The argument of this book unfolds in two stages. First, since roughly the early 1980s, forms and conventions associated with the soap opera have become more prevalent across the full range of television programming (sports, news, drama) and across all time slots (afternoon, prime time, weekends). Second, this transformation is attributable to changes in ownership of the main U.S. networks in that same time period and is intended to guarantee corporate profitability.

The author, who is chair of the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Windsor, builds his argument through a series of case studies: an examination of sports (World Wrestling Entertainment and baseball), of news (coverage of natural disasters and political campaigns), and of reality TV (in particular Boot Camp). These studies are finely observed with a lot of interesting information.

In each case, the author finds that in the time period under consideration, soap opera elements that had previously been absent or marginal acquired a greater importance, such that, in the present day, it becomes fair and reasonable to speak of a “soap opera paradigm” when discussing U.S. network television content.

The soap opera elements in question are (1) “seriality,” the use of cliffhangers and teasers to keep audiences glued to the narrative; (2) “real time orientation,” the keying of diegetic events to the rhythms of daily life, civic holidays, births, deaths, et cetera, as well as “camera motion. . . designed to resemble the perception of an actual event” (p. 36); (3) “seeming intimacy/play orientation,” the cultivation of a sense of knowing “insiderness” among viewers and a simultaneous encouragement to gossip about characters and events (for example, exchanges around reality programs); (4) “story exposition,” the highly redundant construction of the soap opera narrative that gives viewers a feeling of omniscience and also allows them to appreciate the narrative ironically (for example, they can acknowledge and revel in the absurdities of many soap opera plots); and (5) “soap opera themes,” the focus on interpersonal conflict (love/hate relations), the ritualistic repetition of conflicts, and the projection of “the good life.”

Overall, this seems like a reasonable breakdown of the contemporary soap
opera, although one might wish to take issue with some of its implications. For example, network promos for new or upcoming shows typically involve cliffhangers and teasers, but they are not necessarily soap operatic (the author mentions these in reference to reality shows). Creating buzz and manipulating expectations may belong to advertising generally rather than to soap opera specifically. Indeed, Batman (1966-1968) often ended on deliberately hokey cliffhangers that urged viewers to tune in next week: “Same Bat-time! Same Bat-channel!” Hence, the existence of soap opera elements across multiple genres (or is it elements from multiple genres that just happen to exist in soap opera?) may require that we understand them relative to the audience’s knowledge of genres, rather than in relationship to producers’ wishes to maximize profitability.

Likewise, the reference to camera motion that resembles the “perception of an actual event” seems to call for a theory of realism and perception well beyond the scope of this book. It seems hasty to say that one type of camera movement “resembles” actual perception rather than to say that all types of camera movement construct illusions, some of which some people, at some time, claim to be realistic. For example, when Dragnet first aired (1952), although it was shot on miniscule budgets that allowed no time for rehearsal and resulted in narcoleptic performances (“Just the facts, ma’am”), it was nonetheless hailed “for its uncanny verisimilitude” (Anderson, 1994, p. 67). Again, the relevant criterion may be the audience’s general knowledge of the “look” of television rather than producers’ intentions.

Finally, there is the hint of a suggestion that when soap opera elements come together, bad things happen. Audiences are manipulated and dumbed down, while corporations grow in wealth and power. Yet Steven Johnson (2005) holds that soap opera elements invite us to read the subtext of television, thereby heightening our narrative intelligence. It is not an issue broached by this book, nor can it be resolved here.

Nonetheless, these objections may not address the heart of the matter, which is the author’s contention that the increasing frequency of soap opera elements across a broad range of television programming and time slots is linked to “the market interests and values that guide television and the larger media industries in which it operates” (p. 40).

The book, therefore, locates itself firmly on the terrain of political economic criticism that examines conditions of production in order to draw conclusions about consumption. Consequently, the author reminds us that “the product that television produces is not programming but rather the audience, a set of eyes and ears available. . . for the benefit of advertisers” (p. 40). He also approvingly quotes Garnham’s assertion that those who produce television “are subject to increasingly rationalized processes of production within which any room for resistance to the crudest commercial pressures, whether in the name of truth or imagination, has been drastically reduced” (p. 40). This is a bleak view of television, its producers, and its audiences.

