

# Making meaning, making pleasure

## Women and television

*Gaye W. Ortiz*

IT COULD WELL BE AN IMPOSSIBLE TASK to sum up how women in western culture have been portrayed in the mass media during the past decade. It has been a time of rapid change in women's lives, but has anyone recorded this accurately or seriously? Television advertisements perhaps give a hint of how far women have come: think of long-suffering Katie, who is still making delicious meals with an Oxo cube but also, as implied in the most recent advert, still enjoying an exciting sex life with her husband (something we never would have dreamt of knowing twenty years ago when she was a young bride). We are also familiar with the classy woman executive from the Kenco coffee adverts, who is constantly surprising clients, rival industry executives, even (lowly female) catering staff, when they realize that she wears the pants in the company. The range of women's roles in advertising would fill a book in itself, and although Mum still gets the stains out of her son's football shirt, her image is far from representative in today's advertising market.

From the long-awaited burgeoning of film roles for women (kick-started seemingly by the seminal 1991 film *Thelma and Louise*) to the virtual reality heroines of computer games, women's thoughts and actions have become instantly accessible to consumers of media culture. This article will explore specifically the trends in British television, particularly in that staple of 'women's genres', the soap opera. It will ask how women and their experiences, both personal and social, have been represented. It will also look at the way in which programmes that women watch function for women.

### *The 'feminine face' of television*

Straightaway there are problems defining what is meant by 'programmes that women watch' and, indeed, defining 'women' as a discrete audience. As Margaret Gallagher points out, many issues that concern women (such as male violence, pornography, beauty and consumerism, sexuality) have gained attention in the media in

the past decade and thus have come into the mainstream agenda of studies in communication, yet there is an awareness that not only are media institutions male-dominated but so is the actual conceptualization of programme content which deals with these issues.<sup>1</sup> In other words, women's stories may be being told, but they are written, directed and produced by an industry in which women have limited power. Another related issue is the steady increase in fictional female characters, from professional law enforcement types in *Prime suspect* and *City central* to medical authorities in dramas such as *Casualty* and *Silent witness*. Do these women with power and attitude succeed because they behave like men, or are they truly strong women on their own terms?

Gallagher further states that during the past decade 'popular' forms of mass entertainment that were previously considered unworthy of critical media analysis, such as soap opera, romance and melodrama (which traditionally have been tagged 'women's genres'), have now been 'reclaimed' by feminists. The mass appeal pedigree for romance, going back to nineteenth-century serialized publications in France, Spain, Britain and the United States (the latter two as a result of the efforts of Charles Dickens), popularized that genre, and has as a successor the Mills and Boon novel. In recent times, broadcasters (and film-makers) have picked up on the appeal of Jane Austen (not to mention the Brontës), although Austen's acute social commentary seems to have been buried under the romantic emphasis of the productions – an astute reorientation, it could be said, considering the high ratings received. The genre of melodrama, says Gallagher, is another example of how, at the turn of the century, 'political, psychological and aesthetic discourse consistently gendered mass culture and the masses as feminine, and thus inferior'.<sup>2</sup>

Romance and melodrama, thus defined and devalued as 'women's genres', are in contrast with the British soap opera, which originated as a programme with a heavy educational content. *The Archers* began in 1950 as a BBC serial (and has remained as a mainstay of British radio output ever since), but through its close link with the Ministry of Agriculture brought farming news and innovations to a post-war society still affected by food shortages. However, while Lord Reith protected the British airwaves against commercial manipulation, in the United States radio stations were not so choosy, using the popular serial format to support advertising revenue. Manufacturers of consumer goods who sponsored these serials

worked mainly to attract housewives, who would be buying their products. Hence the term 'soap opera' was born, and to this day soap-powder manufacturers still advertise heavily during the commercial breaks for American soap operas. They are still mainly shown in the daytime, in contrast to the British prime-time soaps like *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders*.

