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Never Too Much: The Everyday Implausible in American Daytime Soap Opera Aesthetics, 1930 to Today

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I assert that a contradictory aesthetic has remained and been reborn in the U.S. daytime soap opera through time and technology; I call this the "everyday implausible." Using textual analysis and archival research, I follow this genre from its beginnings on radio, through its move to television and its attempts to situate itself in a digital viewing context, focusing my attention on the transitions from one medium to another. The everyday implausible captures the way in which the genre operates in two opposing modes simultaneously, one of which reflects the banality and realism of everyday life and the other of which is implausible and more extreme (larger, louder, closer, etc.). I claim that the contradictory and simultaneous features of the everyday implausible function as both comfortable and unsettling and radical and reactionary. In this way, soap operas reframe the possibilities and potential of women's everyday lives while simultaneously positioning the viewers back within a normative, patriarchal structure. I explore how identification, negotiation, hesitation, and transformation are all embedded in the everyday implausible and are reflections of the effort it takes for the soap opera's women audiences to make a place for themselves where they are enough without being too much. The everyday implausible is an escape from the negotiation and hesitation implicit in the everyday lived experiences of women within patriarchy. It is, simultaneously, the aestheticization of that negotiation and hesitation that capitalist patriarchy demands. My analysis focuses on the aesthetics of women's popular culture in order to both challenge how we determine standards of "good" and "bad" programming and to consider what kind of media transitions are facilitated or stymied in a streaming context. The purpose of this project is to contextualize the aesthetic of the daytime soap opera—one that has become an object of such ill regard to contemporary media audiences—and identify its significance as an aesthetic of marginality.

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For all intents and purposes, this project began in 1998 when Diane Fanega patiently explained every ongoing storyline on *General Hospital* so that I could go home over winter break and "catch up." Diane has been my cheerleader ever since. She (and my other Girls' High girls) introduced me to daytime soap operas and matched me in my enthusiasm for nighttime teen dramas, showing me the importance of thinking about and talking about television and putting me on the path toward this project. Many years passed before I revisited daytime soap operas, but my curiosity eventually brought me to the University of Warwick, where I was surrounded by brilliant

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Introduction

It is late at night, and Kathy Grant, who has been in residence at a long-term care facility for months now, is scared, desolate, and lonely, worried about the safety of her late-term pregnancy and anxious about the fallout of the lies she told her husband and family about who the baby's father really was. Kathy, in her sleeplessness, turns on a light switch, hears a foghorn in the distance, and lifts up the telephone receiver to prepare to make a call. As she does so, she speaks her thoughts out loud, "I can't sleep. Eleven-thirty and I haven't closed my eyes."[1] For many of those following Kathy's story in this 1953 episode of *The Guiding Light*, all but the last line had to be imagined as they listened on the radio. For the rest, who were watching on television, Kathy's late-night wandering was made real by actor Susan Douglas Rubes—except the dialogue, which was deemed unnecessary and cut for TV. Aural cues meant to spark the listeners imagination paired with verbal affirmation turned to fully realized visuals as daytime serials transitioned from radio to television. In both media, the formal aesthetics of the program—similar yet different from one medium to the next—were used to express not only the physical setting but also this woman's intense emotion and inner turmoil. The foghorn, for instance, communicated that it was late at night in a remote location, but it also served a psychological purpose, hinting at Kathy's feelings of isolation and disquiet. Kathy's emotions could not be contained by sleep or stillness; instead, she was forced out of bed by concerns about her past mistakes, her romantic future, and the safety and well-being of her family. Here, Kathy Grant's experience captures the essence of the daytime soap opera and its audiences: emotion, too big to be contained, expressed verbally, aurally, and visually over multiple forms of media.

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[1] Agnes Nixon, *The Guiding Light* script, April 20, 1953, Agnes Nixon Papers, Northwestern University Archives, Chicago, IL.

In 1953, Kathy was not the only one worried about her future. In fact, the entire soap opera format was shifting from one medium to another, and its survival was in jeopardy. Just a few years earlier, during the run of their short-lived television serial *These Are My Children*, director Normal Felton wrote to soap opera doyenne Irna Phillips, "Somewhere within me I feel quite a great emptiness, a vacant place that I can't quite fill at present. The future holds great promise however, and I am filled with unbounded confidence in my future in television. It is inevitable that you must continue to build your place in the new medium."[2] Like Kathy, Felton felt empty but saw hope in the future, for him, for Phillips, and for daytime serials. And Felton's hope was not disappointed. While this letter was written during Phillips's first, unsuccessful attempt at television, three years later she would begin the multi-decade television run of *The Guiding Light* and then *As the World Turns* (CBS, 1956-2010) four years after that. Television proved to be a largely stable home for the outsized emotions of daytime soap operas and their audiences. However, once again, the future holds great promise, and once again, the survival of soap operas is in jeopardy, unsure where its place will be in the ever-changing new media landscape.

Through these medial shifts, though, the soap opera is still capturing the unbounded emotions of women and tying familiar experiences of everyday life to implausible narratives and excessive aesthetics. The soap opera is, in so many ways, a contradiction. Phillips, who created the form, understood them to be "predictable" in the ways they mirror everyday life and "unpredictable" in the same way—just as interpersonal relationships are. C. Lee Harrington quotes the opening and closing lines of the original bible for *As the World Turns*:

> *Opening lines (excerpt)*: As the earth turns, we know the bleakness of winter, the promise of spring, the fullness of summer, and the harvest of autumn. As the earth turns, the cycle of life is completed. What is true of the earth, nature is true also of man. He too has his cycle, as the earth turns. *Closing lines (excerpt)*: This, then, is

[2] Norman Felton, Letter from Norman Felton to Irna Phillips, February 27, 1949, Irna Phillips Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

> the broad base of our storyline.... It might well be said that the life of each one of us is a serial story.... The experiences of these [fictional characters] are as predictable as the changing seasons, and as unpredictable as nature itself.[3]

As Phillips understands it, soap operas are contradictory—predictable, unpredictable, ongoing, and ever-changing. The complexity of everyday life imbues the daytime soap opera with its own complexity, one that is driven by everyday experiences complicated by the unpredictability of time, nature, and human emotion.

This project works to make sense of the visual and aural contradictions embedded in the daytime soap opera aesthetic and—in turn—explore the contradictory lives of the soap opera listener and viewer. These aesthetics communicate a story to and about their audiences. So much of the joy and the pleasure of soap operas is in their entirely unchecked, unfettered, and unrepentant ability to take up as much space as they would like. Not surprisingly, this willingness to be extreme reads to many as ridiculous or silly. But to others, soap operas provide an opportunity to feel and express in excess. The world of the soap opera serves as a kind of safe space, in which phones and doorbells ring out loudly and frequently, an affective score reveals and revels in the fact that there is often nothing really wrong, and ordinary emotional conversations go on literally forever. In addressing the complexities of confused and ever-changing parentage, Mimi White notes, "The precise nature of what is wrong remains unspecified: too much romance, too much family, or perhaps simply too much story, generating all those hours of television produced and consumed on a regular basis, accumulating events over the course of years in such a way that it becomes nearly impossible to keep track of what has happened."[4] Soap operas are too much in so many ways, and yet there is no such thing as too much. There is not a limit to emotions or repetition or

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[3] C. Lee Harrington, "The ars moriendi of US Serial Television: Towards a Good Textual Death," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 16, no. 6 (2013): 586.
[4] Mimi White, "Women, Memory and Serial Drama," *Screen* 35, no. 4 (1994), 339.

closeness. Even when the excess becomes uncomfortable, it is still unquestioningly part of the daytime soap opera story world, as it has been for nearly a century. No matter what the women of the soap opera audience may be told in their everyday lives, in this diegetic space, soap operas and their viewers are never too much. This repetitive, excessive, familiar, and uncomfortable aesthetic is what I call the "everyday implausible."

In the chapters that follow, I identify and define the everyday implausible. In doing so, I argue that, even as soap operas have shifted with industrial and commercial structures and the changing nature of the everyday lives of women, the affective weight of the daytime soap opera aesthetic has not. In the U.S., women have always been—and remain—bound by the norms of a patriarchal society that rarely values their expertise or labor. By naming this aesthetic, I name the contradictions embedded not only in the daytime soap opera but also in the everyday experience of women in patriarchy. I contend that the everyday implausible reflects this struggle; at the same time, I assert that it reflects and relies on the expertise of its intended viewer by privileging subjectivity and emotional intelligence and resisting a singular interpretation of reality. By focusing on the soap opera as texts and looking at them over the near century that they have existed, I present a new interpretation of and perspective on these programs, one that names the specific complexities seen and heard in the production values of the daytime soap opera.

The Everyday Implausible

> One reason the idea of women watching soaps may be so disturbing is that it asks us to reformulate the frameworks through which women's experience and pleasure have been understood. It shows us that the emotional and the rational are not mutually exclusive realms at all, that the distinctions between reality and fantasy, reason and imagination, are not so precise. If fantasy and reality, fiction and truth,

> can exist simultaneously and intersect, each essential to the other's existence, then the assumed dichotomies between them are really false.[5]

According to Louise Spence, soap operas collapse the distinction between reality and fantasy, truth and fiction, allowing these supposedly mutually exclusive concepts to coexist. Soap operas are constantly in motion, shifting between realism and implausibility, often within the same scene. They rely, on one hand, on everyday settings like houses and hotels and hospitals, commonplace concerns like interpersonal relationships at home and at work, and visual verisimilitude; on the other hand, they are wildly implausible, relying on sensational scores, constantly overblown emotional expression, and plot developments like abruptly changing family ties and global crime syndicates based in sleepy little towns. The contradiction embedded in the everyday implausible, which is carried by the aesthetics and narratives of the soap opera and reminiscent of the contradiction in women's everyday lives—the collapsing of the rational and the emotional—has remained and been reborn in the soap opera through time and technology. While some scholars have explored ways in which the soap opera reflects the everyday lives of women and others have addressed the importance of the formal conventions of soap operas, not enough have brought these together. Naming this aesthetic and the fundamentally contradictory work it does allows us to identify the traits that have moved through daytime soap opera since its inception. In addition, bringing aesthetics in conversation with hegemony creates more room for future scholars to consider how intersectional identities and experiences can be included within mainstream media.

Using textual analysis and archival research, I consider the American daytime soap opera transmedially, focusing my attention on the transitions from one medium to another. Its narrational

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[5] Louise Spence, *Watching Daytime Soap Operas* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 6.

and formal practices are integral to both its address and its appeal to women first on radio, then on television, and now in a digital viewing context. The everyday implausible captures the way in which the genre operates in two opposing modes simultaneously, one of which reflects the banality and realism of everyday life and the other of which is implausible and more extreme (larger, louder, closer, etc.). At the same time, this aesthetic has failed to find a foothold in the streaming spaces that have proliferated in the last decade. My analysis focuses on the aesthetics of women's popular culture in order to both challenge how we determine standards of "good" and "bad" programming and to consider what kind of media transitions are facilitated or stymied in a streaming context. In doing so, I raise questions about what might be lost with the waning role of the American daytime soap opera, especially given its prominence across multiple modes of media over the last century. The purpose of this project is to contextualize the aesthetic of the daytime soap opera—one that has become an object of such ill regard to contemporary media audiences—and identify its significance as an aesthetic of marginality.

The everyday implausible refers to a variety of interlocking features, contradictory and simultaneous, creating an aesthetic—and its effects—that function as both comfortable and unsettling. In this contradiction and simultaneity, the everyday implausible is radical and reactionary at the same time, reframing the possibilities and potential of women's everyday lives while simultaneously positioning those possibilities back within a normative, patriarchal structure. In the chapters that follow, I will look at how this aesthetic comes into play at different moments in soap opera history. Embedded in the everyday implausible is identification, negotiation, hesitation, and transformation, all reflections of the effort it takes for the soap opera's women audiences to make a place for themselves where they are enough without being too much. These different examples represent different aspects of this aesthetic, but they all consider the potential,

the possibility, and the contradiction of soap operas as marginal and mainstream media simultaneously. The soap opera—over time and across and within media—creates and simultaneously rejects a new vision of what the world could be.

To explore this, I consider how the soap opera aesthetic functions—and has functioned throughout its history—in multiple, contradictory ways at once, creating a look and sound that is at once everyday and implausible. It is often ridiculous and, at the same time, often "real," and in doing so defies standard definitions of "good" and "bad." Instead, it resonates with the complex and contradictory needs of its viewers. Almost every soap opera scene relies on the same kind of aesthetic makeup to become equally extraordinary and equally quotidian. As a result of this repetition and flattening, the extraordinary necessarily becomes the ordinary; both are embodied in the same visuals, sounds, characters, and narrative features, constantly imbuing the everyday lives of contemporary daytime soap operas with both everydayness and implausibility. Conversation, for instance, often functions as both realistic and implausible—sometimes even in the same moments. It is one of the most ordinary, everyday tasks on soap operas (both in terms of its frequency and its familiarity), but it is also imbued with excessive repetition and awkward exposition. The consistent inconsistency that is revealed in the formal conventions of the soap opera is part of what allows the genre to somehow be written off as outrageous and boring at the same time.

The everyday implausible is an aesthetic of emotional realism, visually and aurally portraying emotions in a realist way, even while embedded in implausible storylines. Addressing the women readers of romance novels, Janice Radway explains that there is an inconsistent perspective on realism, in which the reader can identify a story and its settings as "real" even while claiming the narrative arc is implausible. This reflects the readers' "ambivalent attitude toward the

reality of the story."[6] The soap opera viewer is invited to have a similar kind of ambivalence, in which the implausible narrative works in tandem with emotions and interpersonal relationships that *feel* real. On radio, television, and beyond, the aesthetic features flout everyday possibilities for emotional expression but still limit the characters to the spaces and places of everyday life. Time is also a factor. The everyday implausible holds a sense of ambivalence and hesitance because, without a resolution in sight, there is always a possibility that feelings, identities, and knowledge can change as new information is revealed.

The investment in the plausibility of implausible things may be a response to an ambivalence about the world. Lauren Berlant addresses the fact that women "worry about what it means to live within the institutions of intimacy, across all kinds of domestic, laboring, cosmopolitan, rural, and political spaces, but they worry even more about what it would mean not to be framed by them."[7] Here, she gets at the ways in which ambivalence is necessary and people often live in the spaces between wanting to belong, wanting to resist the oppression and disappointment of hegemonic structures, and not being able to imagine a world outside of those structures. The soap opera and the everyday implausible speak to a viewer—a woman—living in between, who feels out of place but is not able to reenvision or restructure the world around her. This viewer is both comfortable in her world and uncomfortable in it. The wide-open, boundless, and sometimes lawless spaces of the soap opera are more open to non-normative structures and experiences. This does not necessarily make them more progressive, but it does open up new possibilities and potentialities. As Elana Levine writes in her recent volume on the subject, "Across the continuing history of American broadcasting, the daytime soap opera has carried such

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[6] Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Raleigh, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 187.
[7] Laura Berlant, *Female Complaint* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 27.

promising, and precarious, possibility."[8] The everyday implausible is imbued with exactly this promise and precarity, an escape from reality and a hope for more and better to come, wrapped in the mainstream and commercial packaging of the daytime soap opera.

The world of soap operas, while often shrouded in moderation, has also been a radical one. This is a space where the characters can express infinite emotions without being chastised or judged. They can spend their time exploring and developing a range of close interpersonal relationships—romantic, platonic, and familial. This diegetic world of emotions and intimacy provides the viewer with an opportunity to first experience thoughts and feelings and then discuss feelings with other, as viewing is often followed by detailed discussions with fellow viewers. Emotion is rarely deemed excessive and does not disqualify a character or viewer from being a competent partner, professional, colleague, or community member. Essential to the everyday implausible is a radical-reactionary cycle, in which a new, progressive vision of the world is always embedded in the capitalist patriarchy. It offers escape while also exploiting and denigrating soap opera viewers and keeping marginal voices on the margins. In the soap opera, woman's voices and emotions are not simply important but essential, taking precedence over the concerns of men. By focusing on moments of transition and the impact they continue to have on the genre, I will argue that the aestheticization of both emotion and negotiation is maintained in the daytime soap opera, even as audiences, culture, technologies, and modes of distribution and reception shift.

To do this work, I take as a given the vast body of soap opera scholarship that deemed soap operas and programming for women as substantive and provocative feminist objects. I believe this remains true, and yet there is more work to do. In particular, I want to complicate ideas that soap operas are either progressive and feminist media texts *or* regressive objects of the capitalist

[8] Elana Levine, *Her Stories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 16.

patriarchy. I believe they are always actively both. Angela McRobbie is dismissive of subversive media practices as feminist work because of the fear that it will make women complacent rather than critical of capitalist structures.[9] This cannot be overlooked in the analysis of daytime soap operas and their audiences. Soap operas are—definitionally—a product of the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (to quote bell hooks). The imagined women audiences of soap operas are marginalized in important ways but hold a lot of cultural power, as women who are often (or at least imagined as) white and who have always been a primary market for consumer sales.

It is not now, nor has it ever been, enough to say that American daytime soap operas are subversive. Even when exploring storylines that advocate for sexual autonomy and gender equality for women, they can still be regressive, disinterested in, and disengaged with meaningful identity politics. As queer characters, trans characters, and people of color are brought into the landscape, they are just as quickly asked to fit in to the patriarchal structures that define the world, without considering continued histories of oppression in deep and ongoing ways. In a world where the working class, the middle class, and the obscenely wealthy interact and intermarry without many distinctions between classes or class culture (except for the occasional discussion of debt or ability to make millions of dollars available instantaneously), there is a flattening of difference across the spectrum. This post-difference attitude is embedded in the history of the genre. As Gerd Horton notes about *The Guiding Light*, "From early on, Phillips also used every possible opportunity to emphasize that 'all races and creeds can live as neighbors' in melting-pot communities like Five Points."[10] At the time, this investment in a multiplicity of ethnic representation was progressive. Over the last 50 years, daytime soap operas often took the lead in showcasing progressive issues

[9] Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change* (London: Sage Publications, 2009).
[10] Gerd Horton, *Radio Goes to War* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 150.

on television, showcasing concerns like interracial relationships, the AIDS crisis, and gentrification. Yet they often fail to think about race and identity in sophisticated ways, inducing the problematics and erasures of a post-racial perspective, even as diversity remains prized. Often, the soap opera is less invested in exploring identity and alterity and more interested in presenting diversity and representation in banal and generic ways. It centers women's lived experiences, and yet still keeps most marginal voices on the margins or out of the narrative entirely. That does not, on the other hand, preclude soap operas from doing meaningful and subversive work.

