

SOFT SOAP

Jennifer Craik

ALR is opening up its pages to a discussion of attitudes on the left to the pleasures and past-times known to the theoreticians as popular culture. Here we open the discussion with a sceptical view of the 'worthiness' of soaps.

Q: If you could write *A Country Practice* for the next few weeks, what would you make happen?

A: A mad trucky comes through the town and franky [sic] tries to stop him but he gets killed so then they call in Mad Max to help get rid of the trucky. As he chases him the truck driver dropps [sic] a bomb and blows the town sky high. But Vicki and Simon escape and go to another valley and get down to repopulating the country and then they call it Bowen Valley.¹

I have to admit a prejudice from the outset: this is my favourite passage from the recent book on the TV series *A Country Practice*. In it, a fifteen year old schoolboy devises a future plot for the series, filled with violence and mayhem and lots of begetting. At a contemporary reading, it cannibalises and recomposes various other popular myths — mad truckies in news stories, a Mad Max type of hero, holocaust, exodus, and, of course, living happily ever after — or happily as can be, given the demands of getting down to repopulating!

Yet there is a curiously biblical flavour to this scenario — old testament in form rather than the more wishy-washy protestantism of the new.

As a story, the scenario is striking in its jigsaw of genres, narratives, "real" and "fictional" elements. It is produced as a fantasy, for fantasy can exist only by playing off those elements.

This is my central concern in this review/article. Soaps are fantasies —

unending stories about imaginary people, places and lives. This is quite self-evident — at least to viewers of soaps. But something rather strange happens on the way to analyses of soaps, namely, a preoccupation with how and why soaps differ from everyday life. This discrepancy becomes the focus rather than an exploration of the fantasy world that is produced.

As a result, the conclusions of studies of soaps tend to be somewhat banal. Tulloch and Moran's book concludes that *A Country Practice* is about putting social issues into stories in which issues unfold through characters, "showing people, rather than simply telling them" (p. 176). Ien Ang, in her book on *Dallas*, concludes that it shows us that "(t)he personal may be political but the personal and the political do not always go hand in hand"² (a somewhat incoherent claim). Neither conclusion tells us very much about soaps or viewing or social/political issues.

Why is this? There are three main reasons which are signalled by the physical organisation of these two books. Neither has "a conclusion" in the form of a chapter drawing together the threads of the books; indeed, quite the reverse. The "themes" of each book are given in advance, then each book branches out into a series of unco-ordinated chapters.

This might seem a trivial point. Yet I believe that it signals critical problems concerning (1) the types of studies, (2) the (mis)use of methods of analysis and (3) the choice of subject matter.

A Country Practice is a production study, that is, a study of how *A Country Practice* is made — who does what and why. To this, the authors have tacked on an audience study of what (some) viewers make of it all. In short, they don't come up with very much; on the one hand, those who make the program are limited by what they believe commercial television audiences and owners will tolerate (therefore no programs on chemical warfare, etc.) while, on the other hand, different audiences like different things. For example, the authors conclude that women like gossip; men won't reveal their emotions; so women use *A Country Practice* to assert their adequacy "in the face of a male dominated culture".

The inadequacy of this book is largely guaranteed by the impossibility of the project of trying to reconcile production practices with viewing practices and "textual" features. That is to say, there is an uneasy tension between trying to balance principles and accounts of production, ways of watching and reading, and ways of analysing media products. The very real issues and contradictions in trying to tackle all three at once are shelved in the book. As a consequence, the book fails to produce any interesting conclusions, apart from banalities such as the exploration of "patterns of domestic preferences and the politics of home viewing" which, it is argue, indicates (hold your breath) "revealing similarities and significant differences". Which and what are never quite revealed.

A Country Practice is primarily a production study and, as such, can only stolidly go through the various facets of "the making of" to find out endless details and explanations of makers. These quite simply cannot be reconciled with viewing strategies and "textual" features. This is because a production study necessarily assumes that the conditions of production determine the nature and specificity of the product. While an audience study argues that the program produces its own specificity in the act of watching. Although connections can be made

between these processes, they cannot be combined as a coherent method.