### *Female identity – myth, fact or fantasy?*

[In real life] it is often not easy to know what it means to be a 'true' woman. In fantasy and fiction, however, there is no punishment for whatever identity one takes up, no matter how headstrong or destructive: there will be no retribution, no defeat will ensue.<sup>3</sup>

As indicated in this quotation from Ien Ang, the issue of identification with female characters arises in any discussion of soap operas. Plotlines developed in soaps over the last decade could be seen to mirror the increasing recognition of women's issues. British social realism can be seen in *Coronation Street*, which in 1960 became the first soap opera set in a working-class environment. The snapshot of life in a northern town resonated in Britain, and 'The Street' is cherished nowadays in part because it captures a vanishing reality of community, plain talk and unshakeable values and beliefs.

Tania Modleski's work on soap operas indicates to her that the appeal of the programmes for some viewers may be nostalgic in the sense that they vicariously experience a collective female fantasy. 'Many women dream of a fully sufficient family or community, since in reality most find themselves at the centre of an isolated nuclear family.'<sup>4</sup> Modleski also claims that the intimacy of the visual style of soaps, especially the numerous close-ups, engenders in women the ability to 'read' people in the same way in which they become adept at reading the faces of their loved ones.

However cosy and reassuring life in 'The Street' may be, for women it has addressed a spectrum of issues from domestic violence to sexual identity. But these seem to pale into insignificance when compared to the recent storyline of the incarceration of Deirdre Rashid. Some of the biggest viewing figures in British broadcasting history have confirmed Deirdre's place in British cultural consciousness: 29 million viewers for the episode in which she decided not to leave her husband Ken Barlow for Mike Baldwin. Manchester United's scoreboard even flashed the news to fans at half-time: DEIRDRE STAYS WITH KEN.<sup>5</sup> Years later, her unjust imprison-

ment for fraud, on the false testimony of her lover, provoked discussions in the highest government circles and a national movement to free Deirdre. Just what this says about the public's ability to distinguish reality from fiction is the stuff of another article!

Regular fans of *Coronation Street* have been the subject of research on characterizations of femininity by Sonia Livingstone for the British Film Institute. She found that, for viewers, femininity as perceived on 'The Street' was not the traditional variety attributed to women – irrational, weak, soft – but instead was a more matriarchal image. *Street* femininity was related by these viewers to 'maturity, warmth, centrality to community and sociability'.<sup>6</sup> The endurance shown by Deirdre emerges from that matriarchal strength shown by the women of 'The Street', from Ena Sharples and Elsie Tanner down to the present generation. The suffering yet strong personality, which draws upon a deep wellspring of spirituality and faith, is a familiar and even comforting matriarchal archetype, both in biblical and literary terms. Women who endure, as characters who live within the relentlessly turbulent world of soap opera, display a quality much valued by the viewers.

This generational aspect also provides a clue to the popularity of soaps, as analysed in a mythical framework by Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes. Their work, based on Claude Levi-Strauss's theory of myth as addressing the 'fundamental and insoluble questions of human existence', originally made comparisons between the American soap opera *Dallas* with the book of Genesis. However, in analysing the primordality and seriality of myth, these ideas could be applied to any of the British soaps. Primordality refers to family, in particular kinship and the lineage of family. Just as Annie Walker and Peggy Mitchell display qualities that can be recognized in biblical matriarchs like Sarah and Rachel, the stories of Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau in their struggles for power and legitimacy have echoes in the love/hate relationship of the Mitchell brothers of *EastEnders*. 'All viewers will find familiar the narrative of embroilment of kinship and can become involved in how these characters are organizing their lives by comparison with all other kinship texts we know.'<sup>7</sup> Seriality or continuation of the storyline in soap operas is an essential characteristic. One could have a sense of the successive generations through rites of passage as seen in both the Genesis story and soap opera. These are all about perpetuating the bloodline: marriage, divorce, remarriage, birth, death. The journey

of life is there on our screens. For viewers it is another confirmation that human life is a series of personal relationships.

Furthermore, the efforts of women such as Sarah, Rebekah and Tamar in keeping these relationships alive in the Bible have been given prominence only recently through feminist scholarship – again, matriarchs who ensure the continuation of the Israelite lineage. These women find their New Testament counterparts in the women who accompanied (and bankrolled) Jesus in his itinerant ministry, who stayed at the foot of the cross and who witnessed the resurrection.