As a form of negotiation, simultaneity, and marginalization, the everyday implausible echoes some of the logics embedded in Ralina Joseph's term "strategic ambiguity."[11] Joseph identifies the process by which Black women creators and performers are forced to negotiate racism, anti-racism, and post-racial interventions—often having to walk the line between all three simultaneously. Strategic ambiguity is about a lived experience; the process of coping with the intersectional oppression of Black womanhood while maintaining a public voice and the power that comes with it. This lived experience is represented in the actions of Black women creators and *also* in the work that they create. The whiteness that is present in soap opera writers' rooms, casts, and audiences cannot be overlooked. The everyday implausible is a privilege, and the potential to escape invisibly into hegemonic structures is represented; but it is also the aestheticization of negotiation. The formal aesthetics of soap operas represent a lived experience in which personal emotions and public expectations are often out of sync. In *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, Catherine Rottenberg writes,

> Thus, if liberalism is *constituted* through a spatialized gender division and interpellative identification, no woman who aspires to emulate the unencumbered individual can ever completely succeed: for subjects interpellated into society as women, there will always be a remainder, a constitutive "primary" failure, given

[11] Ralina L. Joseph, *Postracial Resistance: Black Women, Media, and the Uses of Strategic Ambiguity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2018).

> the discursive identification of womanhood with domesticity, family, and the private realm. Thus, emancipated womanhood is, in some very basic way, a contradiction in terms.[12]

Those who can never be unencumbered may still have power and privilege, but there will always be a remainder, a disconnect; soap operas provide a potential escape from this. Yet, the failure remains. The contradiction at the heart of the everyday implausible is the discomfort in this remainder—making this awkwardness, this failure, both audible and visible.

Daytime Serials in Transition

Daytime serials began airing on U.S. radio in 1930, with Irna Phillips's melodrama *Painted Dreams* and the comedy program *Clara, Lu, 'n' Em*. Both shows were broadcast on the radio for over ten years, a sign of the longevity soap operas continue to enjoy, both as a genre and within individual programs. One of the first and most successful daytime serials to transition from radio to television was *The Guiding Light*, which was created by Phillips and broadcast on radio from 1937-1956 and television from 1952-2009. *The Guiding Light* took time to transition fully to television, broadcasting on both radio and television daily during the four-year period from 1952-1956. Daytime soap operas have experienced spikes and declines in popularity since the 1930s. One such spike took place in the 1980s and into the 1990s, when there was an uptick in younger viewers, including college students. The decline in viewership in the early 2000s was swift and mighty. After nearly two decades on radio and almost six on television, *Guiding Light* was canceled in 2009, followed by *As the World Turns* (CBS, 1956-2010), *All My Children* (ABC, 1970-2011), and *One Life to Live* (ABC, 1968-2012). Collectively, those four programs enjoyed almost 200 seasons on television. Today, there are only four American daytime soap operas

[12] Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), 49.

remaining: *General Hospital* (1963-) on ABC, *Days of Our Lives* (1965-) on NBC, and *Young and the Restless* (1973-) and *The Bold and the Beautiful* (1987-) on CBS.

As a broadcast genre, soap operas have experienced unprecedented longevity, witnessing a wide variety of social and industrial changes. In the 1950s, soap opera underwent the first big test of its durability, as it moved from radio to television. It did so slowly, but successfully, while maintaining many of its signature features—from the everyday sound effects on the soundtrack to the daytime time slot aimed at women at home. In the 1960s and 1970s, the daily schedules of the soap opera audience began to shift, and in the 1980s and 1990s working outside the home became more common for American women. Today, television viewing practices have changed radically, with an abundance of viewing platforms and channels, time-shifted viewing becoming more common, an increased role of video sharing sites and social media in promotion and viewer engagement, and a move for many away from broadcast television and toward streaming. *All My Children* and *One Life to Live*, for instance, tried to find a new home online after their network television cancellation, but the attempts were short lived. The 2010 book *The Survival of Soap Opera* explores and explains efforts by networks and soap opera producers to respond to these cultural and industrial changes, often noting hopefully (but unconvincingly) that perhaps these attempts were not too little or too late.[13]

These technological, industrial, and social changes have also been reflected in the formal conventions of the programming, representing the soap opera's past and future in the present. As scholars have contended, media transitions are about multiplicity rather than sudden change, with multiple eras and technological interventions getting layered on top of each other. David Thoburn

[13] Sam Ford, Abigail de Kosnik, and C. Lee Harrington, *The Survival of Soap Opera* (Jackson, MI: University of Mississippi Press, 2011).

and Henry Jenkins note, "Old media rarely die."[14] Instead, they are changed, adapted, and built into the new media. Thorburn and Jenkins suggest that we "resist notions of media purity."[15] Further, "Their original functions are adapted and absorbed by newer media, and they themselves may mutate into new cultural niches and new purposes. The process of media transition is always a mix of tradition and innovation, always declaring for evolution, not revolution."[16] Media forms are built over time, on top of rather than in opposition to each other. Thorburn and Jenkins work is a helpful reminder that digital viewing is still shifting, changing what television is and how it will impact soap operas and other genres that have been evolving.

The work of Thorburn and Jenkins builds off of that of Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, who introduce the concept of remediation, in which new media forms value immediacy and hypermediacy at the same time. Immediacy seeks "to put the viewer in the same space as the objects viewed" and asks them to ignore the mediation process.[17] At the same time, "hypermediated forms ask us to take pleasure in the act of mediation," acknowledging and reveling in multiple forms of mediation within media content.[18] While we certainly see this kind of hypermediation in a digital viewing context—multiple boxes and forms of content visible at once—it is not new. As Bolter and Grusin point out, "Television was hypermediated even before the advent if digital graphics."[19] It borrowed heavily from vaudeville, theater, and film. Though Bolter and Grusin focus primarily on visual media, television also borrowed from radio, bringing the auditory form to the visual one, without ever fully removing the logics of the audio medium. New media are rarely new, but instead layered with the logics, the images, and the content of

[14] David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins, *Rethinking Media Change: Aesthetics of Transition* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 12.
[15] Ibid., 11.
[16] Ibid., 12.
[17] Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 11.
[18] Ibid., 14.
[19] Ibid., 185.

earlier media forms. As soap operas have moved from one medium to another, this kind of layering becomes evident. For instance, the immediacy of radio moves to television, in the form of liveness and domesticity, inviting the listener to move between their home and those of the fictional worlds. The stakes of this invitation shift with the visualization of television, as I address in Chapters 1 and 2.

At the same time, some of the scholarship on the transition from broadcast television to streaming television has expressed a particular nervousness about ways in which it has and will fundamentally change. Amanda Lotz points out that, "The evolving institutional, economic, and technological adjustments of the industry have significant implications for the role of television in society."[20] In particular, the move from mass audiences to niche audiences shifts the ways that communities relate to each other as well as the content they consume. Nonetheless, she argues that even with radical redefinition, digital television still persists and is identifiable as television. Part of this may have to do with television's ongoing role as a medium in transition. William Uricchio notes, "From its start, television has been a transient and unstable medium, as much for the speed of its technological change as for the process of its cultural transformation, for its ephemeral present, and for its mundane everydayness."[21] Nonetheless, like Lotz, Uricchio also sees a fundamental change with digital technologies: "While this has always been television's fate, the present day's convergent technologies, economies, and textual networks have not only subverted many of the assumptions that have until now driven the logics of television but have also transformed the medium's content and cultural place."[22] Uricchio places this fundamental shift in the logics and practices of the thing we call "television" largely on the shoulders of "metadata

[20] Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).
[21] William Uricchio, "Television's Next Generation: Technology/Interface Culture/Flow," in *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 165.
[22] Ibid.

systems and filtering technology," meaning that content that viewers once watched because they "flipped" to is no longer accessible in the same way. In this way, there are logics of television that are disrupted by digital technologies is significant ways.

This confusion between "largely the same" and "fundamentally different" has, in some ways, become a burden for the daytime soap opera and its audiences, as addressed in Chapter 4. In particular, shifts in reception that lead to individualized viewing and a move away from "accidental viewing" change who watches soap operas and how. By looking at content for marginal audiences in moments that are also on the margins, we can begin to see what about the logics and aesthetics are maintained from one medium to the next and what is lost. Even though maintenance in and of itself is not sufficient to determine what is valuable or essential (this must always be balanced with capitalist interests and a host of other circumstances), it is a helpful barometer. Contradiction and formal conventions that convey intense emotions, for instance, seem to remain in the soap opera through any number of changes. By identifying what is maintained in the everyday implausible—an aesthetic that is reflective of and aimed specifically at the soap opera's intended audience—this work serves as a reminder that there are formal conventions of the daytime soap opera (something that is sometimes forgotten) and outlines their qualities or, perhaps, quality. In this work, I argue that the use of contradiction, negotiation, and subjectivity within the soap opera aesthetic is both complex and realist.

The "Bad" Aesthetics of Daytime Soap Operas

This project is in conversation with a large body of feminist television and radio scholarship focused on the daytime soap opera—an array of work that has helped to shape the field of television studies broadly. Soap opera scholarship also became central to the growing field of

cultural studies in the 1970s and 1980s. There was a focus on narrative, realism and implausibility, and audience experience and expertise as central to the soap opera structure. Charlotte Brunsdon, Tania Modleski, Christine Geraghty, Ien Ang, Mimi White, Dorothy Hobson, Ellen Seiter, and others helped to establish this body of literature.[23] This work was in conversation with other cultural theorists and feminist media scholars.[24] These scholars used industry studies and ethnography to explore the form as a complex and contradictory set of feminist texts. Many were also interested in questions of seriality, repetition, and narrative structure as meaningful forms of resistance.

For instance, in "Rhythms of Reception," Modleski, who engaged with psychoanalytic media theory of many feminist media scholars, (per Brunsdon) "argued for the textual inscription of a female (maternal) subject." She wrote about the ways in which the soap opera text serves as a mirror to integrate women to their fragmented domestic existence. Like the domestic tasks of the women viewer's everyday life, the soap opera is fragmented and interrupted.[25] Daytime soap operas, through redundancy, repetition, and frequent interruptions, mirrored the rhythms of women's daily (domestic) work.[26] Modleski's work considers some of the key issues of narrative and narration, namely, the central role of structure, repetition, and timing and frequency of incidents and episodes. While still addressing the fractured and fragmented structures of soap

[23] Many of these scholars published multiple sources relevant to soap operas. Key works will be cited throughout this dissertation.
[24] Much of this scholarship came out of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, UK, including scholarship by Stuart Hall, Richard Hoggart, and David Morley. Other scholars working in this vein, though not directly associated with CCCS, included John Fiske, Janice Radway, and Ien Ang. John Fiske, *Reading The Popular* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989); Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language* (1980); Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-class Life with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1957); David Morley and Charlotte Brunsdon, *The Nationwide Television Studies* (London: Routledge, 1999).
[25] Tania Modleski, "The Rhythms of Reception: Daytime Television and Women's Work," in *Regarding Television* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983), 71.
[26] Ibid.

operas, Martha Nochimson has a different perspective on the feminine narrative structures. Nochimson also moves away from the cultural studies model and concentrates instead on psychoanalytic theory, arguing that the gaps within the structure create a space from which the female subject can emerge.[27] Nochimson argues that the soap opera text is structured for a female viewer, suggesting that the narrative itself is gendered because it resists the fixity and linearity of Hollywood narrative structures. Here, we see some of the ways in which feminist television scholars looked to the text to make sense of the relationship between this women's genre and its viewers.

Formal elements, such as sound, camera movement, mise-en-scène, space and location, and narration, are central to understanding daytime soap operas and the ways in which they make meaning. Certain aural and visual conventions that are associated with the soap opera include the zoom-in to a long-held close-up, a melodramatic score, and repetitive and expository dialogue. Repetition in dialogue, narrative, and structure are key to understanding the form, as are the serial and intertwining storylines. While many of these formal conventions may not seem unique to soap operas, I would argue that—in U.S. broadcasting—they all largely either began with or were further popularized by soap operas. More recently, serial and intertwining narratives have become nearly ubiquitous, moving to other genres (often ones deemed "quality" television) and allowing more and more of what daytime soap operas brought to television to be borrowed by other types of programming.

And yet, despite the significance of the aesthetic practices and the large body of relevant scholarship, there have rarely been systematic studies of the formal and aesthetic elements of U.S. daytime soap opera. Soap operas, as the paradigmatic "bad object," are often considered too

[27] Martha Nochimson, *No End to Her: Soap Opera and the Female Subject* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 35.

insignificant to be worthy of analysis. Robert Allen, whose work serves as an exception to this norm, points to the soap opera's role as "antiart": "Indeed soap operas occupied discursive space so far outside the boundaries of normative aesthetics that they could be used as the *sine qua non* of antiart, the parody of true art, the 'soap opera.' But simply to recount the derogatory comments made about soap operas and the manner by which the term was used to berate other narrative and dramatic forms would not enable us to understand the meanings of soap opera within aesthetic discourse."[28] Somehow, this perspective by scholars, critics, and the public, that Allen calls out and objects to, has gone largely unchanged in the nearly 40 years since this was written. For instance, in an effort to explain daytime soap opera's unique aesthetic, an author on the trivia website Mental Floss unabashedly proclaimed: "Soap operas, 'soaps' or 'my stories,' as many a grandmother has called them, are dramas presented in a serial format on daytime television or radio. […] They also, you probably remember, looked really really crappy."[29] The American daytime soap opera has an aesthetic that is immediately recognizable—and is a nearly universal target of derision. This idea is one that is persistent; even as critics and viewers find other aspects of daytime soap operas to laud, their look and sound is nearly universally considered to be valueless and beyond analysis—with little concern about the fact that this aesthetic has been popular and meaningful enough to remain part of the American media landscape for decades.

Like Allen, I disagree with the premise that soap operas are not worthy of aesthetic analysis. Indeed, it is their aesthetic that is especially compelling. Many television scholars have been invested in defining what is and is not "quality" television, landing on a wide range of

[28] Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 12.
[29] Matt Soniak, "Why Did Soap Operas Look Different From Other TV Shows?" *Mental Floss*, July 12, 2010, https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/25169/why-did-soap-operas-look-different-other-tv-shows.

perspectives.[30] "Quality" television may be high-brow or "cinematic" television, determined by authorship or audiences or aesthetics. But, as Michael Newman and Elana Levine suggest, taste standards are often used to reproduce patriarchal forms of oppression. More productive is to think outside of normative definitions of "good" and "bad."[31] These oppressive standards come up in sound scholarship as well. In particular, James Lastra's discussion of the problems with fidelity in recording and playing back recorded sound is useful here. First, to make claims of fidelity, one must have a standard by which it is set. He argues, "'Good' and 'bad' are obviously defined by what each feels a proper representation should look like in each case."[32] And, furthermore, if one understood that "all practices of audition are equally constructed, there would be no valid reason for suggesting that one socially constructed practice grounds the discussion and evaluation of all others."[33] Sound in any space and on any recording is mediated by various contextual factors.

Like audition practices, other aesthetic practices are equally constructed, based not on objective standards but social and contextual ones. He continues, "The sonic differences to which we attribute significance are always contextually determined, hence no single context provides a reference point for theorizing all others."[34] This call for contextualization in understanding what is "good" and "bad" may be usefully applied to other aesthetic practices, which are also contextually determined. Soap operas, for instance, have a specific context, one that relies on their history on radio and as a women's genre. To consider the aesthetics of soap opera as "good" or

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[30] Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley, eds., *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Michael Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Angelo Restivo, *Breaking Bad and Cinematic Television* (Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Robert Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997).
[31] Newman and Levine.
[32] James Lastra, "Reading, Writing, and Representing Sound" in *Sound Theory, Sound Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 68.
[33] Ibid., 70.
[34] Ibid.

"bad" is to miss the role its history and its audience play on both the development and the significance of this aesthetic. Soap operas are often written off as unrealistic or absurd. But that assumes that realism and authenticity and even production values are contextless. In fact, these exist within a relational interplay between the object, the audience, and the social conditions in which they are consumed. In this dissertation, I am attentive to the format's visual and auditory practices apart from evaluative labels, and I consider instead the dissonant but productive ways in which these practices function.

Another way that soap operas have been dismissed and disregarded has been by calling them "unrealistic." As a result, soap opera scholarship has frequently investigated this question of realism, often addressing the complexities and contradictions contained therein. Some of these have to do with the kind of negotiations and logics performed by Radway's romance readers mentioned above. Like soap opera viewers, these readers can maintain a feeling of realism while simultaneously acknowledging a lack thereof. Ien Ang's work on emotional realism in *Dallas* finds similar results and is explained further below.[35] Early soap opera historian Mary Edmondson was also preoccupied by the question of realism and viewer engagement with implausible narratives. "Many aspects of the real world are ignored in Soapland"—including work, religion, politics, and hobbies, according to Edmondson.[36] She offers one possible explanation for why viewers put up with this—one that relies on aesthetics: "In a true soap, a realistic background is essential. If the breakfast eggs sizzle authentically in their pan, the audience will more willingly believe the subsequent breakfast conversation, no matter how improbable."[37] She suggests that certain sounds

[35] Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London, UK: Routledge, 2015).
[36] Madeleine Edmondson and David Rounds, *From Mary Noble to Mary Hartman: The Complete Soap Opera Book* (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1976), 16.
[37] Ibid., 35.

allow the situation to remain grounded in reality and the everyday even as the storyline and the dialogue move into the absurd. This tension is at the heart of the everyday implausible.

Other scholars also offer possible ways to reconcile this confusion between realism and implausibility. Modleski suggests one that relies on repetition. She proposes that something out of the ordinary—the frequent repetition of the same conversation—provides those conversations with a sense of verisimilitude. While this frequent repetition is perhaps unusual or awkward on television, repetition (whether it be repetitive daily tasks or repetition of the same conversation) is, in fact, ordinary in the real lives of the soap opera viewer.[38] Here, Modleski suggests that exactly the aspects that make the soap opera seem absurd—like repetitive and overly expository conversation—are the ones that are most reminiscent of real life for soap opera viewers. Ang has yet another approach to this problem, also grappling with the contradiction between realism and implausibility in soap operas.[39] In response, Ang presented the idea of *emotional* realism, in which she found that the viewers could relate to the emotional landscape of the programs, even if the characters' specific experiences were unfamiliar. "It is striking; the same things, people, relations and situations which are regarded at the denotative level as unrealistic and unreal, are at connotative level apparently not seen at all as unreal, but in fact as 'recognisable'."[40] Ang goes on to explain that this recognizability comes out of a sense of emotional realism, in which the emotions resonate to viewers as familiar and real, even if the actual narrative does not. Realism and the essential contradictions that lie within it have been taken up and taken on within the field in a variety of ways.

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[38] Modleski, "Rhythms of Reception," 73.
[39] While Ang was writing largely about Dallas, which was nighttime rather than daytime programming, her work has frequently been used in reference to soap operas of all dayparts and seems especially relevant here. The concept of emotional realism remains relevant, even if the time of day is different.
[40] Ang, 42.

By giving attention to the aesthetics of this genre, I work to explicitly argue against the claim that the lack of "artistic merit" developed by soap operas makes their aesthetics unworthy of analysis. In 1985, Robert Allen calls attention to the myth of the soap opera viewer as an "intellectually and imaginatively impoverished 'lower-class housewife' whose interests extended only as far as her own front door and whose life of mindless tedium was relived only by her daily immersion into a fantasy soap world which she frequently mistook for reality"—despite empirical evidence proving otherwise.[41] The implication in this myth is not only that this lower-class, intellectually impoverished listener or viewer should not be taken seriously, but also that a worldly, diverse, multicultural, and multi-class soap opera audience would be. Both points rest on failed assumptions. The women audiences at whom soap opera were aimed were never going to be taken seriously and, at the same time, the needs and pleasures of the lower-class housewife have value. The ability to see this value read out of the soap opera text is about further coming to terms with the patriarchal ideologies embedded in our tastes and critiques. Women at home were not necessarily anything: not necessarily lower-class, not necessarily in their own homes, and definitely not too stupid or silly to understand the difference between fantasy and reality—which does not mean they were not eager to escape their own reality. Burdened with possibilities for reality that may never be achieved, soap opera aesthetics represent an escape from the oppressive system of domestic and emotional labor done for others but rarely for oneself.

