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Notes on the Soap Opera Apparatus: Televisual Style and "As the World Turns"

by *Jeremy G. Butler*

Critical commentaries on soap opera's narrative structure—modeled on literary criticism and cinema studies—are becoming as commonplace as child custody conflicts in the genre itself. Sociological interpretations of soap opera have also flourished recently, leading to numerous articles, several books, and more than a few Ph.D. dissertations. One can now locate material on television soap opera in publications as diverse as the *Journal of Employment Counseling* and *Screen*.¹ Amid this flurry of critical activity certain issues and approaches have taken center stage: soap opera as a possibly progressive, feminist genre (in terms of narrative structure and spectator positioning); demographic analysis of the soap opera audience; empirical research on the effects of soap opera on that audience; and content analysis of the "world of the soap opera." There is much to learn from each of these methods of inquiry, but the work done to date has been incomplete in its approach to the genre as a televisual signifying system, an apparatus that generates meaning. In our desire to comprehend the soap opera audience and the genre's narrative form, we have given short shrift to basic questions about the soap opera's manipulation of sound and image. We have yet to fully articulate the components of soap opera *style* and the function of that style in the soap opera apparatus.

Feminist analysis has thus far taught us the most about soap opera as a signifying system.² Tania Modleski's relatively early (1979) essay sparked much of the feminist rethinking of the genre.³ She contends that soap opera may prove to be the most (only?) feminist televisual form. Invoking Roland Barthes's hermeneutic code, Modleski sees feminist potential in three aspects of the soap opera: its disrupted narrative form, its avoidance of narrative closure, and its construction of a fragmented spectatorial viewpoint. Consequently, her argument is not concerned so much with what might be called a feminist televisual style, but with narrative form and the feminine spectator's relationship to that form. She spends very little time on the actual use of sound and image. Modleski shares this concentration on narrative structure with many of the writers drawing on literary and cinematic analytical traditions. The idea of an endless story has captivated those accustomed to narrative closure, largely because narrative aperture—the open text—is a trait normally associated with modernist or progressive texts, not forms of popular culture as seemingly conservative as soap opera.

Jean-Luc Godard used to joke that his films have a beginning, a middle, and an end—but not necessarily in that order. Soap opera, as has frequently

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been noted, has only a diegetic middle: enigmas without permanent resolutions, the origins of which are frequently lost in the overabundance of narrative. It is in this aspect of soap opera and melodrama that one may find an inherent progressive quality, for, as Laura Mulvey writes in regard to the cinema, "the strength of the melodramatic form lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road, a cloud of over-determined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes."⁴ Soap opera, obviously, has no "last five minutes." Ideological conflicts are never fully reconciled. Ellen Seiter — incorporating Umberto Eco's "closed" and "open" texts—comments on the significance of soap opera's eternally disrupted and eternally reconstructed narrative: "The importance of small discontinuous narrative units which are never organized by a single patriarchal discourse or main narrative line, which do not build towards an ending or closure of meaning, which in their very complexity cannot give a final ideological word on anything, makes soap opera uniquely open to feminist readings."⁵ This feminist concern with ideological paradoxes in soap opera *narrative* has dominated the reevaluation of the genre.⁶ And yet, valuable as this work has been, it has left important gaps. In particular, there is a crucial need for a comprehensive study of soap opera as a system of signification, a text of sound and image constructed in a highly conventionalized fashion.⁷

All too often, television and film analysts neglect style in a search for "meaning" —forgetting that style is always the device by which meaning is constructed. Soap opera possesses its own distinct style, even if it is concealed within the ideologically loaded term, *invisible style*. I will decipher the "invisible" stylistic conventions specific to the television soap opera, and suggest more general ways in which a close textual analysis of a television genre might proceed. I rely, in part, on methods more often applied to the cinema than to broadcast television. Although the cinema may ultimately turn out to be a poor model to apply to broadcast television, the similarities between the two media make methodological cross-over inevitable. Indeed, television soap opera has become something of a test case, the object of inquiry of a number of film scholars who are beginning to address themselves to the electronic medium.* Soap opera may teach us much about the validity of applying cinematic paradigms to broadcast television.

With these caveats in mind, I undertake to examine the style of "As the World Turns," a Proctor and Gamble-produced soap opera aired on CBS from 1:30 to 2:30 p.m. (EST) some 260 times a year. "As the World Turns" premiered on 2 April 1956 as one of the first half-hour soap operas, expanding to one hour in 1975. Thus, approximately 4,800 hours of broadcast time have been spent chronicling this story-making for a rather unwieldy diegetic text when compared to the standard ninety-minute feature film or even the conventional twenty-six episode prime-time TV season. Although I could not hope to chart the development of soap opera style since its initial television appearance in the 1950s I will comment on its characteristics in 1984 as one step towards a history and theory of televisual style.

Style and the Soap Opera Apparatus. This study will mainly address the diegetic segments of “As the World Turns”- leaving for later a few thoughts on the extradiegetic segments; i.e., the commercials, station promotional spots, and similar elements. *Style*, as I will be using the term, signifies the **patterning** of techniques, the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships of one element to other elements within a textual system. Only these relationships generate meaning. My specific approach will be to discuss soap opera style in terms of space (mise-en-scene and videographic properties), time (editing), and sound (dialogue, music, and noise or “sound effects”). Recognizing that a close analysis of all 4,800 hours of “As the World Turns” to date would be a life’s work, I have limited myself to one week selected at random: 18-24 July 1984, Wednesday through the following Tuesday. To best understand the single shot and shot-to-shot relations within a scene I will narrow the sample even further, concentrating on the thirteenth scene from the program aired Friday, 20 July 1984. One of the great limitations of close analysis of soap opera is that shows are never repeated and are generally unavailable for further study. Because the viewer will not have the opportunity to view this scene for her or himself, and because the following comments involve detailed reference to dialogue and visual style, I provide the following shot-by-shot description.⁹

Shot 1 (39 seconds): LS Marcy, sitting alone in her and Jay’s apartment. She eats lunch in an “elegant” fashion and listens to Pat Benatar’s “Piece of My Heart” on the radio. Jay enters, crosses room.