### *When bad things happen to fictional people*

Domestic violence has also been extensively treated within the storylines of *Brookside*, the soap set in Liverpool. Its ethos is informed by the strong Catholic identity of its citizens, and from time to time in the past decade this has emerged through strong themes, such as celibacy and the priesthood. The ease with which Catholicism became entwined with its characters' lives came from the skill of its early writer, Jimmy McGovern. More recently *Brookside* has fallen victim to the syndrome which has seemingly affected most British soaps, that is, sensational calamity. If there is an occasional and exciting crisis – be it the explosion on Brookside Close or the plane crash in *Emmerdale* – the viewing figures rise accordingly. Thus, we again see the manipulation of people's problems for ratings.

The 'body under the patio' storyline in *Brookside*, featuring the Jordache family, was a powerful tale of domestic abuse, both sexual and violent, which had the undoubted effect of galvanizing public awareness of the problem within British society. The seriousness with which the issue was treated included the setting up of a telephone helpline for viewers to ring after the programme, should they want counselling for similar experiences in their own lives. The women of the Jordache family hid the grisly secret of husband/father Trevor's murder (provoked by one of his abusive attacks), and it was only much later that the body was exhumed and the women put on trial.

The courtroom dramas which they and Deirdre endured followed predictably similar lines of injustice, although in *Brookside* the tragedy was compounded by the sudden death of Beth Jordache in prison. The drama, the verdict and the harsh prison regime endured by these fictional women sadly are experiences that are all too real,

as reflected in national statistics on women and crime. It is also true that real women suffer incarceration in this country for much less serious crimes than their fictional counterparts. However, social realism in soaps has not yet gone down the rather less glamorous path of putting a character in prison for not having a television licence.

### *Making visible the bonds between women*

The frequency in soaps with which women are put into desperate situations highlights the fact that soaps do not present ideal families. As Modleski points out, the variety of 'insoluble dilemmas offer reassurance that the woman viewer is not alone in her ability to reconcile and hold together the family unit'.<sup>8</sup> Women, in real life and in soap life, are often the emotional centres of the family home and as such can be seen as 'moral and spiritual guides'. Could television be both mirroring and prompting this vital role? Do real women see themselves as doing some of the things that soap characters do to survive and to hold their relationships together? Or are soaps simply reflecting the actions of women in our society as they face real personal and family problems? It can only be both, as soaps are rooted in the personal sphere.

Baehr and Gray see female soap characters as signalling to their viewers that they are on the 'same side': 'consistent recognition is given to emotional situations which women are deemed to share'.<sup>9</sup> Whether it is an abortion, harassment at work or a broken romance, women can recognize in these fictional scenarios scenes played out in their own, very real lives. The portrayal of Deirdre and the Jordache women in prison, then, has helped to do several things at once. Firstly, it has raised viewers' consciousness about the presence of women in prison, and has gone some way towards dispelling the taboo towards this segment of society. It also signals that women are acting to defend themselves in unjust and desperate situations. One implication for Christianity is that this increasing urge toward action and empowerment should be recognized in areas of church life where Christian women feel justice is not being served, whether those areas be divorce or ordination.

Major events – birth, death, marriage, romance – in which women play a major part may be efficiently and sometimes spectacularly chronicled in a fictional form. Much deeper and more abstract (and therefore hard to represent) is the concept of female friendship. This is where soap opera, with its potential for infinite episodes, has an

advantage over other televised genres; it can take time to develop a long-term relationship, such as the one in *Coronation Street* between Mavis and Rita. In the corner shop, spending countless hours together over decades, the two women created an enduring image of female solidarity. Not even when Rita married Alan (who was later to be run down by a Blackpool tram as he chased her, wielding a carving knife) or Mavis married Derek did their friendship break down. 'Take more than a couple of fellas to split us up', was Rita's comment to Mavis, encapsulating the bond between women who have common attitudes and problems.<sup>10</sup>

### *Talking about women*

Although the development of some genres can be traced from earlier forms, there is one type of programming that is a recent staple of daytime television: the talk show. Although 'prime-time' (evening viewing) talk shows were once popular programmes in British broadcasting schedules, the evolution of the genre into daytime mode – and those talk shows specifically aimed at a female audience – had its impetus from the US. Since their beginning talk shows in America have become increasingly outrageous and sensational, based on increasing competition and the rush for ratings to attract advertising revenue. The volatile combination of confrontation, confession and dysfunctional relationships makes for compulsive viewing, but has also had fatal consequences. Following a humiliating appearance on *Jenny Jones*, confronted as a surprise with a gay man who was obsessed with him, a guest shot and killed the admirer at his home. Jones denied that her programme was responsible for the young man's death.