And where connections between the necessarily contradictory and inconsistent processes *might* be forged, more inspired hands than these are needed to do the job.

While *A Country Practice* fails because of the incoherence of the project, *Watching Dallas* overcomes that incoherence by just taking viewers' accounts of their viewing practices. The book was based on 42 replies ("from a few lines to around ten pages") to an advertisement placed in a Dutch women's magazine called *Viva*, which read as follows:

I like to watch the TV serial *Dallas*, but often get odd reactions to it. Would anyone like to write and tell me why you like watching it too, or dislike it? I should like to assimilate these reactions in my University thesis ...

While this approach guaranteed a more lively and interesting study, its basis — 42 replies out of millions of *Dallas* viewers — raises a set of serious methodological queries that are simply side-stepped by Ang.

Methodology might seem a rather boring topic for the general readership of *ALR*, yet it does allow me to simplify the issues so that writers of studies of soaps might finally take the point.

Academics are frequently criticised for writing jargon for specialist audiences. Recently, some academics have attempted to write with more popular appeal. Cultural studies is an obvious candidate for this trend, since it concerns itself with everyday life.

Whereas early cultural studies work tended to be heavily loaded with theoretical sections exploring how "ideology" could be studied, newer work tends to dispense with that and concentrate on "the analysis" alone. *A Country Practice* exemplifies this tendency. The problem is that questions that should be addressed are not and that "conclusions" that are produced do not warrant that status. I have already addressed the incoherence of the production/audience approach of *A Country Practice*. Within the audience section, I would question



the haphazard collection of audience groups (those that the authors could collar), namely nine Brisbane households (p. 237), ten TAFE teacher-trainees (p. 249), six Normanhurst Boys' High School students (p. 260), twelve Wiley Park Girls' High School students (p. 266), and seven other school groups (p. 260). As you can see, methodological details are scattered throughout the text possibly to evade (or tantaise) the pedantic reviewer. Despite the claim by the authors *not* to require a quantitative framework or justification but, instead, to see how *A Country Practice* is read "in terms of the cultural experience of its audiences", this precisely requires that generalisations *were* made from the chance answers from the haphazard respondents: an art of serendipity in no small measure.

For example, we are told how "the unemployed" interpret *A Country Practice*, where the unemployed refer to twelve schoolgirls from a migrant, working class area whose response to an episode on unemployment, subtitled *A Health Hazard*, was that indeed it was a health hazard. This empathetic response was read as a response appropriate to the unemployed and contrasted with the more macho responses of the six Normanhurst boys whose responses, in turn, are read as "middle classness" — why not as gender-ness? or whatever.

Generalisations such as this are trivial and made a nonsense of the kinds of responses and patterns of viewing that were *actually* going on. For example, *A Country Practice* notes that elderly respondents were reluctant to discuss the show at all —

it was absolutely *their* show for *their* fantasy — that is, for these respondents, it was a private and not a public text. Other family respondents had to be continually prompted to watch the program and refrain from the side conversations and arguments that they seemed to prefer to actually watching the TV drama unfold.

My own reading of this tendency of regular family viewers would be that the pleasure, or at least the *place*, of the program, is to construct a site, an arena, a context for having certain kinds of family conversations and contestations, rather than any intrinsic features of the program as such. But, instead, literal readings are made of makers and viewers as if conditions of representativeness, sampling, opinion equivalence, intervention/response, etc. were all met.

The book, *Watching Dallas*, has a similarly cavalier attitude to the legitimacy of its use of the 42 replies, which were obtained by an even more idiosyncratic process.

