

## In Defence of TV Soap Operas

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 11 September, 2003 - 15:57

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**Sarah Fitz-Claridge** (<http://www.fitz-claridge.com/>)

Parents disagree sharply about the value of television. For some, it is like a highly addictive drug; for others it is harmless; and for others still it has much to recommend it. Despite this lack of consensus about television in general, one thing most parents do agree about is that television “soap operas” are utterly worthless. We disagree.

Soap operas are criticised for their “sensationalism” and unrealistic portrayal of everyday life, and certainly the overt content of soap operas is rather stylised. However, the subtext of the ideas presented through soap operas gives a very powerful access to the themes of our culture. Why are soap operas such a caricature of life, and is this type of access to our culture valuable?

Very early in the life of television it was discovered that many viewers enjoy series that are a sort of reflection of everyday life, but not exactly like it. For instance, exciting things must happen more frequently, and characters must behave in a somewhat exaggerated and stylised way which throws real life into relief.

In real life, when a woman discovers that her husband is having an affair, say, there is not usually a dramatic pause in which the full horror of the situation is reflected in her facial expression. People in soap operas do not behave like people in real life. However, the way they behave in soap operas does reveal the considerations that actually move people in real life. It shows them acted out – “writ large” – rather as an opera shows genuine human emotions but in a stylised way. One couldn't make an opera out of realistic portrayal of emotions. The same goes for a soap opera: the stylisation is necessary for the drama.

Soap opera is not the only form of drama that is unrealistic. A novel is a wholly artificial way of showing real life too. The narrator in the novel is a highly artificial convention which is the subject of many a PhD thesis. It is nothing like real life: indeed it is strictly impossible in real life. The narrator tells the reader what is actually happening, what the characters are actually thinking, whereas in real life, one never knows. One hardly knows what oneself thinks about a complex situation, let alone what others think, and certainly not at the time. But because the novel has been around for hundreds of years, people have got used to the conventions used in novel-writing. Few people nowadays would complain that a novel cannot tell us anything useful about life because the narrator could not possibly exist.

That soap operas portray characters behaving in a stylised way is no more reason for criticism than that novels have narrators. The important thing is not the explicit content but the cultural ideas they embody inexplicitly. If an alien explorer were to arrive on earth, he could gain much more knowledge of our culture through watching soap operas than he could by reading a book about it. But what if these inexplicit ideas are false? We happen to think that most of the inexplicit ideas embodied in soap opera subtexts are not false, but nevertheless, there are many false (and morally wrong) ideas in our culture which few would want their children to adopt. That is all the more reason why children should

become familiar with those false ideas. Many parents believe that they should act as censors in order to protect their children from false ideas, until the children are old enough and wise enough and rational enough to be able to reject them. What they are actually doing is denying the children access to ideas until the children are *irrational* enough to reject ideas on grounds of their source alone rather than their content.

If there is a dangerous idea in the culture, that you want your children not to adopt, then the more they know about that idea, the better. The more they know about the kind of things that happen, such as teenage pregnancies, and the more they know about cultural taboos, rights and wrongs, and the complexities and interactions between things that occur in our culture, the easier it will be for them to form their own way of dealing with them. Soap operas provide access to all this. Everyday life does as well, but everyday life is a relatively narrow source of information about these things, and it is heavily biased by the particular life-style and hang-ups of the children's parents, and by the very situation of being a child, because children are not allowed to participate in most aspects of life.

Soap operas are very valuable, because one can be a fly on the wall, learning about these situations, without risking anything. Every time an adult goes through an unpleasant situation, he becomes older and wiser and hopefully learns not to make the same mistake again. Ideally, we'd like to *think* about these things and let our theories die in our place. The novel, drama of all kinds, and soap opera (which is merely a style of drama adapted to a particular culture) tell us about the human condition; but whereas reading Tolstoy provides information about the human condition in general, watching a soap opera provides information about things which are particular to our culture and to our time.

What children learn from soap operas is how to live in our culture. Parents naturally want their children to rise above the culture – to reject its false ideas, if you like – but to do that, one has to start from the culture one is in, and improve it. There is no way of jumping to a better set of ideas without first criticising the existing ideas. The growth of knowledge begins with existing theories.

[to post comments](#)

## Comments

### **i hate soaps**

*Submitted by one who hates soaps (not verified) on 1 March, 2005 - 13:18*

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I believe soaps are stupid they are very predictable in every sense you can tell when someone is goign to die who is lying and all that stuff SOAPS ARE STUPID AND POINTLESS they are a waste of good air space on tv!!!

[to post comments](#)

### **soap opears are good for children to watch**

*Submitted by a concerned reader (not verified) on 26 April, 2005 - 08:35*

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i beleive that soap operas are good for children to watch and that they should watch them. they show them how to overcome many of the obstacles that we face everyday and they are also getting taught in many schools in mackay. this is a rising fashiopn to be watch ing these shows. i hope yuo take into consideration that these shows are good and that children should be watching them.

[to post comments](#)

## soap operas

Submitted by [by me \(not verified\) \(http://comment/reply/93\)](#) on 23 August, 2005 - 05:58

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i think they suck really! come on!!!