The biggest name in the past decade of the American talk show industry is, of course, Oprah Winfrey. Since 1985 her top-rated syndicated programme, simply (and intimately) called *Oprah*, has made her America's confidante. It has been transmitted in Britain for several years, first on satellite and now on Channel Five. Winfrey has a disarming style, friendly and homely, sensitively able to discuss the most intensely private experiences of her guests but also endearingly high-spirited, at ease and joking with her audience. Her own production company (Harpo Productions) makes and markets her programme, and her financial portfolio has made her one of the wealthiest women in America. The message of her talk show is that women should feel good about themselves, but it has not always been that way. *The Oprah Winfrey show* (as it was known then) was

for many years a leader in the American talk-show trend of sensational, confrontational programmes. In 1994, however, Winfrey announced that the tone of her show would change from 'trash TV' to a motivational, positive format, which would also include more one-on-one interviews with celebrities. Her change of heart came as a result of a programme, when as she said: 'We had the wife, the girlfriend, and the husband, and the husband announced to the wife that the girlfriend was pregnant. The expression on her face – it pains me to think of it.'<sup>11</sup>

The ethics of television talk shows, it would seem, had never before been a consideration, and neither had the common portrayal of women as victims and complainers. Jeanne Albronda Heaton and Nona Leigh Wilson point out that in the early days of 'talk TV' the issues important to women and the opinions of women were aired on national daily television in a way that had never before been seen. The talk show as platform for addressing women's issues, and for the raising of consciousness of viewers on subjects like child care and domestic violence, soon gave way to ratings wars. The subjects were still being addressed, but the manner in which they were presented changed.

Most women on talk TV are perpetual victims presented as having so little power that not only do they have to contend with real dangers such as sexual or physical abuse, but they are also overcome by bad hair, big thighs and beautiful but predatory 'other' women. The women of talk are almost always upset and in need.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, the legitimate concerns of women are manipulated on talk shows so as to expose not only the problems but the inability of women to deal effectively with them. Women's issues are turned into 'trash', as Heaton and Wilson suggest. The motivation of women who agree to participate in these shows as guests must be the source of great wonderment to those watching the televised event. Why would anyone voluntarily spill her most intimate secrets to an unknown, faceless audience of millions, let alone to a studio audience who are there to heckle and verbally abuse her? At the risk of making her problems – and by extension the problems of countless women like her – trivial, she is not helping to change stereotypes about women, but only to confirm them. Perhaps it serves as a kind of catharsis to tell all, but talk show hosts are not therapists. Even when so-called 'experts' are brought in to comment on

the televised theatrics, they are the worst kind of sound-bite artists, who do not actually resolve or even salve the situation. The false closure of the programme – which, unlike soap opera, cannot leave viewers ‘hanging’ – sees the host or hostess trying to tidy up the loose ends. But it is not possible to do this with what is, after all, someone’s life.

*Private lives, public entertainment*

Jerry Springer prides himself on his talk show, which he says is a ‘cultural cartoon’. He is happy that his show is seen as outrageous. It is uncontrolled, he says, because it has raw emotion. *The Jerry Springer show* has been screened recently on British satellite and terrestrial television, and is the subject of much controversy over the regular eruptions of violence amongst its participants. The programmes have titles such as ‘Hands off my lover’, ‘Surprise! I have a bisexual lover’, and ‘I’m pregnant by a transsexual’. Obviously sex is the mainstay topic, and the show revolves around the confrontation set up between various parties, who stake sexual claims of various sorts on the main guest. Springer defends the morality of his show, saying that those who appear on it volunteer to tell their stories and are unpaid. In addition, they never talk about anyone who is not there. Clearly Springer has taken up where Winfrey left off, but at the time of writing he was losing syndication deals because viewers were beginning to complain about the excessive (and predictable) violence on the show. British talk-show hosts, such as Vanessa Feltz and Kilroy, have recently been warned by the Broadcasting Standards Commission about their talk-show format of ‘trial by television’.