Soap Opera Audiences

The distaste for soap operas and soap opera aesthetics is very much wrapped up in the dismissal of the soap opera's women audiences. Soap operas have always been considered

[41] Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas*, 25.

television for women by advertisers and by the general public; they are also perceived as low-brow and trashy. This particular relationship has been explored by feminist media scholars for decades.[42] Charlotte Brunsdon says it perhaps most concisely: "I have always been conscious of the way in which what women and girls like is somehow *worse* than the equivalent masculine pleasures."[43] For many scholars the disdain for the genre is evident. As Brunsdon asks rhetorically: "Perhaps soap opera has such low cultural status not because it is any more trashy than war movies or westerns but because the people who watch it have less cultural power?"[44] Outside of scholars and the audiences themselves, there is little to no appreciation for the taste or cultural competence of the genre's viewers, and there is a total disregard for the extensive expertise that these viewers command. But this expertise is real and it is often passed from one viewer to the next, conveying the huge amount of historical and extra-textual information on which soap operas rely, while building community at the same time. Reevaluating this aesthetic depends on establishing the importance of expertise in television viewing broadly and soap opera viewing specifically.

Soap opera viewers are defined by their textual knowledge, reception practices, and by the text itself. Brunsdon, for instance, argues that the soap opera demands a range culture competencies that are based in the skills of an implied feminine viewer.[45] This gendered audience is implied through "programme publicity, scheduling and advertisements" and through the cultural competence expected from the soap opera narratives and structures.[46] Brunsdon delineates three categories of competencies demanded by soap operas, including generic knowledge, serial-specific

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[42] Robert Allen, for instance, argues: "On the one hand, the soap opera is the most successful broadcast advertising vehicle ever devised; on the other, it is among the most disdained forms of popular culture of the last half century. At the crux of the paradox, I argue, lies the 'gendered' nature of the soap opera's appeals and popularity." Robert C. Allen, *To Be Continued--: Soap Operas Around the World* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 7.
[43] Charlotte Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes* (London: Routledge, 1997), 2.
[44] Ibid., 27.
[45] Ibid., 17.
[46] Ibid., 13.

knowledge, and cultural knowledge: It is "the culturally constructed skills of femininity—sensitivity, perception, intuition and the necessary privileging of the concerns of personal life—that are both called on and practiced in the genre."[47] By privileging emotions and prioritizing interpersonal relationships, the soap opera expects a specific kind of expertise from their audiences. This sensitivity and emotional intelligence is usually mapped onto woman; it is also an expertise that is often overlooked or ignored by society at large. Being concerned with personal lives is not a value—it is simply what women do. Indeed, too much emotion or emotional intelligence is often denigrated in public or professional settings. Not so in the soap opera, where too much emotion is unheard of, and viewers with these competencies are courted rather than dismissed.

The soap opera not only values certain types of expertise, but also provides a path to build and develop community. Scholars like Hobson, Ang, and Seiter used audience research to speak directly to the viewers to try to understand the relationship between soap operas and the (mostly) women audiences who watched.[48] By speaking to and analyzing the responses of individual viewers, these scholars were able to consider issues of feminism and the everyday, of community building through viewership, and of fan practices and production. Community was built between those who watched the programs together and also between those who watched separately. Geraghty, for instance, writes that "community is not simply present in the soaps themselves, it is also experienced in the interaction between the programmes and their audience. Soaps offer a common currency to viewers which permits the enjoyment to be shared between those who do not

[47] Ibid., 17.
[48] Dorothy Hobson, *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera* (London: Methuen, 1982); Ellen Seiter, Hans Borchers, Gabriele Kreutzner, and Eva-Maria Warth, "Don't treat us like we're so stupid and naïve: Towards an ethnography of soap opera viewers," in *Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

watch the programmes together."[49] Active engagement with the text became a trademark of soap opera fans, though it was just as often leveraged against them by the public to portray them as dupes and out of touch with reality. Scholars worked to adjust that particular stereotype, in part by addressing the importance of collecting and trading knowledge about the stories and their histories.

Multiplicity and vast amounts of information are central to fan practices as well as soap opera viewing practices. To fully make sense of any given episode, expert soap operas viewers are asked to keep track of the multiple storylines going on at once within an episode, the history of the program that informs the viewer's knowledge of the current storylines and characters, and their understanding of the conventions of the genre. All media users come to any text with certain expectations and backgrounds, but the sheer volume of historical knowledge contained in a daytime soap opera is on a different scale from most other texts. Much of Henry Jenkins's work is focused on clarifying and defining what fandom is; in particular, he understands it as a mode of cultural interpretation and production, as a social and communal activity, and as a practice that relies on a depth of information about the fan texts and about the culture of fandom and fan communication. In *Tune In, Log On*, Nancy Baym sees similar traits in the soap opera fan. In particular, she talks about the role of early online message boards and soap opera fan communities. These online communities became popular in part as an antidote to the vitriol and judgment lobbed at soap fans for appreciating (and having vast knowledge of) "bad" daytime soap operas.[50] Baym also observes the importance of creative speculation from soap fans; in suggesting or suspecting what will come next, soap opera fans participate in productive and creative acts—and ones that rely on their expert knowledge of the text.[51] Both Jenkins and Baym value the kind of creativity

[49] Christine Geraghty, *Women and Soap Opera: A Study of Prime Time Soaps* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 324.
[50] Nancy K. Baym, *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2000), Vol. 3, 41.
[51] Ibid., 83.

and community that can be developed through fan participation on digital platforms. But acts of creativity and community from fans predated message boards, chatrooms, and social media, and the atomization of digital viewing can be isolating for soap opera audiences, shutting down these kinds of engagement as well as opening it up.

Intimacy and Audition on Radio and Television

In rethinking soap opera aesthetics and how they reflect the experience of their audiences, I am especially interested in questions of soap opera sound, both on radio and television. The intimacy and immediacy of broadcasting is carried by the soundtrack in both media, inviting the listener into the domestic and personal lives of the soap opera story world on a daily basis. In an effort to contextualize and understand the aesthetics and aesthetic history of daytime soap opera, this project will intervene in the field of sound studies and growing bodies of scholarship on both radio and television sound. There is a range of work on listening audiences and how broadcast sound has both positioned audiences as a mass or community and created expectations for them as individuals. The soap opera's roots in radio make its soundscape complex, with layers of audience address and changing technological histories all embedded in contemporary programming. Across media, soap opera sound has played an important role in driving the narrative, telling a story to the soap opera audience not just visually but also aurally.

Early radio scholarship largely focused on industrial and infrastructural histories of radio, cataloguing technological developments and federal oversight. This includes Robert McChesney's *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy* (1995) and Erik Barnouw's three-volume

history of U.S. broadcasting.[52] The first two volumes in this series cover the history of American radio broadcasting, including the development of radio technology and during its "Golden Age." Less common were works that analyzed radio aesthetics—however, Rudolph Arnheim's 1936 text *Radio* did just that.[53] Published while he was living in Italy (after leaving Germany and before moving to the United States in 1940 to escape the Nazis) this volume is a detailed and comprehensive overview of radio aesthetics written by a practitioner at the time that radio served as the primary mode of mass communication. His detailed analysis of radio sound and the tools that were used to create it is both personal and invaluable.

Over the past few decades, new scholarship in radio studies has reinvigorated the field, including work by scholars such as Michele Hilmes, Jason Loviglio, Elena Razlogova, Neil Verma, Jennifer Stoever, Shawn VanCour, and Andrew Bottomley—just to name a few.[54] In some ways, Hilmes's *Radio Voices*, which argues that radio has been all but ignored in media histories, helped to usher in a new era of radio studies. Hilmes takes a cultural history approach to the medium, exploring how the voices on the radio help to create a mass identity for the listeners at home. In particular, this work addresses the perception of ethnic identities and the part that played in politics of immigration; the importance of radio to shifting ideology regarding U.S. patriotism;

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[52] Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, Volume 1* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, Volume 2* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); Robert McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[53] Rudolf Arnheim, *Radio* (1936).

[54] Andrew J. Bottomley, *Sound Streams: A Cultural History of Radio-Internet Convergence* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020); Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Jason Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Elena Razlogova, *The Listener's Voice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Jennifer Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Shawn VanCour, *Making Radio: Early Radio Production and the Rise of Modern Sound Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Neil Verma, *Theater of the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

and the central role of women in production and in the development of network programming, advertisement, and schedules.

Radio Voices also focuses specifically on daytime serials, and tells the story of how daytime programming for women—and serials in particular—was siloed and coded as low-brow, commercial entertainment so that the nighttime schedule could be positioned as quality, non-commercial entertainment.[55] Echoing the sentiments in sections above, Hilmes contends that "the most prevalent temptation was to dismiss them as simply trash."[56] Instead, Hilmes investigates how radio serials got this reputation and the role that network schedules and advertising played in developing it. Radio soap opera, which was so central to the radio schedules in the 1930s and 1940s, has been addressed by a range of scholars. These include Arnheim, Loviglio, Jacob Smith, Cynthia Meyers, Jennifer Wang, and Susan Douglas.[57] Much of this work either addresses serials simply in passing; others look at them from a cultural and historical perspective, focusing on industrial and commercial structures. This scholarship furthers our understanding of soap operas as commercialized programming for women, focusing on emotion and the sale of home goods, but also explores soap operas as programming that is often misunderstood.

The role of radio as a domestic medium is mirrored in the ongoing significance of domesticity in soap operas. On both radio and television, serial settings have not been limited to domestic spaces, but the focus on domestic and interpersonal relationships remains, even when narratives move to public settings. As radio entered American homes, so did stories from around the world, both fiction and non-fiction. In *Radio's Intimate Public*, Jason Loviglio focuses on

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[55] Hilmes, *Radio Voices*.
[56] Ibid., 170.
[57] Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Cynthia Meyers, *A Word from Our Sponsors: Admen, Advertising, and the Golden Age of Radio* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Jacob Smith, *Vocal Tracks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Jennifer Hyland Wang, "'The Case of the Radio-Active Housewife': Relocating Radio in the Age of Television," in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002).

precisely this, addressing how radio complicated ideas of public and private, blurring the lines between the two: "Nowhere was this process more elaborate, more self-conscious, and more foundational than on the radio airwaves of the 1930s and 1940s. Radio, this book argues, was an apparatus that helped produce a new kind of social space—the intimate public—in which the terms 'public' and 'private' came to represent a complex web of social performances perpetually in play rather than distinct and immutable categories."[58] Radio let the public world in, bringing political debate and public figures into the home. But it also let the private world out, with serials and other programming bringing the domestic stories of one (fictional) home into another and into public spaces, where radios were often on. While domestic novels and newspapers previously allowed private stories to circulate within the home, the immediacy of having stories voiced into the living room day after day and year after year was new. The mutability of the public and private was also built into the narrative of the daytime serial and continues to be seen in the daytime soap opera today.

In recent years, more "Golden Age" radio programming has become available not only through institutional archives but also through digital circulation online. Internet Archive and other sites that provide access to OTR (old-time radio) content allow collectors to sell, trade, and showcase the audio they have archived. As this greater wealth of programming becomes more readily available, more in-depth textual analysis has become possible. In particular, Neil Verma's *Theater of the Mind* (2012) is situated in deep listening afforded by a wealth of available programming. As Verma notes, "Radio has always seemed a poor candidate for theorization precisely because we associate it so strongly with the imagination."[59] In response, theorizing the aesthetics of radio becomes Verma's central project. Focusing on radio plays and anthology

[58] Loviglio, xvi.
[59] Verma, 9.

dramas, his work argues that radio used complex sound design to create and cultivate listening experiences that worked with and were about the mind. Jennifer Stoever also ties cultural history to textual analysis, focusing on quality of sound to challenge conventional wisdom about what racialized voices sound like and how those ideas and stereotypes were developed. To do so, Stoever introduces the concept of the listening ear: "The listening ear [...] is a figure for how dominant listening practices accrue—and change—over time, as well as a descriptor for how the dominant culture exerts pressure on individual listening practices to conform to the sonic color line's norms. Through the listening ear's surveillance, discipline, and interpretation, certain associations between race and sound come to seem normal, natural, and 'right.'"[60] Stoever both practices and encourages deep listening in an effort to revise narratives of race and racialized voices on radio. She is invested not only in listening as a form of resistance, but also in the ways resistance was aestheticized on radio. The aestheticization of resistance and the relationship this has to listening audiences is an investment I engage with throughout this project.

In the 1940s and 1950s, genres developed on radio were transitioned to television, including quiz shows, talk shows, news, and nighttime anthology dramas, alongside soap operas. In this way, television sound is linked to the medium's history; it also serves to guide the audience and produce affective responses. Ron Rodman contends that, "At its best, television music can and does act as an agent of signification for characters, settings, emotions, and narrative time in an efficient, convincing, and sometimes clever manner."[61] Yet it is still undertheorized. Even as scholarship develops, it is often focused on music more than any other kinds of sound, ignoring questions of voice, noise, and genre. In *Tuning In*, for instance, Rodman identifies and addresses some key issues in television sound—including highlighting the use of repetition—but, as a

[60] Stoever, 7-8.
[61] Ron Rodman, *Tuning In: American Narrative Television Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 109.

musicologist, his focus is largely on music rather than other aspects of television sound. In the essay "Television Sound: Why the Silence?," Michele Hilmes claims that part of the reason we do not talk enough about television sound in either television or sound scholarship is that we do not yet really have language with which to speak about it. While she begins this work, a more comprehensive effort to create this language has yet to solidify.[62] Michel Chion also begins this task in *Audio-Vision*, though the relative amount of space given to television versus film is indicative of how much work there is left to do.[63]

When addressing television sound, scholars have generally considered the role sound plays in signposting the content for a distracted viewer. Practically, clear aural cues between scenes note to the viewer that a narrative shift is occurring (whether it be into or out of ad breaks or, when relevant, between narrative threads). This allows distracted viewers to be cued as to when they needed to pay attention again. John Ellis argues, "Sound can be heard where the screen cannot be seen. So sound is used to ensure a certain level of attention, to drag viewers back to looking at the set."[64] Sound functions to cue the audience to pay attention. With radio soap operas, the distinct music that brought the viewer into a new program or scene served as an important aural cue that something different was about to happen. This practice continued in the early years on television. Like Ellis, Rick Altman makes a similar claim about attention, "The sound track thus begins to take on an active role. In order to keep those sets operating while all viewers are either out of the room or paying little attention, the sound track must perform some quite specific functions."[65] And later: "There must be a sense that *anything really important* will be cued by the sound track."[66]

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[62] Michele Hilmes, "Television Sound: Why the Silence?," *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 2, no. 2 (2008).
[63] Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994).
[64] John Ellis, *Visible Fictions* (London: Routledge, 2002), 128.
[65] Rick Altman, "Television/Sound," in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1986), 42.
[66] Ibid.

According to Altman, commercial television created a soundtrack whose primary role is to keep people's attention: "For example, it must be possible to follow the plot of a soap opera from the kitchen—or the score of a football game from the bathroom."[67] Altman argues that the soundtrack is a way to get the viewer to return to the image, which, in the end, is the important part of television. These claims from Altman and Ellis are useful as a starting point—especially among the limited range of television sound scholarship—but they are also quite limited.

To assume that the entire role of television sound is to cue the audience negates the role of sound as a meaningful aesthetic and the active role of listener engagement. It can simultaneously negate the importance of *visuals* as a meaningful aesthetic. As Allen notes about television soap operas, "One frequently hears that soap operas are constructed not to be watched but to be listened to. This is another way of saying that the 'zero-degree' visual style of soap operas carries no meaning, that dialogue is all."[68] Nonetheless, television sound is far more interesting than simply as a tool for telling the viewer when to pay attention to the image. This becomes especially important as we move away from models of watching television within the network broadcast flow. In circumstances where commercial breaks are irrelevant, what else can the soundtrack do? The notion of television as simply illustrated radio has largely been dismissed, but there is still room for an interrogation of what role television sound plays beyond exposition. In an effort to move away from a model of soap opera aesthetics as meaningless, we must move toward a more thoughtful interplay between sound and the listener.

One way to consider this is to examine the interaction between different layers of sound as well as sound and silence. While Chion overlooks many aspects of television sound, his work on film sound can be helpful in considering television as well: "We can pile up as many sounds on

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[67] Ibid.
[68] Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas*, 69.

the soundtrack as we wish without reaching a limit. […] There is no auditory container for film sounds, nothing analogous to this visual container of the images that is the frame."[69] The television image is equally framed while television sound also lacks a clear "container." In this way, television is no different from film, nor is it necessarily different from radio, as sound need not (and cannot) be contained in any of these media—as much sound can be added as the production allows. As such, sound provides a way for television programming to expand beyond the frame, disrupting the investment in verisimilitude the visuals produce. In terms of television sound, noise and the corresponding concept of silence both have potential yet to be explored. Both the presence and absence of sound is an area worth exploring. In Chapter 1, I explore the important role that silence or underproduced sound had in the radio soap opera soundscape. This area of inquiry has the potential to open up a new dimension to our understanding of sound on television.

Methodology and Approach

To perform the research captured in the chapters that follow, I looked at and listened to the programs themselves, paired with historical and archival research. In investigating these programs, my goal was not to exhaustively seek out all episodes of soap operas ever made. That would have been impossible. Instead, I sought out a sampling of episodes from different programs and time periods throughout the history of the form. In my work on radio and the early years on television, I focused on the programs of Irna Phillips because her work was successful in both media, and transitioned between the two. I also sought out the work of Anne and Frank Hummert, Roy Winsor, and others, to ensure that I listened to a range of soundscapes from those time periods. For a program like *The Guiding Light*, which was on the air for decades, I listened to and watched

[69] Chion, 67-68.

episodes (and read scripts, when available) from different time periods to see how the structure and style changed over time. Throughout this work, I note these distinctions when relevant. Similarly, in researching contemporary soap operas, I sampled a range of episodes, mostly from the current programs, but also ones from the past few decades. In doing so, I found distinct differences both between programs and over time. I also found significant similarities, and it is those similarities that I largely focus on in the second half of this dissertation. I do not try to say what happens every day on every program, but instead what generally happens on most programs. For instance, *General Hospital* and other soap operas will occasionally use a handheld camera to evoke fear or suspense or for reasons that are not immediately evident. But this move is unusual (both within the program and across programs), and because of that, I do not discuss it here, focusing instead on broad trends and techniques that are used frequently and repetitively.