Marcy: Hi. Where’ve you been?
 Jay: You a detective? [Camera arcs with Jay in LS; he turns off the radio.]
 Marcy: Do you mind?
 Jay: I wanted some quiet. OK? Quiet.
 Marcy: I just asked you where you’d been.
 Jay: Out. [Jay sits.]
 Marcy: Out. . . .

Shot 2 (25 seconds): MS Marcy and Jay seated, favoring Marcy.

Marcy: Out. I know you were out. Out where?
 Jay: Would you get like really sore if I told you it was none of your business?
 Marcy: No, I wouldn’t get ‘like really sore’ ‘cause I don’t really care. But some people do. Some people are worried about you.
 Jay: Yeah? Like who?
 Marcy: Like who do you think? I spoke to Kirk. .

Shot 3 (7 seconds): CU Jay.

Marcy: . He’s really sorry about what happened.
 Jay: Yeah? [Jay turns to face her.]
 Marcy: .

Shot 4 (8 seconds): CU Marcy.

Marcy: . . . Though I don't know why, after all the things you said about his father. But he is and he wants you two to make up. . .

Shot 5 (10 seconds): CU Jay.

Marcy: Which I think is really big of him, considering you had no right to say half the things you said.

Jay: And I think you've been reading too much of Emily Post for your own damn good.

Marcy: I . . .

Shot 6 (6 seconds): CU Marcy.

Marcy: am trying so hard. Kirk wants you two to make up. . .

Shot 7 (7 seconds): CU Jay.

Marcy: You should be the one apologizing to him. You were the one who was so obnoxious. [Jay rises.]

Jay: Me, apologize to him?!

Marcy: . . .

Shot 8 (5 seconds): CU Marcy (she has stood up, too).

Marcy: . . . Your friendship means a lot to him.

Shot 9 (9 seconds): CU Jay.

Jay: Why don't you butt out? You know, you don't fool me. I mean, you think it's going to be real happy for you if Kirk and I stay on the outs, right? You get him all to yourself. You could even move into McColls, no . . .

Shot 10 (9 seconds): CU Marcy.

Jay: . . . problem. You'd be real happy about that, wouldn't you?

Marcy: Why are you like this? Do you see me trying to keep you apart? Didn't I just say you two should make up?

Shot 11 (6 seconds): CU Jay.

Jay: I got the score on you. [Music begins.] You're a lousy little social climber. All you want to do is trap Kirk and trap him good.

Shot 12 (21 seconds): MS Marcy, Jay's point-of-view; she walks away from him.

Marcy: I am not listening to you.

Jay: What's the matter, does the truth hurt?

Marcy: Why don't you take a bit of the truth? You are the one who hurt Kirk. And you are the one who hurt Frannie. And you are so selfish that you can't realize you're hurting the ones you love. And I think that makes you a lot worse than it makes me. [Marcy exits.]

Shot 13 (12 seconds): CU Jay.

Shot 14 (9 seconds): LS Jay alone in the room. He picks up his motorcycle helmet and exits through the door at rear.

Shot 15 (7 seconds): MS empty section of the room. Marcy enters and the camera reframes her in MCU; she looks off screen left.

Soap Opera Mise-en-Scene. In the climactic twelfth shot of scene **13** Marcy castigates Jay for his selfishness after Jay accuses her of being a “lousy little social climber” in shot **11**. The shot begins in medium close-up from Jay’s point of view. Marcy walks away from him, back into the image. She then returns and the camera reframes her in close-up for her final speech about his callous treatment of his friends. At the end of the shot Marcy exits in close up.

This shot’s mise-en-scene adheres to several soap opera conventions. First, and most obviously, the setting is an interior one—as are the bulk of soap opera scenes. To cut costs, soap operas are shot in controlled environments where shooting time can be minimized. However, beyond the pragmatic demands of technology and production economics there are certain aesthetic reasons for the genre’s abundance of interior settings. Soap opera thematics find their most facile expression indoors. Charles Derry writes: “Given this emphasis on interiors, it is not surprising that the soap opera has developed a stable of specific interiors—each of which serves a metaphorical function which allows the genre to deal with one or more of its themes.”¹³ Derry identifies the hospital, the court room, the newspaper office, the restaurant or nightclub, and the private home—and their respective thematic concerns of life and death, guilt and innocence, gossip, socialization, and personal obsessions.” In this context, shot I2 clearly exemplifies soap opera’s use of the private home as an arena for personal politics.”

Lighting is a second highly conventionalized element of ***mise-en-scene***. Since the 1920s, film and now television lighting patterns have been dominated by “three-point lighting”: key light, fill light, and back light. It is possible to manipulate light in a broad variety of ways, according to position and intensity. Moreover, gels may be used to change its color. Although there is some variation among individual soap operas, most do not stray far from a high-key norm exemplified in shot I2 (due, no doubt, to the necessity of lighting some ten or more sets every working day). Marcy’s contorted face is lit with a strong key light on her left side, a fill light to soften the shadows on her right and a back light to highlight her hair and separate her from the background. Although this effect is actually achieved with more than just three single lights, the basic three-point principle remains in effect. Only in the most extreme circumstances do soap operas deviate from this convention. Even in nighttime scenes, actors’ faces are lit this way, although the backgrounds may be mottled with shadows.