[to post comments](#)

## children watching soap opears

Submitted by [margaret reddick \(not verified\)](#) on 30 September, 2005 - 08:20

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Soap operas will not help or harm the child as long as the show is written tasteful and writers keep in mind that teens and some younger do watch the soaps.

some of these music shows should be a no no for children.

[to post comments](#)

## teen pregnancy

Submitted by [a reader \(not verified\)](#) on 3 October, 2005 - 22:10

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i believe that soap operas are very misleading they portray issues a little on the easy side it is not that easy to have a child at such a young age and they make it look as though it is

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## soap operas

Submitted by [moi \(not verified\)](#) on 25 May, 2006 - 13:49

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i believe that soaps are a good thing for children to watch, so long as the child concerned is not too young. they help many children overcome day to day problems and often cover important life issues. sometimes people find it too hard to talk to someone so they can find out the information from the programme. this is what i believe...what i believe is always right.

[to post comments](#)

## soap opera

Submitted by [Mungu \(not verified\)](#) on 2 June, 2006 - 11:21

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what are the aspects considered when writing a soap opera for television.

to post comments

## **Some**

*Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 8 November, 2006 - 12:14*

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Some are okay, Hollyoaks, Neighbours and The O.C teach people stuff

to post comments

## **This Article's Expanding My Thinking!**

*Submitted by mammal\_mama on 20 January, 2007 - 06:35*

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I'm thankful for the way my thinking's being expanded. I loved soaps as a teen and young adult. As a stay-at-home mom, I've avoided them -- I think maybe to avoid being the stereotypical "housewife watching soaps all day."

We recently were in the waiting room at the doctor's and I was getting really mesmerized by the soap opera on the TV. I had to keep pulling myself away from the soap, as my child means so much more to me than that.

So right now, while my kids are small, I think it's best if I don't get back into soaps, as my children really need and want my attention -- and I don't want to miss out on this time with them either.

But who knows? When they're teens we may discover a new hobby together! Susan

to post comments

## **soap operas good for women?**

*Submitted by jenny\_angel on 19 November, 2007 - 05:41*

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Is there anyone here that thinks that soap operas are good for women? if so, why?

i'm doing a research paper. thanks

to post comments

## **Obsessive soap viewing zombifies promising young minds**

*Submitted by a reader in Nebraska (not verified) on 7 July, 2008 - 04:20*

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Look, if you have a well-formed sense of reality to be able to know what on Soaps is BS, or if you are an adult facing up to realities just looking for an occasional escape, but to suggest children without a firm frame of reference can benefit from a regular diet of soap operas is ludicrous. I'm not saying being exposed to some daytime programming would ruin any smart kid, but if that was one of a child's PRIMARY frames of reference on the

world without any adult guidance or discussion, that kid's going to come away with some messed up views underpinning a lot of the rest of their outlook on life. You say schools, public or private, destroy a kids brain and THIS drivel improves it?

Again, if you mean occasional viewing with other influences can be healthy, OK, I'll agree. But the type of obsessive viewing I've seen some adults give a whole slate of soaps, that's a good way to turn a promising young mind into another consumer zombie.

[to post comments](#)

## **KIDS!!!!**

*Submitted by Lindsey Whiten (not verified) on 13 November, 2009 - 21:26*

I think soaps are half the problem as to why lots of our children are growing up mentaly and physicaly too soon! I mean, this is how stupid, relationships too young under the age of 18 started! By tv soaps! This whole thing with kids "going on dates" was started by tv soaps! Cummon! Dates are things starting as young adults when you ask someone out on a date to see wherever they are compatible with you as a good lover! And tv soaps are what started kids drinking, having underage sex, dominating over their parents and so many other bad examples that are in todays society! I'm sorry if I'm sounding like a total freak but it's all the truth! I have lived in a family where tv soaps were a big thing in my house, yet I never took interst in them even when the rest of my familie watched them. And god it did me good! I am now 32 and I have two kids and a husband I have been with since I was 20 and I don't encorage my children to watch soaps! If they want education through the media, let then watch documentries!

[to post comments](#)

## **response to Lindsey Whiten**

*Submitted by Dmitri (not verified) on 25 January, 2011 - 23:18*

Documentaries and other educational TV are good for kids. That said, some soaps, such as the Canadian Degrassi franchise, are also good because they deal with real-life situations faced by everyday teens (and young adults)from 7th grade up to freshman year in college (and teachers) and the actors look like real children, rather than hyped up supermodels. But teen dating isn't from soap operas, nor is it necessarily wrong. Sometimes, there may be a disaster with teen dating, but there are bad things in dating in general, it has nothing to do with age. Some bad soaps, at least bad for kids, are CBS's The Bold and the Beaufitul, and The Young and the Restless. These shows are nothing but catfights, near-incest, and cheating scandals. The two sister soaps named above used to be good and were intended for young audiences when they first aired, but the real threat (reality TV) influenced them to be a bad example for teens. These shows just wanted to remain on the air for money, so they brought in these relationship trashy scandals.

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