap genre and amount of knowledge of the "world" of that particular soap (Kilborn, 69). In this sense, had the participants not been well versed in at least one of these two areas, the results of the research may have been completely altered. Ultimately, the research was flawed because it lacked an account of the reception process of viewers who were foreign to the soap conventions altogether.

Works Cited:

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