Any consideration of soap opera’s mise-en-scene would be incomplete without some mention of acting, or, more accurately, “figure expression and movement”¹³ By popular consensus, the style of soap opera acting differs markedly from that on nighttime television and in feature films. But how is one to deal with acting—an area of television and film studies that has long resisted serious analysis? Jane Feuer suggests that it is in acting style that the concept of excess truly applies to soap opera. She writes that although acting on TV serials seems quite sedate when compared with nineteenth-century theatrical conventions “nevertheless it appears excessive in comparison to the more naturalistic mode currently employed in other forms of television and in the cinema, just as the

overblown 'bad acting' in Sirk's films did for its time. Yet both forms of melodramatic acting are in keeping with related conventions for distilling and intensifying emotion.¹⁴ Jettisoning the evaluative baggage that "excessive" normally carries when applied to acting, Feuer argues that the stylized "over-acting" in melodrama is certainly appropriate to the intensity of the emotions portrayed. Indeed, it is here that one may most clearly see the "return of the repressed" that has been posited as residing in the visual style of 1950s melodrama.

Marcy and Jay's argument peaks in shot 12, resulting in her "excessive" facial expressions. Marisa Tomei's performance in this scene transgresses the current conventions of "realistic" acting-exemplified, possibly, in the work of Meryl Streep or Jane Fonda. More important, the style of Tomei's performance serves as a marker, a signifier, of an extraordinary emotional experience. Obviously, what she says and how she says it communicate distilled, intensified emotion to the sympathetic viewer. For some unsympathetic viewers, this emotional signifier represents something else entirely. "Melodramatic" acting exists on the edge of self-parody." Persons unfamiliar with the genre or accustomed to other acting conventions may be distanced from Tomei's performance and find it amusing. The acting in soap operas, as with all acting, brings up the problem of reception, for one person's realism is another's melodrama. Feuer's article assumes that there is general agreement upon the conventions of contemporary acting when, indeed, they are still quite indeterminate.¹⁶

Soap Opera Videographic Properties. These three aspects of mise-en-scene (sets, lighting, figure expression) cannot exist in a vacuum. They are always articulated through the TV camera and other video technology. The regime of videography greatly influences our understanding of the televisual image. We may see this in at least four videographic properties: the use of videotape as a recording medium, framing (mobile and fixed) and camera position, focal length and the zoom lens, and "special effects" (including dissolves, fades, chroma key, and so on).¹⁷

Because they are recorded on videotape, soap operas more closely resemble television news "actualities" (videotape of news events) than they do nighttime serials and feature films, which are both shot on 35mm film. This resemblance to what television marks as "reality" supports John Ellis's contention: "television presents itself as an immediate presence. . . . Television pretends to actuality, to immediacy; the television image in many transmissions (news, current affairs, chat shows, announcements) behaves as though it were live and uses the techniques of direct address." Ellis believes that television lacks Barthes's "photo effect," that effect of "present absence" —a presence that is now past—which is generated by the photographic and cinematic images. Television, instead, is an "immediate presence" —seemingly live and personally directed at the viewer. Ellis's argument appears particularly germane to soap opera. After all, the genre originated in live broadcasts and in its present, videotape form strongly resembles those broadcasts that we know to be live presentations: local (but not necessarily

national) newscasts, sports programs, "Saturday Night Live," and so on. Soap operas seem live and, indeed, could be live once again.

For Ellis this immediacy is part of his analysis of the text-viewer relationship, but I would like to stress that this sense of "live-ness" is evident in the videographic properties of the text itself, not just the presumed text-viewer situation. Consider soap opera framing, for example. The genre's reliance on the close-up has often been noted, but what is seldom perceived is the comparative haphazardness of these close-ups. Cinematic codes of framing operate to maximize narrative propulsion, to drive the story forward with maximum diegetic effect and minimum diegetic effort. Soap opera videotaping, due to the exigencies of multiple camera production, creates framing that does not achieve this maximum effect. This is especially apparent in shots of accelerated figure movement. Shot 12, for example, begins with neither actor's face visible as they both bend over a table. Jay then blocks Marcy when she walks into the background; the camera arcs to reframe her. When she finally holds still in order to excoriate Jay, she is eventually framed conventionally: slightly off center, with motivated space in the direction she is looking. Her exit is done in close-up, however, breaking another cinematic convention. In pejorative terms—terms which assume cinematic conventions as *the* standard—the compositions of this shot and many soap opera shots are clumsy and awkward.

I wish to avoid those terms, however, and suggest that this "awkwardness" functions to confirm the immediate presence of the televisual image. Furthermore, it is as if the character controls the framing rather than the framing controlling the character. The camera doesn't fully anticipate the figures' movements. Hence, the framing on soap opera closely resembles framing in news actuality, with the camera operator struggling to keep up with the events that transpire before her or him. This slackness of framing consequently marks the scene as if it were "reality" (immediate presence) rather than "fiction" (photo effect).

One final videographic quality that I wish to consider is focal length. Soap opera's norm in this area is a slightly wide-angle lens, used ostensibly to make the small sets look larger. More significantly, soap operas tend to use the zoom lens to mark shots of particular emotional importance. Feuer writes of its use in nighttime serials: "For coding moments of 'peak' hysteria, 'Dallas' and 'Dynasty' will employ repeated zooms-in to close-ups of all actors in a scene."⁴ Feuer suggests that this device follows a convention of daytime soap opera and exaggerates it to the point of excess. Clearly, the zoom-in is used to signal key emotional moments, but my observation of daytime serials suggests that "Dynasty" and "Dallas" have exaggerated this device very little, if at all, beyond how it is used in daytime soap opera. Moreover, rather than a distinction based on degree of "exaggeration," I would argue that the daytime serial's zooms differ from the nighttime serial's zooms only on the basis of the former's apparent lack of control. This distinction arises from the differences in filming/taping procedure of daytime and nighttime, and results in a discernible contrast between the two styles in *the images themselves*. The single, film camera shooting style of "Dallas" and

“Dynasty” produces a much more controlled, precise articulation of zooming codes than does the multiple camera videotaping of “As the World Turns.” The soap opera’s lack of “precision” links it with news events and their illusion of uncontrolled, unmediated “reality.”