Does this criticism imply that viewers are finally demanding a change in their daytime viewing diet? Instead of being passive couch potatoes, slumped in front of the telly and letting the fare of daytime TV wash over them, viewers are considered by many media critics to be an ‘active audience’, who resist and even subvert the intended meanings from the programmes they watch. John Fiske says that ‘women are not cultural dopes. They are not complicit in, nor do they find pleasure in, their subordination under patriarchy.’<sup>13</sup> Perhaps we underestimate women’s powers of reflection when we assume that the portrayal of women as victims in talk TV is taken on board as reinforcement of subordination. Women who watch these programmes in part may be subconsciously confirming their

ability to resist becoming victims and affirming their self-knowledge and self-confidence.

### *Women making pleasure for themselves*

Christine Geraghty says that women are central to soaps, thus making them 'the norm by which the programmes are understood'. Women are competent in negotiating their way through a 'complex web of relationships which make up a soap opera with a care and intensity which makes the men seem clumsy and uncomprehending'.<sup>14</sup> There has been an increasing emphasis on women in other forms of television programming, from Inspector Tennyson in the crime drama *Prime suspect* to comedy, in which *Roseanne* (the unruliness of female behaviour) and *Ellen* (the 'coming out' of American lesbianism) have finally shattered the conventional formula of basing the show around a male central character (not only by having the title role but in *Roseanne's* case by controlling production).

Even the time-honoured religious caricature has been affected by female representation, in the ample form of the BBC's *Vicar of Dibley*. Dawn French has followed in the footsteps of Derek Nimmo and the late Dermot Morgan in a situation comedy where the vicar presides over a community with hilarious results. The female vicar, taking advantage of the Church of England's decision in 1992 to ordain women to the priesthood, was based by writer Richard Curtis on a real-life woman priest. The sitcom humour does not tend to centre around the vicar herself, but rather arises from the oddball members of the parish and their activities. This is perhaps politically correct, as making fun of the vicar might suggest criticism of the larger issue of the ordination of women. The programme has had good viewing figures even after the novelty of women priests has somewhat worn off. There have been previous comedies based on the lives of women in religious life, most famously *The flying nun*, but *The Vicar of Dibley* is a ground-breaking programme in the way it reflects contemporary English social, religious and theological concerns.

### *Conclusion*

Is there any evidence of British media and society putting on a more feminine face? If women's issues become people's issues, if the hope of fulfilment in life regardless of gender, race, class or age is acknowledged and accepted, then we might dare to think that a

transformation of consciousness has begun. Can women be satisfied that the popularization of their pleasures and their problems has put them squarely in the midst of contemporary culture?

In this frazzled and complicated life that most of us lead, there needs to be an 'off' button which allows us to stop for a while and enter another world. Whether it reproduces or reinforces images of femininity is somehow not as important as the respite it may give to a chaotic, stressed-out or sometimes unfulfilled life. For all the studies on the under-representation and trivialization of women in the media, most women continue to watch television. Perhaps the way that women make meaning from what they see is a way of making pleasure for themselves within a structure that is less than ideal. Judging from the contents of this journal, that seems to be what women do in all spheres of their lives – why should their experience of television be any different?

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## NOTES

- 1 M. Gallagher, 'Women and men in the media', *Communication Research Trends* (1992), p 9.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p 7.
- 3 See Ien Ang in M. Brown (ed), *Television and women's culture: the politics of the popular* (London, 1990), p 86.
- 4 G. Frey-Vor, 'Soap opera', *Communication Research Trends* (1990), p 10.
- 5 N. Banks-Smith, 'It was the shirts what done it', *Guardian* (30 March 1998), p 13.
- 6 Livingstone as quoted in Frey-Vor, *op. cit.*, p 15.
- 7 T. Liebes and E. Katz, 'Dallas and Genesis: primordiality and seriality in popular culture' in Carey (ed), *Media, myths and narratives: television and the press* (London, 1988), p 120.
- 8 C. Geraghty in H. Baehr and A. Gray, *Turning it on* (London, 1996), p 73.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p 76.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p 77.
- 11 J. Heaton and N. Wilson, 'Tuning into trouble', *Ms.* (September 1995), p 49.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p 45f.
- 13 Gallagher, *op. cit.*, p 8.
- 14 Geraghty, *op. cit.*