This research also draws on archival artifacts, specifically from the Irna Phillips Papers and the Bridget and Jerome Dobson Papers, both located at the Wisconsin Historical Society, and the Agnes Nixon Collection, located at the Northwestern University Archives. In addition, I draw on a range of media scholarship, including works in film studies, television studies, and radio studies. In particular, I rely on the discourse of scholars who have focused on television and film sound; soap opera and soap opera audiences; medial shifts and transitions; and fan engagement and production. An outline of this literature and relevant interventions have been laid out in the sections above. While my work here is firmly situated in textual analysis of the programming itself, these artifacts and methods also allow me to take a cultural and historical approach, bringing aesthetics into conversation with production, distribution, and reception practices. As many radio and television scholars have before me, I question the boundaries between public and private and the role of intimacy, identification, and imagination in further complicating that.

For many reasons, including their longevity, their popularity, and their largely female audiences, both American and British soap operas have long been of interest to television scholars. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, soap opera became the primary object of study for the burgeoning field of feminist television scholarship. Developing in part out of feminist film scholarship in the U.S. and the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the U.K., the new area of feminist television scholarship was interested in the relationship between the genre's female audiences and the everyday lives of women. Scholarship on soap opera proliferated, working to reclaim and make sense of this historically denigrated genre and using this object of study to understand more about the relationship between women, popular culture, and the home. In the U.S., soap operas were experiencing a spike in popularity in the 1980s and early 1990s—at the same time that many scholars were investigating them. They became essential viewing for many U.S. college students, bolstered by the new VHS technology was quickly making its way into U.S. homes. The new technology also became useful as more women began making their way out of the home and into the workplace. As a result, the genre saw success even as its core audience was supposedly no longer available to view during the original time slot.

I firmly situate my work within this body of feminist media scholarship. At the same time, I work to bring new light to this field, by focusing on a very specific aspect of the form and its history. Despite the impact that soap opera has had on both television scholarship and feminist media scholarship, significant changes in the media landscape and the continued decline in American daytime soap operas mean that there is yet more work to do. Elana Levine's recent work serves as evidence of that. Her focus is a programmatic and narrative history, speaking to the specific (and gendered) context of daytime soap operas while understanding the format to be a metonym for the history of American television more broadly—as I hope to do here. My

investment in soap opera aesthetics in particular—even as the genre is at risk—is political. Ien Ang's work focused on the pleasure of soap opera audiences, but claimed to want to disentangle this from questions of politics or taste.

> The admission of the reality of this pleasure also formed the starting point for this study—I wanted in the first place to understand this pleasure, without having to pass judgment on whether *Dallas* is good or bad, from a political, social or aesthetic view. Quite the contrary; in my opinion it is important to emphasize how difficult it is to make such judgments—and hence to try to formulate the terms for a progressive cultural politics—when pleasure is at stake.[70]

I, on the other hand, see pleasure, taste, and politics as actively and inherently linked, and it is that linkage that I use aesthetic practices to investigate. Allen wrote that "the lack of serious aesthetic attention given soap operas has less to do with their simplemindedness than with the inability of many critics to read them as texts."[71] In many ways, that problem remains. This project, which understands soap operas as cultural texts with a meaningful aesthetic, works to resolve it, taking the pleasure and politics of soap opera texts seriously at one of the many moments in their history in which they may soon change irrevocably.

Chapter Overview

In chapter 1, I consider what kind of listener identification the radio soap opera aesthetic invited. I explore the relationship between the conversational male narrator, sparse sound effects, familial relationships, and emotional dialogue, and soap opera trademarks of domesticity, intimacy, and affect that populated even the earliest iteration of the genre. This combination of voices, everyday sound effects, and often not much else meant that the invisible spaces of radio serials repeatedly created, and then relied on, a sound and a space that was domestic, familial, and

[70] Ang, 12.
[71] Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas*, 97.

emotional. The everyday implausible created a space for the listener to identify with the serials, placing new versions of herself within the narrative and inviting the imagined woman-at-home to reenvision the possibilities of reality. However, reenvisioning reality produced its own set of limitations. The sonic features of the radio serial soundscape created imaginary spaces within the home, but these imaginary spaces were—as often as not—also homes, making the potential of escape wholly illusory. Through its soundscape, radio serials created domestic spaces where there were none and began daytime soap opera's ongoing commitment to emotional production and complex (or, at minimum, complicated) aesthetics.

Chapter 2 catalogues the process of moving soap operas from the imagined domestic spaces of radio to the slightly more literal spaces of television, investigating how the soundscape of the daytime soap opera adjusted during this transition. As the transition took hold, key aspects of the radio soap opera soundscape were transferred and transformed in the new medium, including a maintained emphasis on aurality even with the shift from fifteen-minute episodes to half-hour episodes and the removal of the voiceover narrator. A new emphasis on realism brought about by the new medium was central to this transition. As the format's formal conventions were developed throughout this process, the contradiction and sentimentality embedded in the everyday implausible remained. With that, the form came to aestheticize the ambivalence and negotiation performed by Irna Phillips in her efforts to prioritize realism and emotions at once. In turn, this aestheticized the everyday negotiations of the soap opera audience. With the changes brought about by the apparatus of television, soap operas put an increased value on emotional realism and the emotional expertise of the format's intended audience. This aesthetic developed not only in a moment of transition, but also because of that transition, merging features from both media as it did so.

In chapter 3, I explore the importance of repetition and hesitation in contemporary daytime soap operas. The contradictory aesthetic of the everyday implausible allows for parallel yet dissonant modes of engagement. The key aspects of the soap opera's aesthetic environment that emerge are fairly standard across daytime soap operas: affective music and everyday sound effects; a combination of the close-up, slow zoom, and shot/reverse shot; and fantastic narratives—like unstable parentage—that portray frequently shifting narrative developments. These conventions rely on a sense of the everyday and the extraordinary simultaneously, with narratives and aesthetic features that are realistic and unrealistic at the same time. Daytime soap operas feature repetition throughout the form—in dialogue, cinematography, sound, and music—often replacing narrative closure. Even when narrative developments are revealed, the ongoing storyline leaves open the possibility that that could change at any time. This means that hesitation and an uncertainty about what is true and what will be made untrue are embedded in the aesthetic and narrative conventions. Within the framework of the soap opera, knowledge always requires uncertainty. For the women who watch, this hesitation has the potential to provide comfort and discomfort simultaneously, mirroring the experience of women within patriarchy.

Chapter 4 considers the continuations and transformations as soap operas experience the collision between broadcast television and streaming television. As daytime soap opera aesthetic and narrative conventions intersect with normative digital viewing practices, the format neither disappears nor survives as is. While both the norms of broadcast soap opera viewing and the norms of digital viewing value continuing and serial narratives and viewer control over the viewing experience, there are ways in which these two modes are fundamentally incompatible. At the same time, soap opera conventions have also shifted to other genres and televisual forms. Yet, digital viewing supports the survival of soap opera texts in other ways. Digital platforms have become

useful tools in circulating soap opera expertise and expert knowledge and for active engagement and production by soap opera viewers. Still, as digital platforms create less and less need for communal viewing, the process of becoming a soap opera viewer and, in turn, trading soap opera expertise has fundamentally changed.

In this dissertation, I am writing a history. A history of daytime soap opera, of programming for women, and of American broadcasting. This story is not told through great men or corporations, though; it is told through medial shifts and aesthetics. What I am investigating is not how the process of buying and selling shaped the media products (though, quite obviously, it does and it did), but instead how the products themselves shifted. I am interested in how these changes and stabilities in look and sound give us insight into the audiences that watch them and audiences more broadly. Industrial histories tell one story about how we can make sense of media, media history, and culture; those stories, though, are often shaped by those who have the money and the power to make large-scale industrial changes. This aesthetic history tells the story of the power of listening and watching instead. It considers how audiences defined and are defined by the content they consume and challenges taste cultures and the ways audiences are inevitably limited by those judgements. In an effort to challenge and destabilize what is considered "good" television and what is considered "bad" television, the detailed analysis and investigation of aesthetics that I perform becomes especially important. This attentiveness is a dismissal of an arbitrary hierarchy that favors stories of white masculinity, made by and for a (perhaps imagined) white male audience. Instead, this history lends credence to the opinions and expertise of the (also imagined) women who watch and explores the complex aesthetic practices that have developed—over time

and across media—in a format designed for an audience centered by capitalism but socially on the margins.

Chapter 1:

Feeling at Home: Sound, Affect, and Domesticity in Radio Soap Operas, 1930-1960

As an ad for Dreft dish soap ends, organ music rises and then decrescendos, and a man's voice begins: "Well, yesterday, Liz and Papa Dennis arrived in the little town of Three Rivers where Papa's been offered a church. And although Three Rivers is the tiniest hamlet, and although Papa's salary would be infinitesimally small and the congregation few in number and poor in purse, still, Liz knew instantly that in Papa's heart he wanted to settle here and build a house of God." The organ music ends, and the man continues: "Right now, it's about ten o'clock in the morning, and Liz and Papa have been making a little tour of the town. They round the corner and… well, listen…" And so begins the first episode of Irna Phillips's radio serial *The Brighter Day* (NBC, 1948-1949; CBS, 1949-1956). The first thing heard is the male voiceover narrator speaking directly to the soap opera listener, inviting her to enter the town of Three Rivers and listen in on a conversation between the program's central characters.[1] The episode then follows Liz and Papa Dennis—a minister—as they walk through the new town, exploring and getting acclimated. As Liz and Papa walk, they describe what they see and marvel at the smallness of it all. Occasionally, a brief sound effect can be heard, each creating a new sonic picture within the space: first horses' hooves, then a bicycle bell as they meet up with local newspaperman Mr. Sebastian, later a dog barking, and, eventually, a door opening. With these sparse sound effects and little else, the sounds of the outdoor space are limited. Performance and editing decisions further deemphasize the outdoors: When Liz, Papa, and Mr. Sebastian speak, the performers seem to stay close to the microphone, frustrating any sense of distance that might indicate the openness of being outside.

[1] "October 11, 1948," *The Brighter Day* (NBC, 1948-1949).

Moreover, there is no background sound—no wind or vehicles, for instance—to serve as "room tone." Even the sounds of footsteps that one might expect as Liz and Papa walk through town are missing, creating a feeling of closeness instead of the expansiveness of the outdoors.

As the characters continue exploring Three Rivers, a door suddenly creaks open, Liz drops her voice, and an organ begins to play. Without a change in the quality of sound or explicit exposition from the narrator, these audio features, combined with the dialogue, make it clear that Liz and Papa have gone from the outdoor space of Three Rivers to the indoor space of Papa's new church. As Papa reluctantly expresses his interest in staying in Three Rivers, the male narrator returns to wrap up. "And so, Papa looks about at that bare little room, and Papa's eyes see the glory of our Lord…" Once again, the organ music fades, and the narrator shifts focus: "Well, uh, what do you think of Mr. Cliff Sebastian, newspaper editor? Liz looks over the house, yes, and looks into her own heart. Tomorrow." As the first episode of this radio serial (which would run for eight years) concludes, the listener is brought into direct conversation with the narrator. He asks her to speculate on what she just heard—perhaps even speak to him about it—and to prepare herself for the opportunity to learn more about what is in this young woman's heart. Tomorrow.

This is one episode among tens of thousands that were broadcast on U.S. radio between 1930 and 1960, but the aesthetic features in this episode represent larger trends, combining elements that could be heard across similar radio programs of the time. A conversational male narrator; sparse, utilitarian sound effects; familial relationships; flat, non-descript locations; emotional dialogue; and an invitation into the lives and hearts of soap opera characters: these are the trademarks of the domestic, intimate, affective world that was the earliest iteration of the American daytime soap opera. This combination of voices, everyday sound effects, and often not much else meant that the invisible spaces of radio serials created a close, interiorized sound—one

that was ready to be filled with the familial relationships and emotional storylines of the daytime soap opera. In particular, both silence and voiceover narration encouraged a quotidian yet contradictory aesthetic that allowed listeners to place uncanny versions of themselves within the narrative. These versions were an alternate reality, where family and domesticity remained central, but the woman's role within the household was nonetheless radically different. In the serial, the characters were asked to explore their emotions, placing that work above all else—including, and especially, the mundane physical labor of everyday life. Through their soundscapes, radio serials began daytime soap opera's ongoing commitment to emotional production and affective aesthetics that invite the listener to emote with the text.

In this chapter, I argue that the contradictory and often uncanny aesthetics of "the everyday implausible" assert themselves within the radio serial through the technical simplicity of the soundscape and a persistent narrative and aesthetic tug-of-war between the familiar and the unfamiliar. The everyday implausible is a contradictory aesthetic embodied by bifurcation and simultaneity, allowing for routine and fantasy to be brought to life in the same moments through the same aesthetic turns. This aesthetic created a space for the listener to place new versions of herself within the narrative, inviting the imagined woman-at-home (imagined by the creators and the public) to do the radical work of reenvisioning the possibilities of reality. Like soap opera scholarship that has come before, this aesthetic focus challenges the dismissive sentiment that soap operas were escapist and dangerous, considering further the political possibilities of this escape.[2] However, reenvisioning reality was also a challenge, with its own set of limitations. While the idea

[2] Robert Allen, for instance, summarizes the prevailing notion that the soap opera is deleterious to its listeners and cast them as naïve. Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 25.

of a radically new world held so much potential and promise, it was also limited by the same sparse aesthetics that created it.

The contradictions, potentials, and drawbacks of the everyday implausible can be heard through the time, space, and character types available on radio serials of the 1940s and 1950s. In some ways, the types of characters the soap opera listener was invited to identify with were vast: Regardless of her place in her own life and home, the soap opera allowed her to transform into wife or husband, hero or villain, parent or child, family member or stranger. In other ways, the range was quite stifling: the options presented were also white, housed, and heteronormative. Similarly, the spaces she was invited to occupy provided a fantasy, one that opened up doors but then closed them just as quickly. The sonic features of the radio serial soundscape created imaginary spaces within the home, but these imaginary spaces were—as often as not—also homes. New domestic spaces were brought to life where there were none but also exactly where they already existed, offering listeners the opportunity to reenvision the possibilities of the home while making the potential of this escape wholly illusory. This new reality was also created in time but limited by it as well. Every weekday, for hours each day, the listener could rely on the serials to appear, inviting her to bring this uncanny version of her own world into her everyday reality. Like Brigadoon, though, the serials were fantastic oases that the listener was invited into but that disappeared just as quickly, disrupted by broadcasting schedules and advertisements that served as a reminder of the labor-driven world in which she actually lived. This world seemed like an everyday one, but not quite—at once routinized and quotidian and also implausible, inviting alternate perspectives that were completely outside of the realm of reality.

This chapter explores this relationship between the soap opera aesthetic and the soap opera listener during the nascent—yet already commercially successful—period of the soap opera genre

as it developed on radio. By considering the role of sound aesthetics, I interrogate what the limited aesthetic space of soap operas allowed, even as its fast-paced production schedule may have prevented more complex sound design. In the midst of a strong defense of radio serials and their listeners, Michele Hilmes's *Radio Voices* makes it clear that the mass-produced nature of daytime narrative entertainment in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s meant that critics would never really consider them art nor even really very entertaining: "As many critics pointed out disparagingly, very little humor could be found in the hours of the daytime, so that even the lighter status of comedy did not apply as it could to evening genres."[3] The melodrama of the daytime soap opera was considered the lowest of the lowbrow—without meaning, merit, or artistic aspirations.

In these ways, the aesthetics of the fantastic and feminized spaces and storylines of the daytime serial have often been dismissed or ignored. Because their daily release schedule required them to be put together quickly and cheaply, daytime soap operas were regarded as having aesthetic value that was either incidental or non-existent. The speed with which radio soap operas were created led to a resistance to analysis of soap opera aesthetics, assuming a "bad" and therefore unanalyzable sound that was not worthy of detailed thought. This was in no small part because soap operas were also considered domestic and feminized programming, communicating to their assumed female audiences about topics that were considered mundane and insignificant, like family, domestic relations, and emotions. Nonetheless, these programs took advantage of the sense of intimacy that radio fosters to produce domestic dramas about women's lives—and one of the most popular genres U.S. broadcasting has known. This intimacy was produced through the combination of voices, everyday sound effects, and silence that together create a soundscape that

[3] Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 170.

was domestic, deceptively simple, and effective, bringing the listener close to the personal and emotional conversations of the characters.

While the dearth of sound effects may speak in part to these programs' limited budgets and fast-paced production schedules, it also became central to the creation two of the most enduring features of the American daytime soap opera: domesticity and sentimentality. Because of the emphasis on voices, performance and positioning in regards to the microphone became especially important to building out (or, more accurately, building in) soap opera spaces. Rooms and houses were created simply through the actors' relationship to the microphone, which, in turn, created relationships between the characters and the spaces they were meant to occupy. The only escape from the sound of the home was the male voiceover narrator, who guided the listener through and invited her into the narrative, while also asserting a strong sense of control over the text. From their earliest days, American radio serials have been associated with familial and familiar domestic settings, as well as exhibiting other so-called feminine narrative features, like the primacy of conversation over action and the focus on emotional and domestic relationships. How exactly did this notion of domesticity present itself within a medium that has no physical location and takes up no space? What did this aesthetic of domesticity afford or deny for its supposed female listeners, especially in terms of emotional engagement? And, finally, how did these aesthetics predict, prepare for, and jumpstart a genre that has endured through multiple medial shifts over nine decades? This chapter addresses these questions and begins tracing the aesthetic history of the American daytime soap opera. To accomplish this, I focus on the radio serial soundscape and the room it does and does not open up for listener identification and emotional expression.

The combination of information provided and information withheld by the audio (whether it was for narrative, aesthetic, or industrial reasons) came together to create the unique sound of

the genre, leaving room for the listener to both imagine the fictional yet familiar world and also insert herself into it. The radio soap opera created an aesthetic that transcended everyday possibilities for emotional expression but did not transcend the spaces and places of everyday life. This tension between the extraordinary and the quotidian inherent in the radio serial soundscape began a now almost century-long relationship, one that can continue to be seen in the genre's unusual—and often uncanny—aesthetics. By exploring the relationship between intimacy, imagination, identification, and radio serial aesthetics, one can delineate the ways in which an aesthetic brought about largely through temporal and financial limitations nonetheless encouraged active engagement between the listener and the text. This aesthetic invited the listener to go beyond her own physical and emotional space and enter a fantasy world that was both exactly like and nothing like her own. In focusing on domesticity and familial relationships, but putting a premium on emotions over domestic labor, these programs began the now decades-long relationship in which soap opera aesthetics are both everyday (familiar) and implausible (literally and figuratively unrecognizable).

Intimacy, Imagination, and Identification

To understand how the radio serial soundscape simultaneously opened up and forestalled the creation of imaginary new worlds, it is necessary to introduce the relationship between three terms frequently associated with radio in both scholarship and the public imagination; those are intimacy, imagination, and identification. Imagination reflects the fact that listeners compensate for the lack of visual content by creating images in their heads. Intimacy speaks to the sense of emotional and physical closeness between the content and the listener that stems, in part, from audio's pervasiveness. In addition, the proximity of the performer to the microphone and the

location of the radio itself—which was often inside the home and within reach of the listener—cultivated a feeling that the radio voices were part of the family. This feeling of intimacy alongside potential for the imagination invited the listener to identify with the narratives and characters to which she was listening.