My criticism of such tendencies in cultural studies is not tempered by the claim that such studies are not sociological but “textual” analyses, since the unfortunate fact is that such analysts (trained in literature studies, or, in Ang’s case, political science) have strayed onto the outfield of methodology and conveniently appropriated bits and pieces, just as conveniently ignoring the “difficult” bits and pieces. The result is “applications” that commit the very worst sins of “quantitative method” that earlier cultural studies condemned and sought to evade: representativeness, intention, evidence, etc. This is irony indeed.

What makes a topic worth studying? How do we know if a topic has more than its face value? Where do we draw the line in analytic pursuits?

These may seem like rather old-fashioned attempts to draw boundaries around topics and agendas of research, yet perhaps it is timely to question the haphazard meanderings of cultural studies towards, I fear, oblivion.

Recently, a spate of studies has

appeared on soap operas³. These focus on two issues: first, the form of soap opera as popular culture, especially in terms of popular appeal (= mass = working class audiences); and second, the idea that soaps are “gendered texts” in the sense of addressing a “female” position of spectatorship.

These studies have followed the shifting agenda of cultural studies through condemnation as patriarchal hypnotism binding women into old-fashioned oppression to more recent attempts to see soaps in more positive lights, as “worth” texts that enable viewers to deal with everyday life. Thus, soaps are no longer seen as reactionary texts but as potentially progressive ones. But none of this work seems to me to come up with any convincing arguments about the “worthiness” of soaps. They remain trivial texts for trivial consumption just like a Minties’ wrapper or *TV Week* — enjoyable, but precisely so *because* they are not to be taken seriously.

If soaps are to be studied at all, then the studies need to address the terms of the fantasy and the role of fantasy in viewers’ appropriations of the world of soap, rather than the eternal preoccupation with the discrepancies between the fictional worlds of soap and the “real” worlds of everyday life. Such studies could leave the world of quantitative method aside and concentrate on rather more tantalising forms of analysis: playing with texts that play.

Compare the opening scenario of a mythic *A Country Practice* with the somewhat expiatory tone of one of the (adult) letters about *Dallas*:

The reason I like watching it is that it's nice to get dizzy on their problems. And you know all along that everything will turn out all right. In fact it's a slight from reality. I myself am a realistic person and I know that reality is different. Sometimes too I really enjoy having a good old cry with them. And why not? In this way any other bottled-up emotions find an outlet.

This passage directly acknowledges the fictional thrill of watching *Dallas* — whether viewers liked it or hated it, felt guilty about watching it, identified with it or rejected it, etc. —

all emphasised that the pleasure of the text lay in the fantasy precisely *because* “It is a program situated pretty far outside reality”. And yet, that pleasure can only be obtained by locating the program within a set of grids that establish fictional possibilities and probabilities against actual people and events. To quote from another letter:

... those problems and intrigues, the big and little pleasures and troubles occur in our own lives too. You just don't recognise it and we are not so wealthy as they are. In real life too I know a horror like J. R., but he's just an ordinary builder

And how many people do we know who have been dubbed with a fictional or mythic identity: He thinks he's Clint Eastwood, She acts like Greta Garbo, etc.

Of the two books, *Watching Dallas* is the more successful at tackling head-on the fantasy of the fiction in its own terms — though the tension between the real and the fiction persists. Unfortunately, the book does not make what it could of these responses, instead treating “Dallas” as a sin to be measured against various yardsticks each of which serves to expiate the guilt of watching *Dallas*. As such, the book works as a confessional (and indeed is a handy prayer-book size). But because of its confessional structure, it works well. Readers (penitents) with their own guilty secrets about television viewing can exorcise these tendencies here, while indulging in still more of the suspect pleasure. *Watching Dallas* is a good lively read and uses the substance of the letters in a titillating way.

Throughout both books, the term *pleasure* recurs. *A Country Practice* announces itself as being concerned with the **multiple pleasures** of *A Country Practice*.

This relationship of pleasure to the social aspirations and experiences of different groups in our culture leads to a certain ambiguity in the way each group calls *A Country Practice* “theirs” for different reasons.