Visual Style and Editing. Televisual space-mise-en-scene articulated through videographic properties-is manipulated through highly conventionalized editing patterns. Central to these is the “shot-reverse shot” or “shot-counter shot” structure illustrated in shots 3-13, from scene 1320. The basic principle of this editing system-codified in the “180 degree rule”-is the alternation of criss-crossing camera angles that present first one character and then the other, or, in other terms, one spatial field and then another.²¹ Charlotte Brunson, drawing on an unpublished paper by Andy Lowe, makes the following comments about the use of editing and televisual space in the British soap opera, “Crossroads”: “Generally, sets have two distinct spaces arranged laterally to each other-that is, there are two distinct camera fields, and it is the articulation of these fields which constructs the space.”²² In scene 13, two laterally arranged spatial zones are developed around each body once Jay is seated. During the argument, the zones shift-laterally, screen left. Soap opera incorporates very little use of depth; the shallow sets will only permit a limited side-to-side movement. Most action occurs on a plane that is at a 45-degree angle to each camera axis, as can be observed in any diagram of the 180-degree rule.

In soap opera’s specific use of the shot-counter shot pattern we can see still another instance in which the seemingly live nature of TV is signified. Soap opera editing leaves out “significant” action that conventional-that is, film-influenced-editing would include. This is illustrated by shots 6, 7, and 8 in scene 13. In the first shot, Marcy is seated. In the next, Jay rises. While the camera remains on Jay, Marcy also rises- out of frame. Shot 8 begins with her standing in an unconventional framing, violating both framing and editing codes. Conventional film editing might have included a two-shot in which both characters got out of their chairs. Conventional wisdom dictates that we return to a character in the same state in which we left her or him. In other words, Marcy should be seated at the start of shot 8, as she was in shot 6. Once again, soap opera style seems closer to the haphazardness of documentary and human experience than to the precisely orchestrated style of prime-time television and commercial films.

Soap Opera Time. Time on soap operas is quite unlike that in the cinema and only minimally related to that of the nighttime TV series. The amount of diegetic time in soap opera dwarfs that of the cinema and that of prime-time television. A 4,800-hour text, such as “As the World Turns,” must presumably incorporate temporal structures quite different from feature films or TV’s evening series. If it didn’t, soap opera would collapse beneath the weight of its own, ever-enlarging story lines. How, then, are these mammoth time frames structured?

Television shares with the cinema the potential ability to manipulate time through editing, but it seldom makes use of that potential—at least, not within the individual scene. Shots are joined together in a seamless continuum that preserves real time rather than manipulating or distorting it. A soap opera scene is normally taped straight through; prime-time television (e.g., “Dallas,” “Dynasty,” “Hill Street Blues”) and movies are created from small fragments that are filmed one piece at a time. This extra-textual knowledge of the two media’s production techniques suggests aspects of the editing that are apparent in a close examination of the soap opera text, specifically, scene 13 from “As the World Turns.” Jay’s entrance and walk across the room are presented in full, not truncated as they might be in a film. The “dead” time that the cinema elides cannot be excised from soap opera. The pauses and lulls of real time remain. In this regard, television soap opera’s predecessor, radio soap opera, more closely resembles the cinema than does TV soap opera itself. In radio soap opera, time was manipulated freely since there were no spatial constraints—no concern over sets-limiting diegetic time’s elasticity. Even within a scene, action could be presented more quickly or more slowly than in real life, depending upon the needs of the narrative. The real movement of actual bodies through space was thus only a minor consideration.

Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow contend that the equivalence of story time and real time in television reconfirms its immediacy. All TV programs are in effect identified with the “live” TV program. They borrow the following scheme from M. Tardy, comparing the temporal structures of the novel, the film, and the television program (= indicates equivalence, + indicates nonequivalence):

Novel: time of literary creation + time of reading + diegetic time

Film: time of cinematic creation + projection-viewing time + diegetic time

TV **program:** time of television creation = transmission-viewing time = diegetic time (time of event)

From this they conclude: “The immediate time of the image is pulled into a confusion with the time of the events shown, tending to diminish the impression of the mode of presence in absence characteristic of film, suggesting a permanently alive view on the world; the generalized fantasy of the television institution of the image is exactly that it is *direct*, and direct for me.”²³ Thus, the editing style of the individual scene confirms what has already been noted in the context of soap opera framing: the immediate presence of television. This immediate presence serves the ideological function of naturalizing the representation. It invokes the illusion of a “reality” presented immediately and expressly for the viewer. Heath and Skirrow’s comments are directed to a news program, “World in Action,” but they apply equally well to soap opera.