The intimacy of radio is pervasive and multifaceted. The radio listener feels an intimate connection with the voices on the radio; they have been brought into her home, and they sit next to her in her living room. These voices on the radio are invisible, but they are also pervasive. In addition to creating a sense of intimacy between the listener and the radio voices, the sound and technology of radio also generated a feeling of co-presence, a connection between discrete listeners listening in different locations around the region and the country. In his book *Radio's Intimate Public* (2005), Jason Loviglio opens with an anecdote from Saul Bellow about listening to FDR's Fireside Chats out of car windows on the Midway in Chicago: "A sense of intimacy, even domesticity, pervades the scene—men and women smoking silently in the temporarily breached privacy of automobiles. Here, amid the clover of Chicago's Midway, cars 'parking bumper to bumper' with their windows and doors open, Bellow feels 'joined to these unknown drivers.'"[4] Loviglio's text explores an investment in a certain kind of intimacy, one that relies on ideas of community and co-presence.[5] At the same time, this anecdote acknowledges the feeling of domesticity that is enmeshed with intimate and individualized yet communal radio listening. Susan Douglas also addresses this form of radio listening in writing about the early rock 'n' roll disc jockeys in the 1950s and 1960s. She notes that the mode of address, in which the disc jockeys

[4] Jason Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xv.
[5] In *Radio's Intimate Public*, Loviglio considers the relationship between radio's intimacy and politics, focusing especially and productively on FDR's Fireside Chats. Other scholars who address this issue include: Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Hilmes, *Radio Voices*; Bill Kirkpatrick, "Voices Made for Print: Crip Voices on the Radio," in *Radio's New Wave* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

spoke directly to the listeners using first-person and second-person (e.g., I-you) "constructed an imagined—and a real—community."[6] Community building was an effective mode of developing a marketable radio audience, and a sense of intimacy between the host and the listener as well as the listeners and each other was essential to creating a sense of community. This community bonded listeners together as a part of a collective who listened to the same content at the same time. The intimacy of radio created fandoms even as these fans were listening in individuated, discrete locations.

This sense of intimacy was also developed through the physical placement of the radio and the mode of address used in the medium, evidence of the technology and process of production. As early as 1936, Rudolf Arnheim offered suggestions as to how radio production could develop an appropriate sense of intimacy with its listeners. His most salient suggestion was to keep the voices of speakers and performers low, inviting the listener to feel as if they were in direct conversation with the speaker.

> Speaking softly is more appropriate to a peaceful than an agitated state of mind, and is more suitable for the practical presentation of arguments than for stormy haranguing, for dealing with individuals than for addressing a multitude. The latter fact seems to contradict another wireless hypothesis: that the broadcast is always addressed to millions, never to the individual. Now it has often been said that the wireless addresses those millions not as a mass but as individuals. It talks to everyone individually, not to everyone together. This, then, is a further reason why the radio-speaker should proceed softly and as if "a deux".[7]

Arnheim values a sense of intimacy in radio presentation, emphasizing the rhetorical effectiveness of a close and conversational mode of performance, noting that the speaker was always in conversation with the listeners, even as he was broadcasting to the masses. Whether speaking about serials or non-fiction forms of address (as Arnheim is), his explanation of how the voice can be

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[6] Douglas, 237.
[7] Rudolf Arnheim, *Radio* (1936), 72.

used to develop intimate interpersonal connections remains relevant. Radio can allow for a kind of unprecedented intimacy, using a quiet and confidential mode to create a connection between the speaker and the listener.[8]

Jacob Smith further emphasizes the relationship between radio technology and radio aesthetics in creating a sense of intimacy between the radio speaker and the radio listener. "The microphone's ability to capture subtleties of vocal timbre and inflection faithfully opened up the possibility of new forms of performance marked by a quiet intensity and subtle shadings of inflection, suggestive of intimacy and emotional density."[9] Smith suggests that in melodrama a sense of intimacy can be produced in part by the use of a closely held microphone.[10] Because of the nature of radio technology, the quiet intimacy—and family drama—of soap opera could be created through this simple and easily produced technique. Radios themselves are typically near to the listener, yet they themselves create no sense of closeness. The voices on the radio, on the other hand, were spoken apart from us, but their closeness to the microphone can still evoke a feeling of intimacy in far-off locations. Intimacy in radio production and radio listening has the potential to spark the imagination, provoking pictures in one's mind—a concept frequently associated with radio.[11] Radio has long been considered a medium of the imagination, with the listener doing the work to fill in the pictures and images for themselves.[12] Radio sound pervades

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[8] Ibid., 83.
[9] Jacob Smith, *Vocal Tracks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 8.
[10] Smith, 245.
[11] Neil Verma, *Theater of the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 1.
[12] Arnheim categorically disagreed with this idea: "The eye alone gives a very complete picture of the world, but the ear alone gives an incomplete one. So at first it is a great temptation for the listener to 'supplement' from his own imagination what is 'lacking' so obviously in the broadcast. And yet nothing is lacking! For the essence of broadcasting consists just in the fact that it alone offers unity by aural means, not in the external sense of naturalistic completeness, but in affording the essence of an event, a process of thought, a representation. Everything essential is there—in this sense a good broadcast is complete!" Even as Arnheim claims that to envisage a broadcast is to undercut its completeness as an audio text, the idea of curbing a listener's imagination seems both unproductive and impossible. Arnheim, 135.

the listener's personal space—existing not only in the home but also inside the mind. Even if unbidden or unwelcome, the images had the potential to enter the listener's mind, and remain there, developing the town of Five Points or Rushville Center—or anywhere else that routinely entered one's living room—ever more fully each day. The fact that the relationships to these imaginary places grew every day allowed them to exist and to become familiar to the listeners, providing the potential to escape into them.

Even as listeners' connections to these spaces deepened, the range of possibilities for the imagination was also limited by the storylines themselves. Often the voices on radio serials represented a limited segment of the U.S. population, one that was largely white and middle class. When non-white voices were heard on the radio, they were, at best, tokenistic, or, more often, racist caricatures. In post-WWII America, these racialized voices were unlikely to be heard on radio serials at all. National radio broadcasting in its nascent years—which coincided with a time of economic insecurity and global unrest—made private questions of identity public to a degree and extent that was not possible before. As a number of scholars have pointed out, radio programs used ethnic and racialized voices to create a unifying American national identity.[13] But this interest in "unifying" largely resulted in racial and ethnic identities being reappropriated and caricatured on a mass scale.[14] Efforts to incorporate ethnic or racial diversity into an imagined national identity were typically focused on assimilating a diverse population into the white supremacist structure of the American melting pot, often by creating a racialized other.[15]

Even a program like *The Guiding Light*—which began in the "melting pot" town of Five Points—eventually became the white, middle-class, middle-of-the-road program that transitioned

[13] Hilmes, *Radio Voices*; Douglas; Loviglio.
[14] Loviglio, xvii.
[15] Hilmes, *Radio Voices*.

to television. The town was, initially, peopled by a range of characters from different ethnic backgrounds, including the Kransky family, who were Jewish immigrants. Irna Phillips's popular program *The Right to Happiness* began as a spinoff of *The Guiding Light*, with daughter Rose Kransky in the leading role. However, that attempt to center the program around a young Jewish woman did not last long, soon replacing Rose with Carolyn Allen as the leading character. As Jim Cox puts it, "While Kransky was a rational young woman and possessed a heart of gold, Phillips determined that the more engaging personality of Carolyn Allen was better suited to what her listeners wanted to hear."[16] While Cox does not imply that this shift had anything to do with Rose's identity, this transition from the "ethnic" Kransky to the "neutral" Allen was in line with the kinds of changes that radio serials saw in the 1940s, moving from the urban melting pot to the white, suburban nuclear family. When the listener is encouraged to imagine the spaces and places that have entered her living room and to feel a sense of intimacy with the characters that occupy them, she is presented with the opportunity to project herself into these spaces and stories. Still, this ability to identify with the story and characters was limited by the programs themselves. Their invitation to participate was full of potential, creating possibilities for listeners to imagine themselves within unexpected and unfamiliar roles, but it was also limited by the soap opera narratives and characters, who were white, housed, and heteronormative.

Making the Radio Serial

The sparse, flat, dialogue-driven sound that became the radio serial signature and created the opportunities—and limitations—for identification was developed through microphone setup and performance, industrial and narrative structures (which were incentivized to keep costs low

[16] Jim Cox, *The Great Radio Soap Operas* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999), 187.

and sponsorships central), and authorship. This sound began to develop in the earliest days of radio as a mass medium—in part through the work of radio scholars. Arnheim's *Radio* (1936) was published when radio was still in its infancy. Prior to his move to the U.S., Arnheim wrote and published *Radio* using his own work in and knowledge of radio production to explicate and theorize about radio production, as Erik Barnouw does in *Handbook of Radio Production* (1949).[17] Both scholars produced detailed overviews of radio aesthetics and sound design written in the "Golden Age" of radio broadcasting. In one early section header of Barnouw's text, he notes that "radio is not a medium of huge technical complexity."[18] Despite this, he wrote 300 pages on the technical aspects of radio production. It seems that he agreed with Arnheim, who was fascinated by and enthusiastic about the technical complexities of radio production, noting that radio aesthetics are both more difficult to describe and more complex than those of visual media. Both of these books include detailed discussions of the wide variety of microphone and studio setups, the specifics of sound production, and the use of sound effects and music. They also address in detail the role of the performers and crew in creating radio sound, discussing the importance of performance as well as actor positioning in the production of radio programming.

Many of the details and suggestions given by Arnheim and Barnouw involve complicated and varied microphone setups designed to represent a variety of sounds, situations, and spaces. At the same time, Arnheim is well aware of the financial and technical limitations radio programming may be burdened with:

> Scene shifting during the broadcast demands such quick changes that to some extent complicated arrangements are impossible from the start. […] It is neither possible to rearrange things so quickly nor it is practicable to set up all the necessary equipment side by side right away, so that it only needs to be connected up. This would be a very considerable complication to say the least of it, so we make shift with more primitive arrangements which can be retained more or less for every

[17] Barnouw, *Handbook of Radio Production* (New York: Little, Brown, & Co, 1949).
[18] Ibid., 8.

> scene. It does quite well of course, yet in this way the development of radio art is more powerfully retarded than we imagine. For it is always technical possibilities that inspire the artist to new forms.[19]

While Arnheim is sympathetic to the technological and financial constraints of live radio broadcasting, he also believes that these limitations are at odds with artistic aspirations and that programming that is limited by technology will inevitably be limited artistically. Like many commercial programs that were desperate to keep their costs down and their earnings up, soap operas needed to simplify sound production. However, these limitations presented as many possibilities as they foreclosed on, creating sounds and spaces that have their own range of artistic potential. The radio serial in particular turned technological limitations into imaginative participation.

Like much radio programming—and especially daytime radio—soap operas created a sound aesthetic that anticipated a feminized listener, providing content intended for that audience specifically. Hilmes, whose work is motivated, in part, by an effort to write women back into the history of the medium they helped to develop—American radio—is invested in the industrial and cultural factors that allow for different voices to be heard both on and off the microphone. Daytime programming—largely created by and about women—was set in opposition to "quality" nighttime programming. She writes, "What were these daytime serials? The most prevalent temptation was to dismiss them as simply trash, a debased form for deluded minds. Yet, as we have seen, this conclusion taken to its logical extreme ends by condemning as fools an estimated 46 percent of American women (and an unspecified percentage of men)."[20] In an effort to avoid condemning much of the American population as fools, Hilmes investigates the commercial context that created daytime television as a cultural concept. Daytime programming was designed to be seen as

[19] Arnheim, 129-130.
[20] Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 170.

"debased, feminized mass culture" so that "primetime" could more readily be seen as sophisticated and respectable public service programming.[21] This distinction, in which daytime radio is classified as both women's programming and low-brow programming (a distinction that still remains today), is particularly noteworthy, considering the fact that radio in general was often produced by and received by women. Hilmes writes, "The primarily female audience and address of radio—along with the many female radio innovators whose accomplishments are usually left out of standard histories—created a medium tailored to feminine concerns (as defined by broadcasters), reflecting and working to define the gender role conflicts facing women and men during these highly formative postsuffrage decades."[22] The programming focused on the lives of women, giving the women who were listening the opportunity to identify with the themes they were hearing on the radio.

This divide between daytime and nighttime programming was furthered by the idea of daytime programming as "commercial" (ignoring the fact that this was also true of nighttime programming).[23] Daytime serials were, indeed, commercial programming, which meant that their job was to garner sponsorship and bring in cash to financially support the "quality" nighttime programming with which the serials were set at odds.[24] Not only did soap operas accomplish this by becoming synonymous with dish, laundry, and body soap, but they also did so by keeping their

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[21] An effect of—as well as evidence of—daytime radio becoming classified as lowbrow was that it was also often treated as ephemeral. There are extant episodes of many radio serials available but still not nearly at the same rate as other genres of "Golden Age" radio programming. Westerns, detective shows, sitcoms, and anthology dramas have all been collected more consistently and comprehensively than radio serials. Radio and television serials suffer from a similar problem: Both their reputation and their frequency have created serious social and technological impediments to their retention. Ibid., 154.

[22] Ibid., 33. See also Jennifer Hyland Wang, "The Case of the Radio-Active Housewife: Relocating Radio in the Age of Television," in *Radio Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

[23] Hilmes, *Radio Voices*.

[24] Cynthia Meyers provides an overview of the relationship between radio serials and their sponsors, focusing on the significant role of the advertising agency in shaping content, as a middleman between the two. Cynthia Meyers, *A Word from Our Sponsors: Admen, Advertising, and the Golden Age of Radio* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

production costs down. Jim Cox notes: "Although *Ma Perkins* and its peers received the critics' barbs for the slow narrative style in which they were written, there was one area in which the serials could never be seriously challenged: cost per listener."[25] Cox claims that, even if soaps were bad, they were also extremely lucrative. This was due, in part, to their commercial structure and high ratings, both delivered by their writers and producers.

Daytime serials began airing on U.S. radio in 1930, with Irna Phillips's *Painted Dreams* (WGN, 1930-1934) and, later, the comedic program *Clara, Lu, 'n' Em* (WGN, 1930-1932; NBC 1932-1937), which was initially created by three undergraduates for Northwestern University radio and eventually became the first network daytime serial when it moved from its evening time slot in 1932.[26] Both programs had lengthy initial runs, an early forecast of the success and longevity soap operas enjoyed in the ninety years that have followed. The genre quickly became popular. Hilmes notes, "As NBC and CBS began to offer a national schedule of programs to affiliates in the late 1920s and early 30s, streaming seriality became a business model as much as a cultural form, the backbone of an industry, as magazine seriality had been to publishing."[27] Transitioning—to an extent—from the magazine, the radio serial came to this new medium as a genre that was not entirely new. It borrowed structures and narrative forms from its previous iteration, which were then developed for radio by key creators and writers of this evolving genre.

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[25] Cox continues, "Minimal production costs attracted sponsors in the early days of soap operas. When the return on their investment translated into huge daytime audiences, advertisers bought even more time. Production costs per rating point for *Kate Smith Speaks*, the highest-rated weekday program on the air in 1943, were $609.76. But the second-rated *When a Girl Marries* cost only $287.50 per ratings point. And *Ma Perkins*, boasting a rating very close to *Smith*'s, cost $164.56 per point. While $5,000 was spent every week to produce *Smith*'s quarter-hour, *Perkins* was produced for a scant $1,300. Costs were a factor that the critics of washboard weepers never substantially repudiated. The figures spoke for themselves, for they were almost always irrefutably impressive." Cox, *Great Radio Soap Operas*, 126.

[26] 1930-1934 marks the original run of *Painted Dreams*; it was revived throughout the decade, ending for good in 1940. Jennifer Hyland Wang, "Producing a Radio Housewife: Clara, Lu 'n' Em, Gendered Labor, and the Early Days of Radio," *Feminist Media Histories*, 4, no. 1 (2018); Cox, *Great Radio Soap Operas*, 5.

[27] Michele Hilmes, "Never Ending Story," in *A Companion to Media Authorship* (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 184-185.

Perhaps the most prolific radio serial creators and producers were husband-and-wife team Anne and Frank Hummert. Anne Ashenhurst and Frank Hummert met when she was hired to be his assistant and a copywriter at the Blackett-Sample-Hummert advertising agency, with Ashenhurst brought in specifically to help target the female audiences to whom the soap sponsors wanted greater access. As Cynthia Meyers notes, "The targeted daytime audience for soap and cereal advertisers was female, and Sample believed that hiring a woman would help B-S-H penetrate this market."[28] After working together to help reach this soap-and-cereal-buying audience, and creating hits like *Just Plain Bill* (CBS/NBC, 1932-1955) and *Ma Perkins* (NBC/CBS, 1933-1960), Ashenhurst and Hummert married in 1935.[29] Between 1930, when the daytime serial began and Ashenhurst was hired, and the end of the radio soap opera on November 25, 1960, the Hummerts created and ran at least a dozen hit daytime serials, in addition to a range of other programming.[30]

Their so-called soap opera factory was so successful, in fact, that they are sometimes used as the exemplar of mass-produced and artistically-bankrupt programming. As Robert Allen notes, "[Cultural theorist Dwight MacDonald] singles out the soap operas produced by Frank and Anne Hummert, originators of more than a dozen radio serials, as examples of why popular culture products cannot be art. 'Unity is essential in art; it cannot be achieved by a production line of specialists, however competent.' MacDonald might also have had soap operas in mind when he complained that mass culture threatened to inundate genuine culture 'by sheer pervasiveness, its brutal, overwhelming *quantity*.'"[31] The implication here is that the Hummerts were unable to see

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[28] Meyers, 109.
[29] *Just Plain Bill* aired on CBS from 1932-1936 and NBC from 1936-1955, starting in the evening and moving to daytime in 1933. Cox, *Great Radio Soap Operas*, 78. See also: Jim Cox, *Frank and Anne Hummert's Radio Factory* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003), 22.
[30] Cox, *Great Radio Soap Operas*.
[31] As may be evident from his tone, Allen's goal was quite the opposite of MacDonald's: he was invested in the value of soap operas and used structuralist and semiotic theory to analyze soap opera aesthetics. Allen, 17.

the value in artistic unity or restraint; and yet, they created programming with a cohesive and pared down style that they worked hard to implement across their different programs. As Michele Hilmes points out, "Not all traces of authorship were erased by serial production; in fact, many nighttime programs showed less continuity in writing overall than did the serials."[32] The Hummerts were committed to consistency in their programming, often hiring a variety of writers for each program so that they would have a sound that was linked to the program itself, rather than a specific author. As Meyers writes: "While the Hummerts were well aware that intellectuals and aesthetes might mock their serials' slow, repetitive humorlessness, they held to it in the belief that it best served their purpose, the delivery of audiences to advertisers."[33] Their shows were designed to be accessible to wide audiences, and they were built to sell. They worked to create a unique, distinguishable aesthetic for each of their programs and were financially incentivized to do so. The Hummerts may have been single minded, but, in doing so, they created programming that emphasized not just its own ability to sell, but also the unique voice of a Hummert radio serial.

