

Book Review: Special Issue of Journal of Popular Television on 'Histories and new directions: Soap opera/serial narrative research'

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Ahmed Atay and Kristyn Gorton (eds) Special Issue of *Journal of Popular Television* on 'Histories and new directions: Soap opera/serial narrative research'. 10 (2), 2022.

Reviewed by Ruth A. Deller, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Back in 2010, this journal published a special issue on 'invisible television', referring to 'the programmes no one talks about even though everyone watches them' (Mills, 2010, p. 1). In that issue, both Christine Geraghty and Lynne Hibberd argued the case that soap opera, despite its longevity and viewing figures, is significantly under-represented in television studies, especially in recent decades. Indeed, individual programmes like *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) or *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) have arguably received more attention than the entirety of the soap genre.

The *Journal of Popular Television*'s special issue on soap and serial narratives (Vol 10, issue 2, 2022. Details of individual articles are given in text) is therefore welcome as an example of soap and serial drama being placed back on television studies' agenda. Issue editors Ahmet Atay and Kristyn Gorton 'hope to continue the scholarly conversation and re-energize the research on serial narratives and soap operas' (p.117) through this collection of eight articles (including the editorial). Three key themes emerge through the issue: the challenges of soap production and distribution in a TV landscape changed by the emergence of streaming and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic; the continued importance of soap for its audiences, especially women; and the influence of soap on other drama formats.

Two articles, Atay's 'Serial narratives in the new millennium: The decline and the future of daytime US soap operas' (pp. 123-127) and Sofia Rios's 'From telenovelas to super series: Reflections on TV Azteca's 'improved' content' (pp. 167-183), explore the wave of cancellations of American soaps in the US and Mexican broadcaster TV Azteca's move away from telenovelas respectively. Both discuss several contributing factors leading to these

changes: streaming and the challenges this provides for measuring audience ratings; Covid-19's shutdowns and changes in professional practice; the logistics of producing content designed to be broadcast so frequently; and TV networks' increased fascination with other genres - often coupled with a degree of snobbery. Rios notes how 'The quest for quality is delineating the development of super series, with most breaking away from traditional women's stories previously represented in telenovelas' (p. 178). Both authors call on the industry to recognise what could be lost through the abandoning of these genres: in particular, the space for telling women's stories and those of 'ordinary' citizens. They both remind us of the strong connections audiences – especially women - have with these programmes and their role in personal and familial relationships, as well as highlighting the influence soaps and telenovelas have had on other television genres.

The articles in this issue repeatedly demonstrate the influence of soap opera, telenovela and serial drama on the television industry. Gorton (pp. 139-153) and James Zborowski (pp. 213-224) both note that many television writers and creatives, including Sally Wainwright, Paul Abbott and Russell T Davies, began on soaps. Liz Giuffre and Sarah Attfield (pp. 199-211) highlight that soaps have also launched many high-profile actors and celebrities, such as Margot Robbie, Kylie Minogue and Guy Pearce from *Neighbours* (1985-2022; 2023-present). Several authors here argue that other drama series draw heavily on soap opera conventions, including *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019)'s approach to community and multiple storylines (Kristina Graour pp. 155-166) or *Happy Valley* (2014-2023)'s attention to domestic detail in Zborowski's reflection on formal and social poetics in television drama.

Several countries are represented here: the USA, Mexico, the UK, Australia and Ireland. It is great to see an international perspective, although scope could be extended to yet further territories in future research. Articles in the issue use a good range of approaches

including textual analysis, audience studies and industry studies though the limitations of what can be done in an issue are inevitably clear. For instance, the article with the strongest emphasis on the audience, Ysabel Gerrard's 'Rethinking women's guilty pleasures in a social media age: From soap opera to teen drama series' (pp. 185-198) is about US teen drama fans. Whilst this is an interesting piece, which 'joins the dots' between historical studies of soap audiences and Gerrard's research with the interpretive communities of these (mostly female) fans, it would have been good to see article(s) exploring fans of soap opera or telenovelas more specifically.

Gorton's "Storytelling is storytelling': Resilience, gender and screenwriting in *Fair City*' is a highlight. She interviews female writers of the Dublin-based soap who discuss topics such as: their approaches to storylining and character development; working practices and the challenges of working as a woman in television; and the impact of Covid-19. Existing scholarship on soap has often focused more on texts and audiences, so I welcome work like Gorton's that gives voice to industry professionals – especially as, even in an era where many high-profile television writers are household names, soap writers are often themselves 'invisible' in terms of public profile.

Overall, this special issue places attention on a genre too often ignored or maligned by media corporations and academics alike, whilst remaining important to its audiences as well as being an important training ground for actors, writers and other professionals. Articles here remind us that the conventions of soap opera and serial narrative formats continually inspire other media, including those more 'prestige' formats to which we often pay more critical attention. This collection also reminds us that soap and serial narrative formats remain important, and that the industry and the academy alike should pay more attention to them, or we risk losing one of the most important genres in the history of television.

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