Specifically, the author argues that increases in the use of soap opera elements can be correlated to moments of conglomerate and economic rationalization. Striking examples are drawn from the analysis of news. Hence, the acquisition of ABC by Capital Cities Broadcasting in 1985 was followed immediately by staff
reductions in the news department and an overall “rationalization” of expenditures, which ultimately led to the tabloidization of news. Consequently, “increasing concerns with profitability... reached down into the... news division” (p. 85).

Similar events occurred when Disney bought out Capital Cities, when CBS merged with Viacom, and when NBC was acquired by General Electric.

While it would be staggering to learn that ownership played no role in the final content of U.S. network television, it may be an overstatement to make ownership the key driver in the rise of any particular televisual form. Too many factors invite us to caution. For example, does the soap opera paradigm account satisfactorily for the enduring popularity of such top-rated crime drama/detective fiction as The Rockford Files, Law and Order, and CSI? Some are heavily soap operatic, while others are not. Furthermore, the crime trend nowadays may be toward the stimulation of a sense of visceral shock, rather than any of the soap opera elements listed above. Likewise, do Seinfeld, Frasier, Arrested Development, and My Name Is Earl incline more to soap opera or to the presumption of ironic knowledge—not insider knowledge about the lives of the characters, but outsider knowledge about the workings of television narrative—on the part of their audiences? Further, how would the paradigm account for the relative decline of the afternoon soap opera? Is the abandonment of Saturday morning cartoons in the early 1990s by the major U.S. networks explicable in terms of the soap opera paradigm? Is the real-time orientation of 24 a soap opera device or a thriller device? Clearly, it would be easy—and unfair—to multiply such examples.

The fact is that The Soap Opera Paradigm does present some intriguing arguments effectively. There can be no doubt that U.S. network news has become both melodramatic and trivial. However, this slide into the soap operatic has also been accompanied by a general shift in the media ecology evidenced by the rise of cable networks and the explosion of blogs, a sustained political attack on network news, a general disinclination among the young to follow news, and so on. So, while the basic observation easily wins our assent, its predominant attribution to media conglomeration may be too compressed.

At the heart of The Soap Opera Paradigm is the old debate on encoding/decoding and “active” audiences. When can we say that the intentions of owners and producers at the moment of production fully or adequately account for the behaviour and beliefs of viewers at the moment of consumption? Is this even a good way to frame the question? Would it be preferable to inquire into the overall viewing and media patterns of various audiences? Into their familiarity with and attitudes toward genres and narrative strategies? Different readers will prefer different answers to these questions.

Significantly, the book is fairly silent on the role or status of the audience, except to cast it as a byproduct of industrial activity (the product that television really produces). There is little discussion of why or if the soap opera paradigm works, of the conditions under which it may or may not work, of its embedment within the tradition of melodrama, of the way in which audience familiarity and the modalities of its engagement may compel producers to adopt new strategies, and so on. However, this is the book’s parti pris; it moves from diagnosis of the paradigm to concerns about its impact.
As a result, the book tends to make television feel overwhelmingly flat. It hardly seems to matter what one watches—all TV shows are basically the same, inhabited by the same elements, motivated to the same outcomes, et cetera. Indeed, as the author says, “Soap opera storytelling techniques. . . reflect the same elements employed in other forms of broadcasting discussed throughout this book” (p. 196).

Yet I would contend that this does not reflect the experience of most television viewing for most television viewers. Furthermore, it seems strangely at odds with the author’s own attitude at various points in the book. For example, his analysis of World Wrestling Entertainment is not only vivid, but also occasionally humorous, and it puts one in mind of Roland Barthes’ analysis of wrestling in *Mythologies* (1957). Barthes also interpreted wrestling as a symbolic conflict between good and evil, but he saw no corporate pressure behind it. Likewise, Wittebol’s observations on the evolution of baseball are equally well rendered.

Indeed, the level of detail in the case studies strongly suggests that the author might actually enjoy television. This contrasts with the book’s general tendency to condemn the types of pleasure under study.

*The Soap Opera Paradigm* remains, nonetheless, a tight, well-written, thoughtful piece of scholarship on shifts and trends in contemporary American television.

**References**


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