At the same time, Irna Phillips was busy becoming one of the most successful soap opera creators and writers, beginning what would be a forty-year career in daytime programming. Starting with the creation of *Painted Dreams*, Phillips was a key force in creating the soap opera genre. She began working in radio in Chicago—with WGN specifically—in the 1930s and had a strong hand in creating a specific sound and voice for all of her programming. Her process focused on significant research, clear character cohesion, and a great deal of oversight directly from her. Some of Phillips's successful soaps included: *The Brighter Day*, *Right to Happiness* (NBC/CBS,

[32] Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 169.
[33] Meyers, 115.

1939-1960), and *Young Doctor Malone* (NBC/CBS, 1939-1960).[34] One of her earliest and most successful daytime serials was *The Guiding Light*, which not only ran successfully on radio for nearly twenty years (NBC/CBS from 1937-1956), but was also the only program to make a smooth, successful, and sustained transition to television.[35] This transition was slow—recording both radio and television broadcasts daily from 1952 to 1956—but that slow and steady approach led to more than fifty years on television.

Throughout this chapter, I focus in particular on examples from two quite different popular programs to call attention to their essential similarities. These examples represent the production models from Phillips and the Hummerts. *The Guiding Light*, which was sponsored on CBS by Duz laundry soap, remains the longest-running soap opera in American broadcast history. The Oxydol-sponsored *Ma Perkins* was the Hummerts' longest-running program; it aired on NBC from 1933-1949 and on CBS from 1942-1960, with a total of twenty-seven years on the radio. While the Hummerts' programs were hugely successful on radio, Phillips's influence dominated television. Almost all of the most successful television soap operas were created by Phillips herself or by one of her many protégés.

These examples will draw largely on two roughly contemporaneous and well-known storylines, and the following storyline summaries give some sense of what radio serial narratives were like. On *Ma Perkins*, Ma's daughter and son-in-law Evey and Willie are in the process of getting swindled out of their life savings by "the cousins"—distant relatives who also happen to be con men. Eventually Evey and Willie are saved from their own bad decision making and the

[34] In this period, neither movement between networks nor running concurrently on multiple networks was unusual; both *Right to Happiness* and *Young Doctor Malone* switched between CBS and NBC multiple times during their runs and ran concurrently on both networks as well. See also: Cox, *Great Radio Soap Operas*, 186 & 278.
[35] The program title changed from *The Guiding Light* to simply *Guiding Light* in 1975. I will be using "*The Guiding Light*" here, as that it what it was called during the relevant period. It ran from 1937-1946 on NBC radio, from 1947-1956 on CBS radio, and from 1952-2009 on CBS television.

cousins are brought to justice (and, eventually, redeemed, though they are not really heard from again), but not before Evey nearly ruins her relationship with Ma and the rest of the family, which includes Evey's sister Fay and Ma's best friend Shuffle. On *The Guiding Light*, the story begins (as much as a soap opera story ever can begin) when Meta White decides to get divorced from her husband Ted in an effort to separate him from their son Chuckie, over whom Meta believes Ted is a bad influence. Before the divorce and custody battle are completed, though, Chuckie dies as a result of Ted's actions and Meta, in her grief, shoots Ted and kills him. In the meantime, Meta's brother Bill is struggling with alcoholism, ostensibly brought about by his nagging, overly ambitious wife Bertha and his guilt over working for his errant brother-in-law Ted, all of which lead to a potential extramarital affair. Both storylines were broadcast in 1950, with the aftereffects rippling into 1951 and beyond. While these two programs have distinctly different sounds, they feature many of the same aural elements. *Ma Perkins* has faster pacing and more dialogue, leaving less room for silence; similar to *The Guiding Light*, though, it also uses limited but quotidian sound effects and has minimal background noise or music. As constants on the radio scene, these two programs become useful examples of radio serial sound. The sounds of radio serials came to represent their respective creators, but they also came out of a quick turnaround time, low production costs, and the same end goal: to sell soap.

The Radio Serial Soundscape

Even when the soap opera was no longer a brand-new genre on a relatively new medium, the tone, structure, and overall sound were never only one thing; indeed, the genre was always shifting and expanding. Nonetheless, there were aesthetic and narrative trends that tied these programs together, ones that helped to create a genre, rather than simply a viewing block. From

the beginning, radio serials were about domestic relationships and human emotions, focusing on the everyday, interpersonal, and familial lives and activities of the women it portrayed. Starting with *Painted Dreams*, stories focused on the domestic lives of women—in this case, a widow, her daughter, and the orphaned border who lived with them. In that program, Phillips was even reluctant to include any substantial male characters until absolutely necessary, which came a year after it began, when she felt it was time for the two younger women to start considering marriage.[36] This early serial not only featured many of the narrative turns that remain central to contemporary soap operas, but also began to establish the key features of the radio soap opera soundscape that could still be heard after the transition to television in the 1950s. *Painted Dreams* showcased primarily domestic conversations about interpersonal relationships, local gossip, and community events. These conversations were occasionally punctuated by a limited repertoire of everyday sound effects—doorbells ringing, doors opening and closing, dishes clattering.[37] Vocal performances featured a flat, close sound, and the focus was typically on only one or two voices at a time.[38] This simplicity was helpful for both production and reception, as it made conversations easier to follow. This same principle of paring down the soundscape for the sake of clarity seems to have applied across the board. Primarily, radio soap opera episodes were made up of voices—voices in conversation, in private reverie, in monologue; the voice of the narrator speaking in first or second person; or the hawking voices in the requisite soap ads—and of silence. Even as radio soap operas changed substantially over their thirty-year history as different writers, creators, and

[36] Irna Phillips, "Plan Presentation – Montgomery Ward," 76AN, Irna Phillips Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
[37] Irna Phillips, Episode 10 and Episode 25 scripts, 76AN, Irna Phillips Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
[38] Cynthia Meyers notes that there is an intentionality behind this choice: "Most scenes involved only two characters so as to make them as easy as possible for distracted housewives to follow." Meyers, 115.

producers arrived with different agendas and styles, there are important commonalities and ties that helped to create the radio soap opera sound.

While the daytime serial used the same audio building blocks as most radio fiction, how this genre put them together was unique. In radio fiction, sound design was used to create the fictional (and imaginary) spaces and establish how the characters moved through them. In *Tuning In* (2010), Ron Rodman describes how this problem was typically tackled: "Radio actors, sound effects technicians, and composer/musicians telegraphed their actions through dialogue (e.g., 'Marcia, why are you walking out the front door?'), elaborate sound effects (e.g., door slams), and dramatic musical scores that borrowed heavily from theater and film."[39] In this way, there were a variety of audio techniques that could be used to expose what the relevant spaces were and how the characters were occupying them, using sound effects, dialogue, and music. Neil Verma addresses how approaches to this changed over time as radio listeners became more accustomed to the new medium.[40] "Dramatists [initially] thought they were writing for a 'blind man' and used speech to convey anything that would be silently visual in the theater. By the late 1930s, that preference had changed. Radio listeners became accustomed to recognizing purely aural rules that signified movement around the world of drama. For instance, around this time it became common for narrators to cut in and out suddenly, while 'scenes' faded in at the beginning and out at the end."[41] The daytime serial used both these approaches as well as narration and exposition from the male voiceover narrator—though these interruptions were also reduced over time as audiences became more savvy.

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[39] Ron Rodman, *Tuning In: American Narrative Television Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6.
[40] *The Guiding Light* did not lean heavily on voiceover narration in the 1940s, but the Hummert programs, like *Ma Perkins*, continued to use it fairly consistently.
[41] Verma, 28.

One of the biggest distinctions between the daytime serial and other forms of radio fiction was often simply the active presence of female voices, especially in leading roles. There also seemed to be a distinct difference between the style and aesthetic of daytime programming and that of nighttime programming. Even with radio fiction that did focus on women, nighttime serials often sounded different from those broadcast during the day. *Ann of the Airlanes*, for instance, was a daily nighttime drama about an airplane hostess (i.e. flight attendant) who was also a spy. The nighttime drama developed a multi-layered—and often loud—soundscape that was in contrast to what was typically heard on daytime serials. While the program was always invested in Ann's personal life and amorous pursuits, it was primarily about her adventures as an international spy. Those adventures were indicated by an array of sound effects, including the engine and propeller sounds of the airplanes she travelled on. The program even featured nearly ninety seconds of theme music, complete with airplane propeller accompaniment. This use of extensive sound effects and theme music was rarely heard on the daytime serial. Even with the same building blocks of sound, the daytime serial was able to carve out a unique soundscape that set it apart from other types of programming.

Soap opera sound was not only distinct because of what it left out but also because of what it included. Two of the most obvious audio features that distinguished the daytime serial sound were the soap opera organ and the soap opera ads. Even though they are commonly—even comically—associated with radio soap opera sound, I will not linger on them. The organ served as a somewhat infamous element of the radio soap opera, and its presence in the radio serial is undeniable even while its frequency is sometimes overstated. *Right to Happiness*, as one example, used the organ music to lead in and out of every scene, underscoring emotion and serving as a transition to the sponsorships before, after, and sometimes during an episode. *The Brighter Day*,

on the other hand, had organ music as their theme music, but rarely elsewhere. *The Guiding Light* fell somewhere in the middle. Organ music was typically heard at the beginning and end of every episode as well as going into and out of ad breaks. Occasionally, additional organ music was incorporated to underscore or create a particular mood. In fact, the organ—and exaggerated recollections thereof—is often the only sound associated with the radio soap opera. In the *Historical Dictionary of Radio Soap Operas*, for instance, Jim Cox discusses *The Guiding Light*'s infamous organ. "One observer discounted her sharp intrusions into an otherwise reflective performance, noting: 'No program in heaven or earth could match *The Guiding Light* in ominous chords, strings, and cadences.' In the broadcast of January 10, 1950, for instance, the organ's erratic exclamations jarred fans 23 times. Such unexpected and disarming outbursts interrupted every episode in those days, possibly keeping some of its listeners on unnerving edge."[42] This claim, though, is somewhat misleading. By 1950, organ music on *The Guiding Light* was rare, focusing on transitions between scenes and into and out of ad breaks. While the January 10 script does include an unusually high number of organ chords, it was just that—unusual.[43] Most extant episodes from that period include less than half that many organ cues, making the claim that this "interrupted every episode" more impression than fact. While stereotypical organ music was heard to varying degrees on most programs, its presence was not as jarring or as disruptive as it is often made to seem.

The question remains, though, of why the organ has this intense association with the radio soap opera soundscape, even if it is not entirely justified. One possibility is its persistence throughout the history of the genre—across time and between programs. Neither was the organ as

[42] Cox, *Great Radio Soap Operas*, 65.
[43] Irna Phillips, *The Guiding Light* scripts, January 1950, Box 37, Irna Phillips Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

aggressively present within each episode as Cox would have us believe, nor was it featured consistently in all programs throughout their runs; nonetheless, it was featured in many radio serials at some point between 1930 and 1960. Another possibility is the quality of the sound itself. The organ's plaintive, mournful sound echoes the kind of narrative turns that the genre was known for: the melancholy and despair of the housewife, the widow, or the young mother who has lost a love or lost a child or lost touch with reality. In this way, the organ and the soap opera were simultaneously creating and recreating each other's reputations. As the genre's sound becomes heavily associated with the organ, the genre writ large gets further associated with melodrama and melancholy. As a result, the organ—overstated as it was—could be representative of what critics and the public expected from the soap opera, without having to investigate what else about this soundscape might be significant.

The soap ads served a similar role in the public and critical imagination. The ads were obligatory and took up a substantial amount of airtime, often occupying anywhere from three to six minutes of a fifteen-minute program slot. They typically aired at the beginning and end of each episode, and sometimes in the middle as well. In *A Word From Our Sponsor*, Meyers provides an extensive overview of the relationship between radio serials and their sponsors, considering their financial as well as narrative impact. She addresses the structure as well as the function of the ad breaks: "The Hummerts' didacticism also functioned to naturalize the insertion of reason-why advertisements in and around the serials' narratives. In most of the Hummert serials, the advertising was neither 'spot' (that is, textually separate) nor fully integrated into the program's narrative. Instead, they used what was called a 'sandwich' style of advertising. After an organist played a musical signature, the announcer delivered the opening tag line and a minute-and-a-half

long commercial message."[44] On all serials, these advertisements became an integral part of the radio serial sound, with the sponsors often becoming synonymous not only with the genre but also with the individual programs they sponsored.

Despite the integral role of these sponsorships, they are not the focus of this analysis. Meyers and others have done essential work on the production, reception, and commercial structures of this advertising.[45] Radio serial sponsorships were both part of and distinct from the rest of the radio serial soundscape. As is evident from Meyers's description, while the narratives and the soap spots were intertwined, they were not interchangeable. Occasionally, product plugs were integrated into the narrative either implicitly or explicitly, but this was not common. More typically, the spots were a break from the narrative. It is not only necessary to understand the role these advertisements had in the programming and content, but also to analyze daytime audiences beyond what they can buy and sell. While daytime soap operas are not inherently more commercial than other broadcast programming, they have been deployed as such, creating a distinction between quality/family programming and commercial/women's programming.[46] In working to understand and consider the value and meaning of the daytime soap opera aesthetic, I approach it as an object that is always, but not simply, commercial. I analyze the content outside of its commercial structure not to ignore that the commercial structure exists, but instead to consider if anything exists beyond it.

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[44] Meyers, 115.
[45] Meyers. See also Wang, "Case of the Radio-Active Housewife" and Kristen Hatch, "Selling Soap: Post-War Television Soap Opera and the American Housewife," in *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002).
[46] Hilmes, *Radio Voices*.

Sound and Silence

In addition to dialogue, sound effects, and infrequent music, one of the most striking features of the radio serial soundscape is that of silence. This silence includes moments where no sound is heard, in which the listener is required to be patient—perhaps even thoughtful—as the audio text moves slowly through the narrative or from one scene to the next. It also includes what James Lastra refers to as "contextless sound," which is flat, close to the microphone, and with an emphasis on clarity and legibility, rather than a specific sense of space or place.[47] As I will address later in this chapter, it is often specifically the uninflected, flat sound that gives the soap opera its specific sense of space and place; it is this same contextless sound that opens up possibilities for listener identification with the text.

The uncanniness of silence has long been of interest to media scholars working to understand something that is both the absence of sound and a function of sound. Both Mary Ann Doane and Claudia Gorbman address the strangeness, even the uncanniness, of silence. Gorbman specifically discusses the role music played in silent movie houses as a way to distract from the discomfort of the silence. Music filled the auditorium in an effort to compensate for the flatness of the screen and, as a result, bonded spectators together. Music also served to compensate for the lack of speech and provided an antidote to the uncanny images produced by the new form of motion picture.[48] Doane further notes the uncanny nature of silence in film—suggesting that while it is not death, it is death-like.[49] Specifically, she explains how film sound can be neither present nor absent. "Sound extends from beginning to end of the film—sound is never absent (silence is,

[47] James Lastra, "Reading, Writing, and Representing Sound" in *Sound Theory, Sound Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 78.
[48] Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies* (London: BFI, 1987), 53.
[49] Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space" in *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980).

at the least, room tone).”[50] This is true with radio as well. Even silence has a sound. Whether it be room tone, microphone sounds, or the static of the radio transmission itself, silence always sounds. This semi-silence represents not complete silence, but instead the silence of something. This can be the absence of street sounds outside the window (or even when on the street) or of hospital or office sounds while in public spaces. Importantly, the presence of some sounds does not preclude the silencing of others.

This absence—and the uncanniness it provokes—resonates with the radio serial. While silence on radio is not marked by a soundless two-dimensional silent image, the disruption of sound in the single-sensory experience of radio is also disturbing. One segment from a September 1950 episode of *The Guiding Light* is more than a third silent. In this episode, Meta has just shot and killed Ted, and the members of both his and her households are trying to deal with the aftermath. When the police arrive on the scene, they call Bill to let him know that his sister has been arrested, but we hear only Bill’s side of the conversation. This scene is bracketed by the ringing of the phone and the setting of it back down, but includes no other sound effects.[51] During most of this scene, no voice, music, background noise, or sound effects are present at all. While the severity of the silence in this scene may be extreme even for *The Guiding Light*, the pacing, pauses, and use of silence are not. This silence—when audio contains no audio —is itself and the opposite of itself, distancing the listener while also drawing her in. In this context, gaps in the audio create a soundscape that was open rather than frenetic and provided lots of spaces but little explicit instruction to the listener on how to fill them.

In the radio serial soundscape, a well-timed sound effect was key to giving narrative and spatial cues and to developing a fully formed narrative world. These sound effects—limited though

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[50] Doane, 32.
[51] “September 25, 1950,” *The Guiding Light* (CBS, 1947-1956).

they were—were an essential part of the radio serial sound. At the same time, these cues did not always work to create a sense of verisimilitude, with sound cues that were often absent when one expected them and then glaringly and surprisingly loud when least expected. The lack of background noise and sound effects in these serials encouraged the presumption of an interior, domestic space, rather than a louder outdoor or public space, which would typically be marked by crowd sounds or street noises. On the rare occasion when external scenes were featured, the soundscapes were often underdeveloped, hinting at the outdoors or at public spaces, perhaps, but without a real fullness. In *The Brighter Day* example at the beginning of this chapter, the sound effects designed to represent the outdoors largely served to underscore the quiet and underproduced soundscape of the more common domestic spaces, rather than to create a well-defined public one. In a similar vein, *Ma Perkins* often left open spaces in the soundscape, with incomplete sound that made outdoor scenes or ones in Ma's lumberyard sound as nondescript, flat, and domestic as the ones at home. In the following example, one can hear Willie and Evey yell to and discuss their friend Shuffle, whom they have just seen across the street.

> *Willie*: Oh, you always think that movie actors are handsome. To me they all look alike… Hey wait a minute…
> *Evey*: Hmm?
> *Willie*: Across the street...
> *Evey*: Where?
> *Willie*: Walking the other way. Hey, ain't that Shuffle?
> *Evey*: Shuffle, was he at the movies?
> *Willie*: Nah, walking the other way. Well, sure it's Shuffle! Wait a minute...Hey Shuffle! Hey. I thought he was supposed to be at Ma's house.
> *Shuffle*: Is that you, Willie? You Evey? Come on, walk along with me. I've got to catch my bus.
> *Single car sound.*
> *Willie*: He's gotta catch his bus. Come on, Evey, it's only a block out of our way. Let's walk him to the bus station, huh?[52]

[52] "4447," *Ma Perkins*, August 29, 1950 (CBS, 1942-1960).

Once Willie and Evey walk away from the movie theater, the only street sound that can be heard is the single car sound indicated in the middle. On the street, the soundscape was developed not through the everyday sounds of the city, but largely out of dialogue and sound perspective. Sound perspective—the apparent distance and location of a sound source—is a important way that space and place were indicated on daytime serials.[53] As Shuffle yells to them from across the street, his voice sounds far away, getting closer as they move, but the other indicators of the outdoor space are limited—just the sound of the single car driving by and, at the end of the episode, the honking of a bus horn. The absence of street sounds and flat sound design fails to fully represent the location in which it was supposed to be taking place, but it imbues this outdoor setting with a sense of intimacy and domesticity.