Watching Dallas explains its project as “how these letter-writers

experience *Dallas*, what it means when they say they experience pleasure or even displeasure, how they relate to the way in which *Dallas* is presented to the public". This is explained as treating the letters as texts, to be read "symptomatically" in the "ideological context" in which "it acquires social and cultural meanings", that is, in terms of "the relation between pleasure and ideology".

The term pleasure has had a renaissance recently as a nice way to get around what used to be called the *problem* [sic] of false consciousness, that is, to account for why people enjoy the tacky products of "mass culture" in a consumption society. Pleasure can even account for the ideologically suspect activities of the masses, like Bingo, *Sale of the Century* and brown vinyl sofas. Fortunately for *Watching Dallas*, the respondents do not appear to come from the masses, but to come from that ideologically "aware" class of persons whose responses frequently pre-empt the symptomatic readings that are to be made of their responses:

I'm just hooked on it! But you wouldn't believe the number of people who say to me, 'Oh, I thought you were against capitalism?' I am, but *Dallas* is just so tremendously exaggerated, it has nothing to do with capitalists any more, it's just sheer artistry to make up such nonsense.

So where does this idea of pleasure get us? It was originally borrowed from psychoanalytic notions but has gradually lost that theoretical precision to become employed as a general explanatory term for any and all forms of consumption. Pleasure becomes anything that makes life bearable, the enjoyable bits of "the ideology of mass culture". Pleasure is the Sandman's sleepdust of the imaginative realm, that which keeps us tamed, subdued and oblivious to the wily ways of the world.

Since the idea of pleasure is a little elusive, it has been grounded in the idea of *populism*, a rather homely term for things that real, ordinary people think and do. It is a term that serves to make the participants of mass culture feel OK about so doing.



It celebrates individual tastes and pleasures, and you don't have to feel guilt or shame about them.

This very pluralist attitude is quite disturbing in the complacency of the conclusions that such studies produce. This is even so when specific groups are the focus. In *Watching Dallas*, for example, Ang considers the case of feminist viewers of *Dallas*. Can feminists enjoy *Dallas*? "Is *Dallas* good or bad for women? She attempts to answer this by arguing that *Dallas* is a partially *open* text, that is, that multiple and different readings might be inscribed in it, and made of it.

But even in those open readings, structured by the *seductiveness* of viewing, do dangers lurk? Will feminists stray from the yellow brick road to "Utopia"?

The answer to this is a bit of a cop-out. Terry Lovell is cited giving the curiously paternalistic advice that soap-watching might allow women to be "good-humoured" both about their "oppression" and their "protest", but Ang seems a little more concerned that the two activities may be incompatible or, at best, not entirely kosher.

Fundamentally, neither book deals with the essential feature of soap opera — the form of fantasy and how it works in consumption. Like the confessional, soap works as the semi-public expiation of guilt. Both involve repetitive (weekly) doses as part of the process of watching/confessing, but also ensuring that there can be no cure in sight or the practice would become

redundant. In other words, just as the confessional works to legitimate the fact of sinning by the recognition of its act, indeed grants permission to sin, soaps do the same for fantasy.

The illusion, compulsion and guilt of soaps, along with the essential fusion of real and fictional elements are the substance of soap. The melting-down and re-forging of the self in the fantasy of soap opera is the pleasure and the "reality".

Ultimately, all that can be said is that soaps work as a joke on the self, as Lesley Stern acknowledged by titling a paper, *When I Grow Up, I Want To Be Sue Ellen!* If soaps are to be studied, the focus should be the joke of the fantasy and the fantasy of the joke.

NOTES:

1. John Tulloch & Albert Moran, *A Country Practice: Quality Soap*, Currency Press, Sydney 1986, p. 257.
2. Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera & The Melodramatic Imagination*, Methuen, London, 1985, p. 136.
3. See Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas*, University of Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1985, for the most cogent analysis.
4. See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen*, 16:3, 1975.

JENNIFER CRAIK teaches in Humanities at Griffith University in Queensland.