



Watching Daytime Soap Operas: The Power of Pleasure

Louise Spence

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Conventional wisdom states that soap operas are escapist fantasies for lonely, passive women. This book goes far beneath the skin of this myth and succeeds not only in dispelling it, but also in showing the unique characteristics of this hugely popular media genre.

The volume is organized into sections: "Life's Little Problems ... and Pleasures, or, Why Study Soaps, The Theoretical Matrix"; "How to Study Soaps, The Narrative Discourses of Soap Operas"; "How to Watch Soaps, The Power of Pleasure, or, How to Enjoy Soaps." Despite these playful titles, this book is not a light and airy discourse. The author, an avid soap opera fan who is professor of media studies at Sacred Heart University and co-authored the award-winning *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*, has written a scholarly and interesting exploration that includes the history of soap opera studies, insightful analysis of the genre, and equally perceptive explorations of the sociology of the home as feminine environment:

"A great deal of contradictory experience and ideas are integrated and accommodated in soap operas," she writes. "Dissatisfaction and discontent are responded to within and without threatening existing social structures and conventions. Perhaps this helps to explain women's resilience (and how, in the face of disaffection, the existing power structure relations are so easily maintained)."

Spence skillfully shows the uniqueness of soap opera structure. Multiple story lines interweave and fragment. The audience becomes aware of developments and situations long before the characters do. In one example, the camera focuses on the face of a gay character, and then moves to a young man's rapt attention. Nothing has been said, but it is obvious to the experienced viewer that the second young man is also gay.

Repetition is very important in the soap genre. Erica Kane's tenth wedding (*All My Children*) is not that unique, but viewers will compare this new event to the last nine, and remember each in turn. Audience involvement with characters every day for years leads to a significant and surprising richness of character development. *All My Children* debuted on January 5, 1970; five days a week, every week, for thirty-five years is a lot of time for characters to develop.

Soap operas use the conventions of soap storytelling, particularly the camera work that uses extreme close-ups of single characters' faces, even when in conversation, to underline the real emotion in the eyes and mouth. Music, lighting, and the peculiarly overwrought acting style of soaps all exist to heighten the emotional relationships in a scene. A perfect book for college courses on feminism and media, this myth-scattering volume illuminates significant tensions in society and popular culture.

JOHANNA MASSÉ (March / April 2004)

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