This kind of contextless sound not only happened in outdoor spaces, but in domestic spaces as well, requiring dialogue and the listener's imagination—rather than elaborate sound design—to fill in any indicators of space and place. While housework was often absent from radio soap operas (ironically, given the emphasis on domestic space and the commercial sponsors), when it did become part of the everyday lives of the characters, these activities still often seemed more unfamiliar than familiar. On the occasion that soap opera characters were doing housework, there were rarely sound cues to confirm their activities—like the ones that the domestic listener might be used to hearing around her own home during similar activities. In one episode of *Ma Perkins*, Ma, Fay, Evey, and Willie are chatting and catching up after dinner. They discuss typical after-dinner activities like serving coffee, doing dishes, and putting the kids to bed, but there are none of the concomitant sounds of these activities. Even as Fay claims that, "Judging from the sounds I hear upstairs, I ought to go up and teach some manners to my young offspring," none of these

[53] Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White, *The Film Experience, 5th Edition*, (New York: MacMillan, 2017), 455.

sounds can be heard by the listener.[54] In another episode, as Fay and Evey gossip about an upcoming visit from Fay's beau, Fay lets Evey know she is going to do the dishes. Between this line and Evey's exclamation, "Oh, quit the dishes," a few seconds later, there is a faint hollow sound under Fey and Evey's conversation, but it does not sound like the water running and dishes clattering that one might expect.[55] This leaves room for the listener to create distance between the characters' experience of doing everyday chores and her own, given that, even as they discuss them, those kinds of tasks are rarely fully acoustically present.

As a result of the silences and absences like the ones outlined here, there is a sense of only vague or nondescript spaces, ones that the listener—with the aid of her imagination—has the potential to insert herself into. In *Theater of the Mind*, Neil Verma coins the term "audioposition" to explain the important relationship between the listener and the text to which they are listening. He writes that, "Listeners do not just 'have' a point of audition; they are 'positioned' by audio composition and components of dialogue."[56] With radio soap operas, because the spaces and places remain so undefined, it is not only about how the listener is positioned within the fictional world, but also where she is positioned in the real world—the physical space the listener herself occupies. As noted by Doane and Gorbman above, silence in film is unexpected, uncomfortable, and even taboo; in many ways, this is heightened rather than negated in a medium that is made up entirely of sound. When there is silence, our instinct is to fill it, perhaps not with sound, but with something. The silences invited the listener to fill the void with her own experiences, both real and aspirational. In radio soap operas, silence opened up spaces for the listener to enter the everyday lives of these characters, so like yet unlike her own.

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[54] "4527," *Ma Perkins*, December 9, 1950 (CBS, 1942-1960).
[55] "4532," *Ma Perkins*, December 26, 1950 (CBS, 1942-1960).
[56] Verma, 35.

An Uncanny Invitation: Time, Character, Space

The possibilities for world building and identification that arose in this silence—and through sound effects and dialogue—were full of potential, allowing the radio serial listener to imagine herself in a world that was both familiar and completely unlike her own. Featuring a range of characters, a routinized yet disrupted schedule, and affective domestic spaces, the everyday yet implausible aesthetics of the radio serial presented the listener with new visions of herself and her world—while still keeping her firmly situated within the home. In this context, the listener was given space to focus on a different kind of labor than she was perhaps otherwise performing—labor that was emotional rather than physical. While the soap sponsors and advertising executives who produced these programs played an active role in influencing content, that did not mean that housework was integrated into the narrative.[57] The absence of housework meant that identification with this domestic text invited the listener to enter a world and take on a persona unlike her own, one that was not occupied with domestic service, but instead focused on other individual and interpersonal issues.

This invitation was significant. Through the radio, the listener was given the opportunity to reenvision her world as one that put a premium on the production of emotional conversation over physical labor. This new world, while it was in many ways shaped like the listener's own, had the potential to be something quite different: a world where women controlled not only narrative but also *feeling*. It was a world created largely by women presumably for women, and it held the promise of new possibilities for women's daily lives—possibilities that challenged the patriarchal structures of the real world that it mirrored. Radio soap operas spanned the years

[57] In particular, *A Word from Our Sponsors* delineates the integral role that advertisers had in the soap opera production process. Meyers.

leading into and through WWII, when women were asked to support their families outside of the home, and the post-war years, when woman were being told to return home. Nonetheless, in both periods, the new world created by radio serials—one where women were in charge, shaping a narrative that defined "work" as emotional production and relationship building—was a fantasy and the sense that women were in control was an illusion. These women were no more freed from the patriarchy than their real-life counterparts. The greatest reminder of this was the male voiceover narration.

This voiceover narrator was one of the most important and consistent voices on the radio serial, a trademark of the form. By the late 1930s, the narrator was omnipresent, remaining central to the daytime serial sound and consistent through and across programs, even as other aesthetic features shifted. The narrator had a variety of jobs: recapping information from previous episodes, teasing what was to happen in episodes to come, setting the scene and providing visual information in a non-visual context, and serving as a conduit between the characters and the listener. This announcer filled in the blanks, simultaneously providing the listener with information she already knew and providing her with information to which she would otherwise not have access.

In a text that was made up almost exclusively of voices, the narrator held and existed in an entirely different space from the rest. While he did not have an image to preside over, like the voiceover, he existed over and outside the soap narrative. Mary Ann Doane addresses the use of voiceover in film, noting: "It is its radical otherness with respect to the diegesis which endows this voice with a certain authority. As a form of direct address, it speaks without mediation to the audience, bypassing the 'characters' and establishing a complicity between itself and the spectator."[58] Despite the fact that she is theorizing about film specifically, what Doane addresses

[58] Doane, 42.

here begins to articulate a contradiction heard with the radio serial voiceover, in which the narrator not only relied on a sense of otherness and authority, but also a feeling of intimacy. Doane further explains how this gives the voiceover the power to produce the "truth" of the image. What truth does he then provide when there is no image? Perhaps none at all. The narrator was authoritative, omnipotent, and in control; but he was also in conversation with the listener, speaking directly to her and inviting her into the text. Because there is no image, this contradiction is never resolved. Instead, he simultaneously embodies the contradictory roles of confidant and deity, serving as both intimate and other.

This contradictory but flexible role meant that the voiceover narrator helped to provide the kind of conversational intimacy that Arnheim and others saw as so essential to radiophonic sound at the same time that he was controlling the radio serial text. As an omnipotent figure, he was providing information, putting ideas into the listeners' heads, and expressing ideas and emotions to which they were already attuned. This narrator would allude to the fact that he was uniquely "in the know" (e.g. "though some mining stock, which…well, let's hear for ourselves…" or "Yes, I can tell you now…"), but he also served as an ally, often reiterating information that only he and the listener (but not the characters) knew ("Ma and Fay are still not convinced of what we know to be a fact").[59] As such, the audience and the narrator were in on it together. In contradiction to Doane's observations about film voiceovers, Kristen Hatch claims that the radio announcer positioned himself "as a mediator between the audience and the characters."[60] Mediator, though, does not seem quite right. His role as confidant already precluded him from simply being a neutral third party or a go-between for the listener and the narrative, as did his role as authority figure. He controlled the listener's relationship to the text by bringing her into it and keeping her at a distance

[59] "4470," *Ma Perkins*, September 29, 1950 (CBS, 1942-1960).
[60] Hatch, 41.

from it at the same time. The listener was being told, on the one hand, that she was integral to and intimate with the text, while, on the other, that she had no control over it. The position of the listener—both in on and at odds with the text—created a distance, in which she had all the power and none of the power at once.

This confusion of control becomes additionally apparent in considering the time and timing of the radio serial narrative, which was dependable yet disjointed. In their dailiness, soap operas were routine and every day. The listener could turn on her radio and get lost in the predictable scheduling and structuring of the soap opera. However, despite this illusion of control, she was in the hands of the programming itself, which was frequently disrupted by ad breaks or by the end of the episode. These disruptions were voiced by the narrator, who seemed to control what information she was provided both as she was brought into the narrative and as she was taken out. As such, the narrator served as control over the programming's routinized and commodified structure. These disruptions were not only a reminder that the listening experience was out of the listener's control but also a reminder of the labor-driven world in which she actually lived. Just as the listener was getting adjusted to this alternate reality of domesticity that soap operas provided her with (one in which emotional conversation reigned), she would be abruptly removed from it with advertisements for products that were reminders of the real-world labor in which many of the listeners were "supposed" to be participating.

Much has been written about the structure and timing of soap operas, considering how its fragmented nature both shapes and reflects back women's daily lives.[61] Just as much as it is fragmented, though, it is also routine. The radio serial shaped schedules *at the same time* that it disrupted them, creating and disrupting this new world simultaneously. This simultaneous

[61] Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

structuring and disruption is guided by the radio serial voices, contrasting the melodrama and emotion of the characters (which were temporally routine yet disruptive to our understanding of the real world) with the knowledge and capitalist aims of the voiceovers (which were disruptive to the listener yet familiar). It is in this murky, contradictory space where the everyday implausible lies, reflecting the listener's own disunity and a sense that feeling entirely comfortable is possible but elusive.

This disunity was, in part, the work of the voiceover narrator; so was the feeling of intimacy that invited the listener into the text, asking for her companionship and participation. From 1930 onward, the point of view of the narrator varied widely. Depending on the program and the year, the narration shifted between first-person narration (e.g. "Let's hear for ourselves…"), second-person narration (e.g. "You'd made up your mind…"), and third-person narration (e.g. "Tomorrow on…"), and included variations on and shifting between all three of these. These different modes of address were used at different times and to different ends. *The Guiding Light*, for instance, adopted multiple points of view. Early on, it used first-person plural as well as second-person to refer to the audience; throughout the early and mid-1940s, it shifted to third person address; in the years before the transition to television, it featured a mix of third-person, first-person plural, and second-person, now in reference to the characters; and by the mid-1950s, the voiceover began to disappear entirely. This shifting use of narrator address had the potential to inform and encourage different modes of listener identification.

By 1950, while *The Guiding Light* narrator often used second-person, the *Ma Perkins* narrator spoke primarily using first-person plural. Despite the difference, both interpolated the listener into the text. With frequent use of phrases like, "Let's listen in…" or "Let's hear for ourselves…" the narrator for *Ma Perkins* gave the listener a (false) sense that she (the listener) and

he (the narrator) were somehow equally in control and equally relevant to the narrative. In the following, one can see the use of the first-person plural as inclusive and conspiratorial: "And now our scene changes. That business deal that Shuffle mentioned—we know that it's a brand-new scheme of the cousins to cheat Willie and Evey out of their life savings, and in a very clever way. Well, right now, over in Rushville Center in Ma's lumberyard, we find Sylvester just approaching Ma with...Well, listen…"[62] While "we" came together through a collective awareness of information the characters did not yet have, there was also a disingenuousness to it, since the listener was then immediately reminded through the use of the phrase "well, listen…" that the narrator had knowledge of and control over the text that the listener could never access.

The Guiding Light's second-person narration, on the other hand, not only suggested to the listener that she was an active part of the text, but also brought her into the role of specific characters by letting her know, for instance, that "There are tears in your eyes, Meta." Despite the seven years of experience Phillips had already gained writing daily daytime serials, address in the first few years of *The Guiding Light*'s run showed signs of its newness and a kind rather than canny relationship between the narrator and the listener, with the narrator serving almost like the neutral mediator that Hatch suggests. A 1937 episode began: "It is early evening as we again visit Dr. Ruthledge's parsonage in Five Points. This section of a cosmopolitan city is a typical melting pot district. You will remember that Mr. Smith, whom we know as Gordon Ellis, member of a prominent family, has taken rooms in a tenement building a short distance from Dr. Ruthledge's home. During the past weeks, you have met the Gordon family."[63] Here, the listener was positioned as very much on the same page as the narrator. "You" (referring to the listener) seemed to be as knowledgeable as the narrator. "We" had the same amount and kind of information and "we" were

[62] "4433," *Ma Perkins*, August 9, 1950 (CBS, 1942-1960).
[63] "February 15, 1937," *The Guiding Light* (CBS, 1947-1960).

visiting Five Points together. This was different from the "we" of *Ma Perkins*, where the listener was left out of information as frequently as she was included in it, and also different from the "you" that appeared later in *The Guiding Light*'s run.

Circa 1950, use of the second-person narration on this program was rampant, implicating all of the characters at various times. Through this second-person, "you" (referring to the characters) were told by the narrator what you were feeling, but so were "you" (referring to the listener). In one episode from this time period, the narrator was able to give the listener a sense of Bill's thought process between the breakfast table and the office:

> Much as you'd like to forget everything that Bertha told you last night and what she tried to tell you this morning, Bill, somehow her words keep going through your mind. Yes, she planted a seed of anxiety, concern. But knowing your wife, you wonder if she's exaggerating the difficulty that seems to exist between your sister Meta and her husband. It wouldn't harm anyone if you asked Ted how things were going at home. That's what you're thinking, isn't it Bill? That wouldn't be interfering. You've almost made up your mind to say something to Ted, haven't you?[64]

Here, the second-person served to give the listener intimate access to Bill's internality, exposing his thought process in a way that would have been difficult to do otherwise. But Bill was not the only one exposed to this monologue, in which "you" were told the complex sets of thoughts and feelings that were going through "your" mind. Obviously, the listener was the primary "you" that was listening, and she was given the opportunity to identify here with Bertha's husband and Meta's brother as he worked through his emotional turmoil. In another example, the soundscape works to demonstrate Meta's anxiety for her son and interpolate the listener into that experience. The narrator recounts Meta's stress and worry through a combination of dialogue and sound effects: "Minutes pass. [*clock chimes three times and then under narrator*:] You hear the old grandfather clock in the hall strike the hour. And then your eyes close, but your troubled thoughts are not lost

[64] *The Guiding Light* (CBS, 1947-1960).

in sleep. They find expression in distorted dreams."[65] In both of these examples, the use of second-person narration practically begs the listener to imagine herself as these characters, in the midst of emotional turmoil that is devastating and overwhelming—to the exclusion of any other work or responsibility.

The use of first- and second-person narration and the sense of control over the text implied (though not actually allowed) by the narrator, left room for the listener to fill in the gaps with information not given and actively told her to place herself within the narrative space. And while these programs were explicitly about familial spaces and familial relationships, this identification allowed the listener to place herself not simply within a nuclear family but also within a variety of different and sometimes unexpected roles. The serials spoke to the listener as a mother, wife, child, brother, and more, allowing her a space to take on any role she chose. As Bill toys with the idea of adultery, for instance, the narrator invites the listener to embody all of the characters involved in this potential love triangle. At various points in this storyline, the narrator notes that "Bertha has an uncanny way of making you feel guilty, doesn't she, Bill?"; as well as, "You had made up your mind, Bertha, before you saw Ted this morning…"; and, finally, "You wanted Bill to go on talking about his wife, didn't you Gloria?" In these examples, the listener is given the opportunity to embody, at different times, the wife, the husband, and the other woman. Relying on the listener's close relationship with the program, its characters, and its narrator, the second-person address creates space for the listener to insert herself into the story from a range of perspectives. The way the narrator positions the listener invites her to identify with characters unlike herself, as she is unlikely to be the housewife, the cheating husband, *and* the vixen in her everyday life. As such, the range of audiopositions is large enough to encourage multiple points of identification—but

[65] Ibid.

within a limited world view. While these audiopositions seem to offer a multitude of possibilities, they are still only limited to the types of characters that were present on these daytime soap operas. Bertha, Bill, Gloria, and Meta may have different personalities, genders, and marital statuses, but they are also all married (at various times), middle-class, and white.[66]

One of the most important tasks of the radio serial soundscape was to create the intimate and imagined domestic spaces and places where the stories unfolded. In addition to the invitation to embody characters, the radio serial and its sparse soundscape invited the listener to imagine herself inside the characters' lives and homes. The soundscape (even with a limited toolbox) invited the listener to enter these spaces by creating vibrant worlds for her—ones that were nonetheless limited largely to domestic scenes. These were everyday spaces but also fantasy spaces, ones that were similar to the real world, but not the same. They were created through their own everydayness as much as anything else. Often no detail was provided, giving the impression that the listener already knew where she was located. The spaces were familiar both because they were home-like (like the listener's own home) and because they were everyday (in that access to these imagined spaces was available exactly once per [week]day). Indeed, these spaces could be exactly like the listener's own home, since she was largely creating the world in her mind. Despite this, they would, in a sense, always be unfamiliar, as they did not actually exist and remained unseen. These spaces were sometimes set up and described by the narrator, other times indicated through dialogue, and occasionally conveyed through the use of sound perspective or sound effects that served to indicate the movement of bodies through space.

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[66] While these characters are unseen and, therefore, one could argue, have no race, Jennifer Stoever makes a compelling argument as to why race-blindness never really existed on radio. The presumption of whiteness was pervasive and non-white voices were always highly racialized, not just through racist minstrelsy like *Amos 'n' Andy*, but in a variety of contexts. Jennifer Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

The most common mode by which the scene was set and visual cues were given was directly from the narrator. He might provide a simple explanation of where the character was located and what she was doing. Alternately, it might have been more detailed. Early episodes of *The Guiding Light*, for instance, began with quite extensive explanations from the narrator. One episode from 1940 began with visual cues scattered throughout the introductory monologue: "A little over three months have passed since a stranger came to the melting pot community of Five Points and *rented the flat in the tenement building formerly occupied by the Kranskys*"; "During Ned Holden's serious illness Mary made several attempts to see *the attractive, auburn-haired girl* who had evidently gone away without a word even to the minister's daughter"; and, finally, "After spending a restless, uneasy day attempting to reach a decision regarding a problem that had confronted her for some little time, *she walks over to her bookcase and selects an apparently much used book.*"[67] These details, provided before the narrative even begins in earnest, gave the listener visual information about the apartment building she had entered, the characters relevant to the episode, and the way the protagonist was moving through her space. This use of exposition was efficient, but it also reinforced the narrator's role as authoritative and omniscient, as if he could see into the spaces that the listener could not. As such, she was expected to trust his description and supply her own detail where he did not.

Often, though, the listeners were reentering a world that was already familiar and this degree of detail was unnecessary. In these cases, there were other ways to further build these imaginary spaces. Sometimes, for instance, space was implied through dialogue. In one episode of *The Guiding Light*, in which Bert Bauer tried to convince her husband Bill not to head to work yet,

[67] Italics added for emphasis. Irna Phillips, *The Guiding Light*, February 6, 1940, 76AN, Irna Phillips Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

the content and context of this conversation are enough to evoke an image of a breakfast table around which they are gathered, waiting and planning for their day to start. Later, when the listener finds Bill speaking to his coworker (and brother-in-law) Ted, the knowledge that they are coworkers is enough to create an office space.[68] When dropping into the same towns and homes that the listener visits every day, it takes very little exposition to provide the listener with sufficient context. Instead, if she chooses to, it is assumed she is able to build these spaces in her imagination.