Soap opera scenes preserve a real-time temporal structure, but the length of individual shots is modulated according to certain conventional rhythms. Commonly in “As the World Turns” and other American soap operas the first shots of a two-person conversation scene will be comparatively long, followed

by an alternating pattern of approximately equal shots-counter shots, peaking in a longer climactic shot, and concluding with slightly shorter shots of resolution. This alternation-climax-resolution pattern may be observed in the example from "As the World Turns." Shots 1 and 2 last thirty-nine and twenty-five seconds, respectively, and serve to establish the ensuing scene. The verbal confrontation begins. Shots 3 through 11-each lasting five to ten seconds-establish the particular parameters of this confrontation in the alternation between Jay and Marcy, and identify the camera field that each inhabits. With some exceptions, a character will be on screen when she or he speaks and off when she or he listens. The emotional development of the scene reaches its climax in the twenty-one second twelfth shot (discussed previously), after which three shots (seven to twelve each) conclude the scene. In this typical, fifteen-shot scene we observe a fundamental pattern: exposition, alternation of two visual fields, climax, and temporary resolution. Even in complicated scenes with more than two characters, soap opera gravitates to this pattern-dividing crowd scenes into smaller groups of two or at most three characters. Each soap opera syntagm is invested with its own self-sufficient narrative structure-except, crucially, for a final resolution. New questions are raised in scene 13, for example, by the final shot of Marcy staring after Jay. The image of her looking off-screen leaves open the enigmas surrounding him: Where will he go? What will he do?

Even though the time frame of the individual scene is firmly rooted in real time (albeit modulated real time), the temporal relationship among scenes and among the daily episodes is much more ambiguous. Derry provides a starting point for the analysis of time in soap operas. He contends that there are basically two, sometimes contradictory time schemes: "Extended Time" and "Landmark Time." He explains: "First there is what can be termed a Landmark Time: that is, the episode broadcast on Thanksgiving is generally represented as Thanksgiving, likewise with Christmas. Landmark Time is complicated by the intrusion of Extended Time, whereby one day of soap opera story can be extended into a week or more of half-hour or hour episodes." These are further complicated, Derry notes, by the idiosyncratic time schemes of certain diegetic lines. He points out that the time of pregnancies are frequently drawn out, while those of children aging are compressed.²⁴ Time, it would appear, is constructed rather casually on soap operas.

The implausible, occasionally contradictory time schemes of soap opera are evidenced in the week of "As the World Turns" under consideration. A scene toward the end of Friday's show has Margo, Maggie, and Lyla saying goodbye to Lyla's son, Craig. The three women -a lawyer, a policewoman, and a nurse-have spent the entire day at Lyla's waiting to hear about Craig's job interview, itself a rather improbable use of time for three working women. When he leaves, Lyla notices that a baby photograph at which Craig had been looking is missing from its frame. She asks the two other women about it, and the scene ends. The following Monday's episode begins apparently where Friday's program left off, with the women just discovering the missing photo and starting to discuss it.

However, the phone rings, and when the caller asks where Craig is, Lyla responds, "He left 35 or 40 minutes ago." Apparently, this scene is set a good deal later than the end of Friday's scene. Had Monday's scene been broadcast directly after Friday's it would have seemed strange, but since the weekend separates them it's doubtful any viewer would notice the missing "35 or 40 minutes."

Such a temporal gap may not be large, but it does indicate a more general component of soap opera's temporal style: time is manipulated, but only *between* scenes and, especially, between shows. This temporal manipulation may result in either *extended* or compressed time. On the one hand, diegetic time may be drawn out; entire scenes may even be repeated shot for shot. On the other hand, diegetic time may also be elided. One segment might end with the characters heading for bed; the very next scene following the commercial break could be the following day. Indeed, soap opera may even construct a time frame that is apparently contradictory when examined closely, but which seems to make sense while viewed. Thus, even though the time within a scene adheres strictly to real time constraints, the time between scenes and between shows is quite malleable, shaped to fit conventional dramatic demands.

This intersegment malleability is facilitated by television's highly segmented nature. Though there must be absolute consistency *within* a particular segment—as in the temporal structure of the individual scene—there may be considerable variation in the time scheme *between* scenes. Television assumes pragmatically that the viewer may not have seen the previous segment and may not see the succeeding one.²⁵ Consequently, the relationship between scenes is less causal than the classical cinema or the conventional nineteenth-century novel, where the narrative is assumed to be "*a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time*" (Bordwell and Thompson).²⁶ In television, the narrative "links" are very loosely soldered together, forming a chain that is more dependent upon simple succession than causality. In this regard, soap opera is the apotheosis of television. Its numerous diegetic lines (approximately twenty on "As the World Turns" currently) demand a flexible time scheme in order to facilitate the many activities that are occurring at the same diegetic time; i.e., within a similar present tense. As Brunson notes regarding "Crossroads," "There is no single linear time flow." She continues, "The different present tenses of the narrative co-exist, temporally unhierarchised."²⁷ Individual scenes—small parcels of present tenses, as it were—marshal the viewer's attention for the scene's duration, setting her or him in a rigid real-time scheme. The next scene, however, is still another small parcel, and one which may bear little relationship to the previous one. Indeed, it may well contradict the present tense of the past scene. No present tense is given greater priority in the world of soap opera, because the hierarchy that exists in, say, classical cinema has been mostly dismantled.

The 4,800 hours of "As the World Turns" are broken down into largely self-sufficient scenes—each lasting just under two minutes on the average." Using the week under consideration for some specific figures, one can note that the twenty scenes of a typical day are distributed in seven segments of narrative

action -averaging five minutes, fifty-one seconds each (ranging from four to eight minutes, approximately)-which are interrupted by six commercial breaks, and concluded with one segment of final credits. Out of each 58.5 minute daily program (from the beginning of the first pre-credit scene to the end of the copyright credit), 17.5 minutes are devoted to non-narrative material. Hence, some 30 *percent* of each program is actually extradiegetic material. It is small wonder that soap operas have proven to be the financial backbone of the television networks for decades.

