
Book Reviews

James H. Wittebols (2004) *The Soap Opera Paradigm: Television Programming and Corporate Priorities*, Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield. ISBN 0742520013.

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In this thought-provoking book, James Wittebols has made a serious contribution to current debates on the media, not only in the USA to which the work is addressed, but internationally.

His argument is that, because it is commercially successful, the soap opera has become the dominant format for the US television. This, he argues, applies across all genres from sports, to drama, and to news coverage of elections and politics.

The book is divided into three parts – in the first the author gives a concise history of the development of the television industry in the US, ‘an example of how what was initially regarded as a public resource ended up as a system that increasingly serves private interests whose primary goal is profit, not public service.’(p. 11) Central to this project, from the early radio days, has been the soap opera. He then goes on, drawing on existing literature, to define the characteristics of soap operas. (For European readers, the focus on affluence, which is one of the characteristics of the US soaps, is not particularly relevant). Part 2 looks at television news, using specific examples from 1970 to 2000, of the coverage of natural disasters and election campaigns, and argues that over time the major networks have allowed commercial considerations, principally economy and the drive for ratings to dominate their approach to news coverage and in this the soap opera format has provided them with the audiences they require, to the detriment of public service. Part 3 extends the analysis to drama, reality television and networked sports coverage.

The author is clearly onto something. Personal stories – though they have always been a feature of factual programmes, sometimes to great effect – have, he contends increased. The question is whether the personal story is the best way to explain the facts of a situation – whether it elucidates or merely tells a tale with which people can identify, rather than think about. The suspicion has to be that broadcasters, in a competitive climate, plump for the former as the best guarantee of ratings success. Avid watchers of news, especially 24 hour news, which has so much airtime to fill, would also probably recognise the phenomenon. In a UK context, with which this reviewer is most familiar, the analysis certainly resonates with recent current affairs programmes, (where they still exist). What the author has done is to give us a new tool with which to analyse media content. Wittebols' analysis certainly merits replication outside the USA.

The analysis is not however, without its problems. The author admits that some elements of the soap opera paradigm, for example what he calls 'story exposition', are in fact beneficial and thus do not sit easily in an analysis which argues the opposite. Story exposition is a characteristic of the way soap opera plots unfold, giving various accounts of the same storyline. In news, this is good journalism. It is the journalists' way of giving the audience all sides of the story (p. 97), and they can then make up their own minds as to what to believe.

The concentration on conflict and chaos, and seriality, two further soap characteristics, are undeniably to be found in television news but are not, I think, recent strategies of the corporate media but long-recognised news values which have been around since the beginnings of journalism. They are coincidentally similar to elements of soap opera but have a different provenance – bad news, as we all know and tell our students, is good news. The author cites the example of conflict in the Middle East, 'There was continuing violence on the West Bank today...' (p. 96) as evidence of seriality, but the media will return to this issue time and time again, because journalism follows, as it should, events and processes as they unfold. Events such as these are important and have consequences for our lives and to cover them is less a strategy than a duty.

In a sense, this is a theory which repudiates its own parent, for what is absent from the text, from the index and from the references is any mention of the word tabloidisation. To this reviewer this book is clearly a reworking of, or a refinement of the notion of tabloidisation. The categories employed to determine the 'soapishness', if I may coin the phrase, of the various genres of television, are in many cases interchangeable with those denoting tabloidisation. Chapters 6 and 7 cover natural disasters and political campaigns in television news, by means of content analyses. The author shows convincingly that there has been an increasing concentration on personal stories in the coverage of natural disasters and on images and the personal characteristics of candidates rather than the issues in the

coverage of politics. Both are cited as examples of the soap opera paradigm at play. That may well be the case but it is not exclusively so. A focus on the personal, the predominance of style over content, image over issue have been central concerns of the tabloidisation debate for some time.

The analysis of prime time drama stretches, I think, the paradigm beyond its limit. It is a natural temptation when establishing a new theory to attempt to bring everything within its purview, but it is, in my view, a mistake. Serial drama retains audiences better than single plays, long runs better than short, but this does not mean that there is anything inherently wrong with serial drama. Practically all serial drama on television is classified as soap opera. By this measure, Charles Dickens wrote what the author would no doubt class as soap opera, but he is amongst the greatest of English writers. What is important is the quality of the writing – in news, adhering to a soap opera paradigm may well be pernicious, but in drama less so. Possibly this is not so much a fault in the analysis, but in its application outside the USA, where television drama may be in a generally healthier state.

In sport, the author convincingly analyses the elements of soap opera in the coverage of WWE network wrestling, down to the saga (Chapter 3) of whether or not the executive in charge will be fired if ratings do not improve – the programme itself as part of the story – but the implicit criticism is that this is necessarily a bad thing, when I for one am not convinced it is. If by installing elements of narrative – and this would equally apply to Chapter 9 on reality television – into a ‘sport’ such as wrestling, which is, not only to the sports-averse among us, an essentially pointless affair – people with terrible hair pretending to hurt each other – broadcasters manage to attract audiences, then the elements of soap opera are what make it watchable. That is, they are among the best elements of such programmes.

However, reservations aside, this is a stimulating and interesting book, well worth reading, the core analysis of which deserves wide consideration.