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A review of Elana Levine's book Her Stories: Daytime Soap Opera and US Television History (Duke University Press, 2020).

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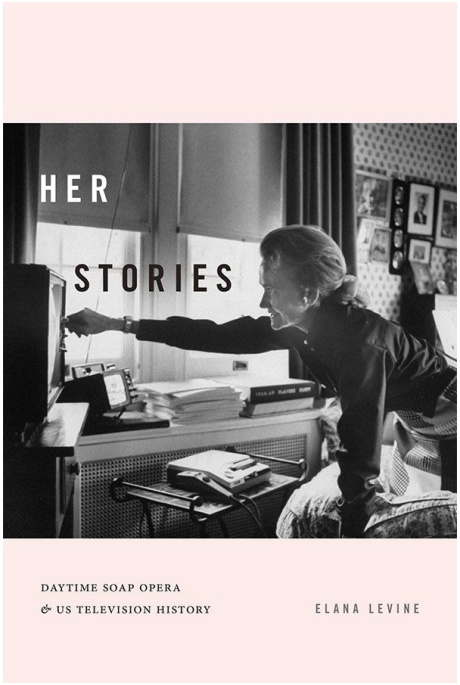
Finding Our Stories in Elana Levine's "Her Stories: Daytime Soap Opera and US Television History"

Elana Levine, *Her Stories: Daytime Soap Opera and US Television History* **(Duke University Press, 2020)**



Soap opera, long considered television's most denigrated form, has in recent years received renewed critical attention for exactly the features that make it so despised: its serial narratives, its close ties to U.S. economic influences, and, most notably, its role in shaping and constructing contemporary femininity – perhaps the largest form of mass media to do so since the "women's film" decades earlier. Of course, such labels placed upon daytime television are not mutually exclusive, nor are they static, unchanging entities. In *Her Stories*, Elana Levine takes these cultural assumptions regarding U.S. soap operas to task, arguing that soap opera is not only the prototype for the economic, political, and aesthetic dimensions of the entire U.S. television industry, but also an important site to examine constructions of gender at different historical junctures. To make this latter point, Levine opens her study with Jane Marsh, a soap opera viewer who kept a journal documenting her responses to her favorite soap operas during the 1970s and continues the practice of recording her viewing experience in the present, via Twitter.

As expected, Jane's reception of these soap stories transformed over time, in light of both changes in her personal life and the changing fabric of U.S. politics and society. Her testimony thus becomes a model for Levine's own method of tracing the historical specificity of gendered spectatorship, soap opera form, and industry practices, from the late 1940s to the 2010s. Levine explores the varied historical and industrial contexts in which soap opera finds itself; rather than promote soap opera as a concise and discernable genre over time, she allows the variability of its aesthetics and its reception to shed light on the ways the daytime soap opera adapts to the industry and its target audiences, and vice versa.

Like many feminist media scholars before her, Levine's methodological aim is to locate soap opera as an object of study somewhere between a singular text – considered that which is subject to aesthetic, formal analysis – and a mass medium "aimed at a female audience" – considered more readily understood in terms of quantitative, data-driven analysis.[1] As Levine notes, television scholars Charlotte Brunsdon and Robert Allen previously ushered in an approach to television soap opera that takes into account both its operation as a meaning-making textual system used for certain ends by institutions, and one perceived by an "always already social reader."[2] This combination is what Allen calls a "reader-oriented poetics," an attempt to not only grasp the mode of soap opera for its formal properties, but how such properties in fact generate meanings (often a variety of them) for viewers.[3]

The implication of Levine situating herself within this lineage perhaps speaks to a number of problems within television studies itself: 1) nearly 40 years after initial attempts to theorize it, soap opera remains an object of derision despite its position as a building block of both the television industry and contemporary conceptions of gendered identity, and, 2) television as a medium still resists analysis (or at least presents theoretical difficulties),

in part because of its very affordances: its seriality and the lack of a single author. The branch of feminist media studies discourse in which Levine finds herself – the question of approaching television either as a text, as an object activated by audiences, or hopefully somewhere in between – is not unique to the mode of soap opera, but instead points to the inherent difficulties that come with studying television. In this sense, *Her Stories* revisits many of the themes in Levine's previous book *Legitimating Television* – for example, how quality television works to distance itself from television's feminized associations from the post-war era.[4]

While these issues are not unique to soap opera, soap opera does however open up new understandings of the television medium, arguably because it takes television to its highest degree of medium specificity; rather than hiding television's serial origins, the soap opera capitalizes upon them. For this reason, television soap opera becomes uniquely situated to answer questions not just about gender and television – which is Levine's key argument – but also revisits questions at the heart of the discipline which remain unresolved, those of medium and methodology.