Soap opera time is compartmentalized into self-sustaining individual units of scene, segment (diegetic and extradiegetic), and single day's program. The relative strength of the division between each of these units is signified by the device used for the transition. Transitions from scene to scene within a segment are almost invariably achieved with straight cuts, while the conclusion of a segment is marked with a fade to black- to facilitate movement from a diegetic segment to an extra-diegetic one or vice versa. The end of the day's program is also marked with a fade to black. Dissolves are seldom if ever used between units, though they do occur occasionally within a scene for an "artistic" effect. In making use of these various transitions to make temporal breaks, soap opera is employing conventions inherited from the cinema. Depending on the context, a *cut* can signify immediate succession of the two images joined-or it can mean an indeterminate amount of time has passed. A *fade*, in contrast, signifies a substantial ellipsis. As we shall see, certain audio elements work to pull the viewer across those boundaries, but the basic principle remains one of segmentation.

Soap Opera Sound. The soundtrack is a crucial component of soap opera. As radio soap opera has already proven, the genre can do quite well without any visual accoutrements. Even today it is entirely possible to "view" TV soap opera without actually seeing it; indeed, there are many who listen rather than watch (for example, while they move from room to room cleaning a house, or on a radio at work where a TV is unavailable). Soap opera's emphasis on dialogue is evidenced in most of its scripts, which contain very little specific action and few, if any, camera positions. In a practical sense, the images are constructed to illustrate the words, rather than vice versa. Heath and Skirrow have noted, "The problem for television as institution of images is then the constraint of the image, its ideological currency constantly to be maintained: the commentary must be accompanied, the screen *filled*."³⁰ In this regard, sound "precedes" the televisual image. As Ellis has argued, television appeals more to our desire to hear than our desire to look: "In psychoanalytic terms, when compared to cinema, TV demonstrates a displacement from the invocatory drive of scopophilia (looking) to the closest related of the invocatory drives, that of hearing."³¹ Instead of demanding the sustained gaze of the cinema, Ellis continues, television requests only that its viewers occasionally glance in its direction, when summoned to do so by signals from the soundtrack.

Assuming the primacy of sound in television, we can articulate specific

stylistic patterns that characterize the soap opera's use of dialogue, music, and "sound effects." Of these three, dialogue has proven to be the dominant concern for those who have written on the genre. Most of this material has focussed on dialogue's preponderance at the expense of physical activity. Ellis's comment typifies thinking on the subject: "It [soap opera] is massively composed of talk; conversation, speculation, confrontation, chat."³³ This has been borne out by content analyses, such as Natan Katzman's 1970 study of "Characters and Conversations": "Almost everything that happens in soap operas takes the form of verbal activity. One indication of this was the fact that of 884 locations coded, only 9 were clearly not indoors, while 690 were in homes, offices, or hospitals. The characters talk, and talk, and talk."³⁴ Although of late those soap operas which seek a more youthful audience have begun to incorporate more adventure stories and less talk, the basic principle remains the same: Characters suffer and discuss their suffering. If we accept the dichotomy between doing and suffering, action and passion that Geoffrey Nowell-Smith traces from classical tragedy in his discussion of film melodrama, then soap opera has inherited the legacy of "passion" from the cinema.³⁴ In scene 13 from "As the World Turns," Jay and Marcy do not actually do anything beyond talking about what one *should* do to attain love, companionship, and happiness. Additionally, the "actions" they discuss (Jay hurting his friends; Marcy pursuing Kirk) are themselves principally verbal actions rather than physical ones. In soap opera, talk is the main topic of conversation.

An analysis of the content of soap opera dialogue is well outside the purview of this study, but I would like to offer a few observations on the interdependent relationship of dialogue style, editing, and syntagmatic narrative form.³⁵ Dialogue functions as one of the most common and most significant devices for overcoming the segmental nature of television and concatenating one scene to another. As a result, it strongly effects the operation of televisual style. Dialogue constructs a question-and-answer pattern. It may be as explicit as one character asking where another might be, followed by a cut to that character. More often, a character will simply mention another in a style which suggests that there is some question surrounding what that character might do. Dialogue continually acts as the catalyst for new enigmas in the never-ending narrative chain that is at the very heart of the genre. This eternally confounded hermeneutic works its way into soap opera's smallest narrative unit, the single scene. Small questions are answered while larger ones are held in abeyance. Thus the soap opera does not so much continuously withhold resolution, as it does parcel out incomplete pieces of closure. And, as we can see in the way dialogue is manipulated, those pieces of closure always construct the foundations of new enigmas.

Melodrama has been as closely associated with music as it has with words. The term itself derives from the eighteenth-century theatrical tradition of melos (music) drama. Judging from the parodies of soap opera such as "As the Stomach Turns" of "The Carol Burnett Show," circa 1969, organ music is as closely identified with the genre as is the mountain of verbiage. In many parodies, the

type of music and the style of narrative are actually those of radio soap opera much more than those of contemporary television programs. Rising organ and resonant announcer voicing queries (from "Our Gal Sunday": "The story asks the question, Can this girl from a mining town in the West find happiness as the wife of a wealthy and titled Englishman?")³⁶ have been replaced by pseudo-rock rhythms, plaintive solo guitars and pianos, and copyrighted popular songs—as is evident in scene 13 from "As the World Turns." Narrative television has only recently begun incorporating rock music as performed by its original artists, such as the Pat Benatar tune that begins the scene.³⁷ Previously, rock-style music performed by studio musicians had been the standard on the rare occasions when rock music was necessitated by the narrative—say, when characters visited a discotheque. Indeed, until the late 1970s soap operas generally avoided rock music, considering it inappropriate for their older, conservative audience.³⁸ The frequent use of rock music on today's soap operas, as well as on traditionally conservative sports programs, indicates that this musical style has finally achieved general acceptance. It also reflects the interest of the networks in more youthful consumers.

Even though the style of soap opera music has evolved, its function has largely remained the same. Music, more than any other element of *mise-en-scène*, is responsible for setting the mood and marking intense emotions. In the scene under consideration, for example, the instrumental music, consisting of a strong drum beat and a style of electric guitar associated with contemporary dance music, begins 132 seconds into the 184-second scene and continues until it quickly fades out at the cut to the next scene. Although it clearly marks the escalation of the scene towards its emotional climax, once that climax passes (shot I3), the music does not diminish. It continues to mount until the very end of the final shot, fading out at the same time that the scene cuts to the following scene (of a woman practicing piano) and fades in piano music; the rock theme actually impinges slightly on the succeeding scene. So, the rising musical theme, a conventional, stylistic use of music, serves a dual narrative function, signifying both the segment's conclusion and drawing the viewer into the next segment. As with the dialogue, music generates narrative momentum—in an attempt to counteract segmentation. Just as there is music "left over" when the scene ends, so do several narrative elements remain unresolved: Will Jay reconcile with Kirk? With Frannie? Will Marcy make Kirk fall in love with her? It is critical to the soap opera form that emotions are never quite fully discharged; traces always linger. As Laura Mulvey has written about film melodrama, a certain excess remains— "an excess which precludes satisfaction."³⁹ Some emotion has been drained off, but, as the music suggests, emotional undercurrents continue to flow throughout the day's program. In scene 13 the conflict between Jay and Marcy reaches a temporary resolution, but it is only a resolution within larger enigmas.

A Conclusion that Precludes Satisfaction. An image of what might be called the soap opera apparatus is just now emerging from the haze of critical abuse

and academic disdain that has long concealed the genre. Clearly, style is a fundamental component of that apparatus- a significant and signifying element. Style validates television's illusion of immediate presence and hence certifies the world presented as "natural" and naturally for the viewer. Soap opera style also transcends television's segmentalized nature. Although editing patterns construct self-sufficient narrative units, a specific manipulation of dialogue and music propels the story forward, beyond segmental boundaries, and beckons to the viewer to stay tuned. Small, almost self-contained narrative pieces are revealed, while larger issues remain in limbo. In this fashion, style serves the critical function of nurturing and maintaining the genre's diegetic enigmas.

There are still many questions to be posed about style's position in the soap opera apparatus. What is the significance of the expressionistically stylized representation of dreams, fantasies, and flashbacks in soap opera-a popular device for recapitulating diegetic information? Could this use of style signal the return of the ideologically repressed? Are the ideological contradictions presented in these sequences actually sanitized by being marked as "other" than "reality"? As has been argued for Sirk's melodramas, could the genre consist of texts "which seem at first sight to belong firmly within the ideology and to be completely under its sway, but which turn out to be so only in an ambiguous manner"?⁴⁰ And what is the viewer's relationship to style? Will that relationship change in the years to come as videocassette recorders with their ability to "scan" through commercials and uninteresting diegetic segments become more and more common?

Finally, this study has intentionally privileged the approaches of authors as committed to film analysis as they are to television research. I believe our understanding of soap opera can benefit from the methods of sound and image analysis developed in film studies—if the film scholar can learn to cope with the quite distinct auidal and visual style of soap opera, a style uniquely adapted to the preservation of enigmas rather than their resolution. Moreover, an eye trained to read the cinema can learn from soap opera, for there is much in this genre that contradicts narrative film's most cherished assumptions about narrative form and auidal/visual style.

Notes

1. See, for example, E. M. Gade, "Representation of the World of Work in Daytime Television Serials," *Journal of Employment Counseling* 8 (March): 37-42; Charlotte Brunson, "'Crossroads'- Notes on Soap Opera," *Screen* 4, no. 22 (1981):32-37. For an annotated bibliography of writings on soap opera, see Patricia Tegler, "Bibliography," in *Life on Daytime Television: Tuning-In American Serial Drama*, eds. Mary Cassata and Thomas Skill (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1983), 187-202. Ann Kaplan has also compiled a pertinent bibliography on television in general. See E. Ann Kaplan, "Selected Bibliography," in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches-An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan, (Los Angeles: AFI Monograph Series, 1983), 139-47.
2. Developments in this area have been well documented by Jane Feuer and Annette