Aesthetics, audiences, and economics: an overview

While at first glance covering a seemingly overwhelming archive, the scope of material contained within *Her Stories* is in fact crucial to Levine's argument, as it proves soap opera's mutability across history – changes necessitated both by the television industry as well as changing conceptions of gender. Levine organizes her chapters within three larger, chronological parts:

the first covers the late 1940s to the early 1960s, the second spans the mid-1960s to the late 1980s, and the third and final part follows the era of the soap opera's decline, the late 1980s to the 2010s. Within each timeframe, she focuses upon a number of themes that appear consistently throughout – production, industry, critical discourse, reception – themes that are equally as expansive as the archive she draws upon.

In the first part, Levine maps the transition of serials from radio to television, a move that marks not only the groundwork for the broadcast network industry, but more importantly the foundations of television as a medium. Levine opens with the former radio serial, *Portia Faces Life*, a program that follows housewife and attorney Portia as she juggles attempts to maintain both roles. When *Portia Faces Life* first aired in 1954, producers were still grappling with the transition from radio to television; for instance, how would Portia be brought to life *on screen*, when viewers (or listeners) were accustomed to merely hearing about her daily life as a wife and career woman? Producers played with the aesthetics and narrative of the new television soap opera, experiments that would end up shaping the "audiovisual grammar" of storytelling on the small screen.[5] The shift from sound to visual representation presented a dilemma not just in terms of reorienting audience perception toward a new form, but also regarding profitability – would the sponsorship model of radio (where the likes of Procter & Gamble paid for entire series in return for ad time) also transition to television? How would housewives – considered ideal consumers in the radio era – be able to *watch* television and continue their domestic duties, when radio allowed them to do both? Levine unpacks the intertwinement of television's visual forms and business practices in light of these questions, arguing that the imagined housewife-viewer played a crucial role in shaping industry standards for the development of daytime programs and their

subsequent marketing. Stories of the 1950s wife-and-mother figure in soaps like *As the World Turns* and *The Guiding Light* interpellated viewers through storylines that reinforced post-war notions of gender, where the problems – and solutions – of womanhood were constructed and represented as taking place within the confines of the home and marriage. As Levine notes, through the representation of the private sphere, "soaps were part of a broader hegemonic focus on individualized troubles, a distraction from the underlying structural inequalities that made for these instabilities in the first place."[6]

Because of their successful appeal as the "therapeutic salve" to the psychological and emotional needs of post-war American women, daytime soap operas from the 1960s to the 1980s flourished as the profit-making centers of the big three networks, CBS, NBC, and ABC. In the second part of *Her Stories*, Levine connects the reliability of soap opera's audience base, built through newer narrative strategies of social issue storytelling and sexualized subject matter (both topics often taken to sensationalized extremes), to the profitability of daytime television, which in turn subsidized the networks' prime-time programs.[7] However, soap operas did not just serve as a means to fund the higher-budget evening line-up; crucial to Levine's argument, both here and elsewhere, is soap opera's impact upon the narrative and visual dimensions of television as a whole.[8]

Like Linda Williams and Christine Gledhill's theory of film melodrama as a *mode* rather than a genre, Levine's consideration of soap opera as a mode complements her approach of thinking through its pervasive influence across television and other media.[9] The "turn to relevance" in the 1970s allowed soap opera to speak more broadly to more audiences, and this turn was something that prime-time television picked up on, particularly during that decade. Here, Levine focuses on programs such as *All My Children*, which originally took place within the home, but also took on social

issues outside it, reframing political problems as interpersonal struggles. For example, the character of anti-war activist Amy in *All My Children* brought attention to the injustices of the Vietnam War through conflict with her more conservative in-laws.[10]

Soap opera's relevance was seemingly short-lived, as the 1980s marked the emergence of "quality TV," a label granted to prime-time programs that clearly fell into the mode of soap opera – especially in terms of their seriality – while keeping a distance from soap opera's more feminized, low-cultural associations. Though the soap opera of the early to mid-1980s in some ways exceeded its daytime status via time-shifted viewing, changes in audiences, developments in sound and visual technologies, and greater investment from a variety of sponsors, the late 1980s saw the form face an identity crisis in light of the changing political climate. The third and final part of Levine's study addresses the post-network era of television, where the soap opera's successes and failures provide a lens for understanding the larger failures of the network system itself. The question of audiences looms most loudly here, as blame for the collapse of traditional broadcast television is attributed to viewers. Referring to the cancellations of some of the longest-running soap operas, including *Guiding Light* and *As the World Turns*, Levine notes that:

> Rather than pointing to the faltering economic structure of the broadcast television business [...] industry figures painted themselves as simply responding to the changed needs of the women in the audience. How they described those needs, and altered their programming strategy to address them, had deep roots in the history of the daytime soap opera [...] In all cases, this imagining of the audience was rooted more in the commercial interests and logics of the industry than in an investment in women's concerns.[11]

Much like their beginnings, soap operas in the post-network age also took leaps of aesthetic and technological experimentation (namely a move to online platforms), though instead of seeming groundbreaking as they once had in the shift from radio serials, here innovations in content and form signaled their decline, as they struggled to regain relevance in an ever-shifting televisual landscape.

Are her stories our stories?

Her Stories makes a compelling and rigorous case that soap opera indeed plays a leading role in shaping U.S. histories of both gender and television, and that the two are inextricably linked. What remains to be seen, however, is the extent to which this history of television – arguably *the* history of television – will be acknowledged as such. Levine certainly provides more than enough evidence to demonstrate that "*her* stories are *our* stories," but perhaps the search for her stories, in a history of television that has so fervently refuted its soap opera origins, remains an ongoing one – what Tania Modleski once called , "the search for tomorrow" when attempting to locate a feminist aesthetics and form in soap opera nearly 40 years ago. "As feminists," Modleski wrote, "we have a responsibility to devise ways of meeting these needs that are more creative, honest, and interesting than the ones mass culture has come up with."[12] Levine meticulously fulfills that responsibility with *Her Stories*, paving the way for new kinds of feminist intervention in television studies. But much like the debates about texts and audiences lurking beneath the surface of our discipline, Levine's study also, by its very existence, shows that television's gendered past remains largely unsettled and unacknowledged – a search that is still worth pursuing.

But where do we look now? This is the question that perhaps remains in the light of Levine's study of soap opera. As she notes,

between 2003 and 2012, of the ten soap operas remaining on U.S. networks, six were subject to cancellation, a demise Levine attributes to soap opera's attempts to imitate prime-time television aesthetics and storytelling (as well as network austerity measures). Because soap opera's reinvention required a distancing from its own history (particularly a repudiation of its feminized associations), those that remained on-air are hardly recognizable within soap opera conventions. How then do we think about soap opera (or femininity and television more broadly) in the contemporary moment, when television "aimed at a female audience" no longer exists in the form it once did?

Accepting a lack of soap opera objects in the present as a dead end to studying televisual forms of gendered spectatorship in general would actually be the opposite of Levine's premise. If we are to follow her argument that soaps are not static entities, but media with their own historical specificity, then we might look to other television forms in our search for soap opera's traces, as a number of feminist theorists have done.[13] How might the form and content of soap opera haunt the television of the present, perhaps even where we least suspect it? What happens if we think of *The Sopranos* as containing elements of soap opera? Or *Mad Men*? These questions open up not just our presumptions about what constitutes "good" television, but the very judgment of "quality" in and of itself – what has to remain hidden or camouflaged for the label "quality" to emerge in the first place. Because it is true that if soap opera is indeed the origin point for *any* television history, not just gendered ones, then soap opera is always already there, even if at times we have to search harder and more closely for it.

1 For an early example of this distinction within feminist media studies, see Annette Kuhn's essay on "Women's Genres": "What does 'aimed' at a female audience mean? What exactly is being signaled in this reference to a gendered audience? Are women to be understood as a sub-group of the social audience, distinguishable through discourses which construct *a priori* gender categories? Or does the reference to

a female audience allude rather to gendered spectatorship, to sexual difference constructed in relations between spectators and texts? Most likely, it condenses the two meanings; but an examination of the distinction between them may nevertheless be illuminating in relation to the broader theoretical issues of texts, contexts, social audiences, and spectators." Annette Kuhn, "Women's Genres," *Screen* vol. 25, no. 1 (1984), 24.

2 Charlotte Brunsdon, "Television: Aesthetics and Audiences," in: *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 68.

3 Robert Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 62–63.

4 See in particular, Chapter 5, "Not a Soap Opera," in: Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

5 Elana Levine, *Her Stories: Daytime Soap Opera & US Television History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 21.

6 Ibid., 60.

7 Levine further addresses the context of such subject matter in her book-length study, *Wallowing in Sex*, addressing both soap opera and prime-time television's contributions to representing social subject matter, such as sexual liberation. Elana Levine, *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

8 Again, see: Newman and Levine, *Legitimating Television*; Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

9 Lynne Joyrich connects soap opera with melodramatic modes of address more broadly. See: Lynne Joyrich, "All That Television Allows: TV Melodrama, Postmodernism and Consumer Culture," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* vol. 6, no. 1 (1988), 128–153, https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-6-1_16-128.

10 Levine, *Her Stories*, 113.

11 Ibid., 207.

12 Tania Modleski, "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas: Notes on a Feminine Narrative Form," *Film Quarterly* vol. 33, no. 1 (1979), 20, https://doi.org/10.2307/1212060

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13 These very same theorists have also challenged the connection between femininity and seriality; see for example Williams's recent essay, where she, like Mittell, questions the connection between seriality and gender, arguing instead for decoupling them. Linda Williams, "World and Times: Serial Television Melodrama in America," in: *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). See also: Mittell, *Complex TV*.