- Kuhn. See Feuer, "Melodrama, Serial Form and Television Today," *Screen* 25, no. 1 (January/February 1984):4-16; and Kuhn, "Women's Genres," *Screen* 25, no. 1 (January/February 1984):18-28.
3. Tania Modleski, "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Opera: Notes on a Feminine Narrative Form," *Film Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (Fall 1979):12-21. Now incorporated in Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (New York: Methuen, 1982).
 4. Laura Mulvey, "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama," *Movie* 25, no. 1 (Winter 1977/78):54.
 5. Ellen Seiter, "Eco's TV Guide-The Soaps," *Tabloid* 6 (1981): 43.
 6. In this theoretical context even soap opera commercials may be analyzed in terms of their narrative effect. See Sandy Flitterman's use of Christian Metz's "Large Syntagmatic Category"-Sandy Flitterman, "The *Real* Soap Operas: TV Commercials," in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches-An Anthology*, ed. Kaplan, 84-95.
 7. The BFI's informative though short monograph on "Coronation Street" also concentrates predominantly on narrative form. Richard Paterson does provide some thoughts on the "stylistic rhetoric" of the serial, but the brevity of his articles does not allow for sufficient elaboration. See Richard Dyer, Christine Geraghty, Marion Jordan, Terry Lovell, Richard Paterson, and John Stewart, *Coronation Street* (London: British Film Institute, 1981).
 8. See especially Brunson, Dyer, Flitterman, Geraghty, Kuhn, Lovell, Modleski, Seiter; and (cited below) Derry, Ellis, Feuer, Heath, Skirrow, Allen. To clarify my own training and prejudices: I perceive television through the filter of a graduate education in cinema studies and several years experience teaching the same, as well as courses on soap opera.
 9. Almost thirty explanatory frame enlargements were prepared for this essay, but permission for publication could not be obtained from both actors, Marisa Tomei declining.
 10. Charles Derry, "Television Soap Opera: Incest, Bigamy, and Fatal Disease," *Journal of the University Film and Video Association* 35, no. 1 (Winter 1983):8.
 11. *Ibid.*, 9. Charlotte Brunson takes this notion a step further by arguing that "the action of the soap opera is not restricted to familial or quasifamilial institutions but, as it were, colonizes the public masculine sphere, representing it from the point of view of the personal" (Brunson, "Crossroads," 34).
 12. The significance of setting has informed much work on cinematic melodrama—beginning with Thomas Elsaesser's observation that certain 1950s melodramas use "setting and decor so as to reflect the characters' fetishist fixations" (Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," *Monogram* 4 [1973]:10). It has also informed Jane Feuer's analysis of nighttime soap opera, specifically "Dynasty" (Feuer, "Melodrama, Serial Form," 8-10). Although some daytime soap operas have aspired to the glamour of conspicuous consumption in their decor, the genre's settings remain remarkably barren—using only the bare necessities to preserve naturalism.
 13. See David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979) 84-86.
 14. Feuer, "Melodrama, Serial Form," 10.
 15. Sirk's films have this problem.
 16. The image of actors/characters in soap opera is a complex and unique one, quite unlike the cinema or theater. Space does not permit a full discussion of it here.
 17. See the discussion of "cinematographic properties" in Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art*, 99-150.
 18. John Ellis, *Visible Fictions* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 106.

19. Feuer, "Melodrama, Serial Form," 11-12.
20. In cinema studies, shot-counter shot has been at the center of highly controversial Lacanian incursions into textual analysis. Interested readers should see Daniel Dayan, "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema," *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (Fall 1974):22-31; and William Rothman, "Against 'The System of the Suture,'" *Film Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (Fall 1975):45-50. Both are reprinted in William Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).
21. For a more detailed explication of film editing and the 180-degree system, see Bordwell and Thompson, 151-84. For a broader application of these film-based concepts, see Herbert Zettl, *Sight Sound Motion: Applied Media Aesthetics* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1973), 292-325.
22. Brunson, "Crossroads," 35.
23. Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow, "Television, a World in Action," *Screen* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1977):53-54.
24. Derry, "Television Soap Opera," 6-7.
25. Ellis observes, "The segment is self-contained in TV production partly because of the fragmentary nature of much broadcast TV (especially if it carries spot advertising), but also because of the attention span that TV assumes of its audience, and the fact that memory of the particular series in all its detail cannot be assumed" (Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, 148).
26. Emphasis in original, Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art*, 50.
27. Brunson, "Crossroads," 34.
28. The erosion of scene-to-scene diachronic causality in soap opera leads to a narrative form quite distinct from (some would say inferior to) classical film and the traditional novel. Robert C. Allen has argued, however, that although this syntagmatic structure of soap opera may be seen as one-dimensional, the genre articulates a surprisingly "elaborate paradigmatic structure." Indeed, a synchronic consideration of character relationships reveals a dense layering of potential meaning that is fully decipherable to only the most dedicated viewer. (See Robert C. Allen, "On Reading Soaps: A Semiotic Primer," in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches-An Anthology*, ed. Kaplan, 102-3.) Moreover, drawing on Levi-Strauss, one may posit thematic oppositions structuring these paradigmatic relationships. Richard Paterson and John Stewart, for example, maintain that the British soap opera "Coronation Street" emphasizes three structural oppositions: inside/outside, male/female, and work/no-work (Richard Paterson and John Stewart, "*Street Life*," *Coronation Street* [London: British Film Institute, 1983], 84).
29. The average length of an "As the World Turns" scene during 18-24 July 1984 was one minute, fifty-five seconds. The longest scene ran five minutes, fifty-three seconds; and the shortest, thirteen seconds.
30. Heath and Skirrow, "Television, a World in Action," 19.
31. Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, 137.
32. *Ibid.*, 157.
33. Natan Katzman, "Television Soap Operas: What's Been Going on Anyway?" *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (Summer 1972):209.
34. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Minnelli and Melodrama," *Screen* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1977):115.
35. Dialogue is also an integral component of Allen's intricate paradigmatic structure of character relationships (Allen, 103).
36. Quoted in Madeleine Edmondson and David Rounds, *From Mary Noble to Mary Hartman: The Complete Soap Opera Book* (New York: Stein and Day, 1976), 45.
37. As late as 1978 and "WKRP in Cincinnati," the inclusion of songs by their original artists was considered innovative.

38. Although 18 to 34-year-olds (the target audience for rock music) also constitute a large segment of the soap opera audience, more than 50 percent of the genre's viewers are over 35 according to studies done in 1970 and 1980. See Katzman; and Mary Cassata and Thomas Skill, "Television Soap Operas: What's Been Going on Anyway?-Revisited," in *Life on Daytime Television: Tuning-h American Serial Drama*, eds. Mary Cassata and Thomas Skill (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1983), 160-63.
39. Laura Mulvey, "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama," *Movie 25* (Winter 1977/78):56.
40. Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," in *Movies and Methods*, ed. Nichols, 27.