These spaces were also shaped through dialogue, allowing the characters to guide the listeners through the imaginary homes simply with their voices. For instance, one character might return home, shouting, "Hello?" while another responded, "I'm in the kitchen!" In doing so, the characters inform the listener of the kind of space they are listening into (a home) and add detail to situate the specific conversation (it will be taking place in the kitchen). In one episode of *Right to Happiness*, the MacDonald house takes shape as the characters walk through it, talking to each other. Carolyn MacDonald (née Allen), her son Skip, and his fiancée Grace are at home when they are interrupted by the doorbell ringing. As Carolyn goes to the door and returns, the boundaries of the space are given shape in a number of ways. The first is through the sound of the doorbell, chiming loudly as the family members are chatting. This is followed by a discussion with guest Dick Braden and the sound of the door opening and closing, implying movement through space. However, there is a flatness to the sound, with none of these movements well defined or indicated by sound perspective.[69] Instead, it is the sound effects and the narrative—the fact of going to the door, the conversation that Carolyn and Dick have there, and their return to the rest of the family—that indicate their movement and shapes the domestic space in which Carolyn and her family are located.

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[68] *The Guiding Light* (CBS, 1947-1960).
[69] *Right to Happiness* (NBs, 1939-1960).

Some of the work of locating the characters within their own domestic space cannot be done simply through language and assumption. Sound perspective and audioposition also affect the listener's imaginative and participatory experience. As Arnheim points out, "The listener does not find himself, as in the auditorium of a theatre, at a fixed distance from the scene, but alters his vantage-point within the scene of action strictly in accordance with the will of the author and producer."[70] Both through language and voice, the producers control where the listener is positioned. When necessary, these moments were indicated in the scripts with words like "away" or "fading." One episode of *The Guiding Light* from 1940, for instance, includes the following three cues for Dr. Ruthledge: "(AWAY) Mary, my dear," "(COMING UP) Mary, child—," and "I think (FADING) it would be better if I talked."[71] These directions specified the relationship between dialogue, sound, and space, suggesting how the relevant spaces needed to be developed by the performers during production.

In one scene from *The Guiding Light*, we hear Bill Bauer walking away. He tells his family he is going outside for a bit and leaves the house. When the character walks away from the room he had been occupying, the actor moves away from the microphone he is speaking into. As the actor creates a physical space between himself and the microphone, the listener's mind creates a domestic space, in which Bill walks out of the room and to the door, leaving his Papa and his sister Trudy alone in the living room, or perhaps the kitchen, or the family room.[72] Because so little aural information is given about location beyond silence and the sound of the door shutting, the listener must decide the setting, potentially based in part on where her telephone is placed within her own home, since the Bauers had been on the phone earlier in this episode. While the vagueness of the

[70] Arnheim, *Radio*, 88.
[71] Irna Phillips, *The Guiding Light*, January 18, 1940, 76AN, Irna Phillips Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
[72] *The Guiding Light* (CBS, 1947-1956).

serial soundscape also left some of these questions open to interpretation, the program still positioned the listener in a certain way, indicating through sound the movement in—and therefore the existence of—space. Often, the narrator would provide some of this spatial information, letting the listener know the characters' location. In one episode of *The Brighter Day*, as a scene in the Mayo's home begins, the narrator gets quiet. "It's just after suppertime in the Mayo's home […] well, listen…," he whispers, seemingly in an effort not to disrupt the domestic space he and the listener are entering.[73] In this moment, the narrator provides information about the characters' physical and domestic space not only by stating it outright (though he does that), but also through his tone. These examples represent diverse modes of emplacement, all of which allowed listeners to be taken into and out of domestic and personal spaces through the aural aesthetics of radio serials. Through these varying techniques, the listener was both confined to domestic spaces much like her own and given permission to take on new types of roles within this domestic setting—ones that focused entirely on emotional production rather than physical domestic labor—simultaneously opening up and foreclosing new incarnations or iterations of the listener's idea of self.

Through their sense of intimacy (in being homey and affective) and openness to imagination (in being a non-visual medium), these programs asked the listener to identify with people and tasks she might not otherwise be able to access. This meant that even as the spaces and sounds of radio serials were, essentially, completely quotidian and familiar (and therefore easy to project oneself into), they were, simultaneously, entirely unfamiliar and unlike the listener's normal everyday space, presenting the opportunity to try on different ideas and identities. This bifurcation—in which soap opera aesthetics allowed listeners the possibility of moving out of their

[73] "October 12, 1948," *The Brighter Day* (NBC, 1939-1960).

everyday roles and identities, but not so far out that they were given permission or tools to leave their everyday lives behind—speaks to the contradictory nature of the everyday implausible, in which opportunities are opened and closed simultaneously. With domestic and everyday settings layered on top of invitations to shift in and out of one's own identity, the expected domestic roles and identities are momentarily and slightly displaced to create temporary space for new options. Radio soap operas leverage the opportunity to experience something everyday yet implausible, presenting the listener with a radical new perspective that is closed down as soon as it is presented.

Conclusion

Audio is pervasive yet elusive—it is everywhere and also nowhere, making it fill the home yet remain entirely in the listener's imagination. From this contradiction—inherent to audio content, yet uniquely represented in the daytime radio serial—were borne others, ones that were embodied in the radical-reactionary cycle of the everyday implausible. The new world created by daytime serials was a radical reinvention, both in its similarity to and difference from the outside world. It posited that woman's voices were not simply important but, indeed, essential; women's concerns did not erase men's, but took precedence over them. But this world's possibilities were also its limitations. Its similarity to the world outside of soap operas—its everydayness—made a new structure of power and control seem attainable but remain impossible. As serials introduced the possibility of a world where women had control over their own lives and emotions, they also reproduced the patriarchy and maintained the status quo, often keeping marginal voices and identities out of the narrative entirely.

This was due, in large part, to the placement of the serial—and the radio—within the home. By situating the narrative within this familiar backdrop, the soundscape of the serial offered escape

and confinement simultaneously. As this chapter has addressed, identification simultaneously expanded the world of the domestic listener and limited it. On the one hand, it foreclosed on what kind of space the listener was able to listen in on, but it also gave the listener the opportunity to occupy a different part of that domestic space by allowing access to roles unlike her own. At the same time, those points of identification were also limited by biased cultural norms behind and in front of the microphone, which kept difference out of the narrative. The sound of daytime soap operas temporarily enlarged spaces for listeners to occupy, but it created a space of identification that was also deeply constrained. As such, the soundscape of the radio serial created a domestic setting that trapped the listener within a specific kind of home, but also produced an uncanny version of it, in which the domestic setting ostensibly looked like her own space, but potentially allowed for different kinds of production and performance.

This contradictory mode of engagement was offered through the audio design as well. Silence—alongside sparse sound effects, dialogue, and narration—highlighted what was familiar about the soundscape while underscoring what was unfamiliar, creating a space for the listener to place a new version of herself within the narrative. Barnouw writes, "Because a program happens in the listener's mind, and problems of scenery construction do not exist, radio can move fairly freely. It can go into any setting the listener can imagine, real or unreal. It can go about anywhere in the world, and in and out of a man's mind."[74] If indeed radio serials could just as easily be set anywhere in the world, why choose domestic settings? What does creating an extension of the listening space—a space where the listeners can simply hear into the familiar and familial troubles of everyday life—allow? This chapter has presented some of those possibilities, enumerating the ways in which the familiar opened up opportunities to explore worlds that were entirely unfamiliar.

[74] Barnouw, 12.

The production of silence and intimacy invited the listener into the program she was listening to. Verma writes, "As audioposition moved, one's living room was the front of the Spanish Civil War one moment, Broadway the next, then Brobdingnag, and then a music hall."[75] As audioposition in serials largely stayed the same, so too did one's location, asking the listener to imagine herself in an entirely new world—her own living room. The possibilities for fantasy and escape were constantly inviting radical engagement while not actually encouraging meaningful social change.

In her article "Selling Soaps," Kristen Hatch concludes that, in the end, by praising women and their roles as domestic servants, soap operas encouraged women to stay in the home rather than explore possibilities outside of it.[76] At the same time, though, these programs—in their lack of emphasis on domestic servitude within the narrative and aesthetics—gave listeners a window to another world, one that encouraged emotional engagement and community building within them and about them. While radio soap operas may have, in fact, provided just enough fantasy and freedom to do as Hatch claims, encouraging listeners to stay home and listen to the radio instead of exploring what was beyond it, these serials also provided an emotional outlet for listeners and a domestic setting to escape into that may have been similar to, but was not the same as, their own. The voices, sound effects, and silences of the radio soap opera soundscape did more than just convey the narrative: They created a sense of intimacy and identification, and forged the beginnings of the aesthetic that would willfully last through shifts in medium, audiences, and time. And while radio is generally consider a time-based medium, the sound of daytime soap operas enlarged the spatial realm its listeners could imaginatively occupy, creating a site of identification that both challenged and recreated the oppressive power structures of their lives.

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[75] Verma, 48.
[76] Hatch.

This contradictory aesthetic jumpstarted a genre that has endured through multiple medial shifts. Chapter 2 will explore the first of those, continuing to give attention to the aesthetic features of this women's genre and exploring how those features shifted and adapted to the new medium of television in the 1950s. Revisiting both the male narrator and the use of silence, I will consider how these and other aesthetic features shaped the genre during this fraught but ultimately successful transition. The chapter will investigate the consequences to the genre of becoming fixed in time and space, the creators who guided it there, and the shift in expectations from the viewers at home.

Chapter 2:

Envisioning Emotions: Irna Phillips and the Transition to Television

> META: Good heavens, what do you want with a television set?
> BERT: To watch television.
> META: I've never known you to be particularly interested in –
> BERT: Well – there're certain programs I'm – interested in –
> META: You've always been pretty much of a radio fan, haven't you?
> BERT: Oh yes, I'm still – in the radio department. But – before you came I was – looking over the paper, and there are a – few new programs coming on, one in particular, that'll be on for the first time on Friday – a half-hour show, Friday evening. And it sounds very intriguing. I'm not so sure I'm going to like it, but it has aroused my curiosity. And after all, that's how new things catch on, you know – curiosity.[1]

In the months surrounding *The Guiding Light*'s premiere on television, it introduced a new storyline, in which advertising executive Bill Bauer was tasked with the care of a new musical television program called *The Woman Gloria*, named after and starring the nightclub singer with whom he once had an affair. Not surprisingly, his work on this account—an assignment that not only had him working closely with Gloria, who was still in love with him, but also required him to be away from home for long periods of time—left his wife Bertha (Bert) on edge. So on edge, it seems, that she was even willing to purchase a television set—to the great surprise of her sister-in-law Meta. For a radio person like Bertha, this switch was clearly not made casually. If Bertha was curious enough to make the switch (even if it was out of concern for her marriage), maybe—just maybe—*The Guiding Light* team could convince its listeners to do the same when the program began airing its first television episodes on June 30, 1952. If this long-running and successful radio

[1] Irna Phillips, *The Guiding Light* script, April 2, 1952, Irna Phillips Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

program could find a stable home on the new medium of television, perhaps there was hope for the genre writ large.

By the time *The Guiding Light* began airing its first television episodes that summer, the first few (fictional) episodes of *The Woman Gloria* had already aired to great success, and Bill, after holding Gloria's hand through the early part of the production process, was returning home to his family. Unfortunately for both *The Woman Gloria* and for Bertha, Bill's absence from the set had an immediate impact. Just one week into *The Guiding Light*'s television run, the viewer learned that the fictional show within a show had been stalling. With dialogue so self-referential it is almost difficult to believe it had a second meaning, the Monday afternoon episode of *The Guiding Light* began by asking, "What happened on Friday's program?"[2] In response, Bill's supervisor not only recapped key moments in the previous week's episodes—letting the viewer know that Bill had to get out of New York quickly and that Gloria's most recent episode had not gone as well as everyone had hoped—but he also gave Bill the rundown on the big investment they made into the television program and the importance of it being a success. The meta-narrative (or Meta narrative?) here was not subtle: In the transition to television, the stakes were high not only for *The Woman Gloria* but also for *The Guiding Light*—and failure was not an option.

Fortunately for *The Guiding Light* and the daytime serial format, the investment in the transition to television seems to have paid off. Almost seventy years later, the genre continues to anchor daytime television, even as the number of programs that remain continues to dwindle. Still, it was a long time before audiences, producers, and the press were convinced of the new format's success. According to Marsha Cassidy, soap viewing rates went up in 1952 as the move took hold but fell again in 1956, even as the genre expanded. It was not until after the final radio soap opera

[2] Irna Phillips, *The Guiding Light* script, July 7, 1952, Irna Phillips Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

was canceled in 1960 that television soap operas "gained swift momentum."[3] In a 1955 *New York Herald Tribune* article, one writer insisted that soaps were on their way out: "A check with the networks unearthed this bit of intelligence: In effect, TV soap operas won't be expanded or increased, which means that they obviously are doomed to oblivion in the near future. Yet old soaps never die—they'll merely melt away, to be reincarnated on the ether waves of radio."[4] Apparently, television required the genre to evolve or die, and soap operas, just a few years into their life on television, were running the risk of stasis. Even with new serials being added to the daytime television schedule each year, this writer seemed convinced that television soap operas and their continued fifteen-minute run time were heading toward their imminent death. Little did he know that the genre was only six months away from the half-hour format—or perhaps he would not have been quite so quick to predict the genre's demise.[5] While the last radio soap operas played their final organ chords on November 25, 1960, television soap operas continue more than six decades later.

As the transition took hold, some key aspects of the radio soap opera soundscape were transferred to the new medium while others were transformed, maintaining the emphasis on aurality shaped by radio and developing a new investment in realism brought about by the visuals of television. Even as the soap opera's formal conventions were created and adjusted throughout this process, the contradiction and sentimentality embedded in the everyday implausible remained, aestheticizing an ambivalence and negotiation performed by creators like Irna Phillips in her efforts to prioritize realism and emotions at once. These daytime soap opera creators developed an

[3] Marsha Francis Cassidy, *What Women Watched: Daytime Television in the 1950s* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005), 3.
[4] "Has the Soap Opera Bubble Burst?," *New York Herald Tribune*, September 18, 1955, F22.
[5] By this point, the half-hour daily serial had been rumored and even announced to the press but had not yet come to fruition.

aesthetic that valued emotional realism—and the emotional expertise of the format's intended audience. This priority on emotional realism was developed through the changes brought about by the apparatus of television and influenced by Phillips in an effort to stay true to the audience even while transitioning the format to a new medium. While realist aesthetics are often perceived as aesthetics of restraint (as with neorealism or "prestige TV"), the emotional realism of the everyday implausible is an aesthetic of excess. This excess is often perceived as unrealistic in the extreme; it is not necessarily based in aural or narrative verisimilitude, but is instead a format focused on emotional realism. Nonetheless, by embodying the shifting yet enduring nature of the soap opera and reflecting the emotional expertise of its viewers, both the excess and the familiar are essential parts of the contradictory aesthetic of the everyday implausible. In television soap operas, the everyday implausible not only aestheticizes emotional realism but also the negotiations of the women behind the scenes and in front of the screen who were invested in television that reflected their own expertise and perceptions of the world.[6]

This aesthetic developed not only in a moment of transition, but also because of that transition, merging features from both media as it did so. Television was derived from a variety of sources; as explored in Chapter 1, the soap opera's most direct predecessor, though, was radio, a medium that relied entirely on sound and had to portray space, time, emotion, direction, action, and reaction all aurally. David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins note that new media are the result of their relationship to old media—before, during, and after the transition: "To comprehend the aesthetics of transition, we must resist notions of media purity, recognizing that each medium is

[6] This concept intersects with Ralina Joseph's term "strategic ambiguity," which addresses the efforts of Black women creators and performers to negotiate racism, anti-racism, and post-racial investments simultaneously. While strategic ambiguity reflects the work of people with intersectional identities and the everyday implausible is a gendered (not explicitly intersectional) aesthetic, they both address the struggle of creating and consuming mainstream content while existing on the margins. Ralina L. Joseph, *Postracial Resistance: Black Women, Media, and the Uses of Strategic Ambiguity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2018).

touched by and in turn touches its neighbors and rivals."[7] This sentiment is shared by Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, who argue that the use of remediation and hypermediation—on which the current "new media" landscape relies—is not really new at all. The sense of newness and transparency are mapped on to new media forms to make each new form exciting, but in actuality new media are often reproducing modes of engagement from previous ones.[8] As a result, the formal conventions of the television soap opera are deeply embedded in their own history as a sound medium. For daytime serials, both aesthetic and narrative practices were borne out of radio, and this is the context that the genre brought with it to television. The *Herald Tribune* author above was right about one thing: old soaps never die. Even as few individual programs failed to successfully make the transition to television, radio soap operas continue to live on in their televised counterparts. The process of moving these programs from radio to television was just that—a process—and, as is evident from the resistance expressed in the *Herald Tribune* article, not always a smooth one. The sounds and sights of the daytime soap opera adjusted as it made this difficult transition, but the gendered nature of the genre remained—inhabiting the slightly more literal domestic spaces of television just as it had the imagined ones of radio.

In this transition to television, even as many features remained, changes to the soap opera format were inevitable. One of the more substantive changes was the move from fifteen-minute daily episodes to thirty-minute ones, a shift that began in 1956. Another was the excision of the male voiceover narrator. Both these changes were motivated by an investment in realism, sentiment, and a sense that what worked on radio could not function in the same way on television. The replacement of the male narrator—a voice that seems to have rung false in a visual medium—

[7] David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins, *Rethinking Media Change: Aesthetics of Transition* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 11.
[8] Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

necessitated the inclusion of a number of aesthetic features that were central to the daytime soap opera aesthetic, both in its earliest years and in the long term. These include frequent close-ups, repetitive and emotionally-resonant music, and psychological sounds and visuals that were used to mirror the internality and emotional world of the characters. The extension of the narrative to half-hour (and, eventually, hour-long) episodes encouraged the creation of the multiple, intertwining narratives that have become a trademark of the daytime soap opera. This expanded timing also afforded greater emphasis on character development and more time to dedicate to the expression of sentiment. These changes were brought about, in large part, because of the work that creators like Irna Phillips were doing behind the scenes. Phillips's negotiated maneuvers—in which she both adamantly told the male creatives, producers, and sponsors what she envisioned for the medium and simultaneously apologized for overstepping—became a microcosm of what was happening within the genre, in which a feminized aesthetic developed but always within the confines of the patriarchy.

This chapter looks at the development of this daytime soap opera aesthetic on television, considering the ways that it was reenvisioned, enumerating what did and did not carry over from radio, addressing key players in the development process, and, finally, understanding the genre as planned rather than accidental. In particular, I will focus on how emotional realism—a term coined by Ien Ang—was not simply reflected in the narrative, but became a guiding force for the development of visual and aural features as the format moved to television. Maintaining aspects of the formal conventions from radio helped to ensure audience retention. Nonetheless, considerable changes to the soap opera aesthetic—guided by the same parties—were both necessitated and precipitated by this major medial shift. By looking at perhaps the most obvious moment of textual shift in the history of daytime soap operas, this chapter explores both the

industrial and creative factors at play in shifting this format from radio to television in the 1950s. Even as the soap opera aesthetic was being framed and pinned down by television, the exciting new visual properties of the medium also opened up a world that had unlimited potential; programs had to create literal spaces and ideas where there had once only been imagined ones. They were soon filling even more hours per week, opening up new opportunities for storytelling, characterization, and visual and aural aesthetics.

TV's New Realism

As daily programming designed for a potentially distracted viewer, daytime soap operas are known for their repetition, including repeated dialogue within and between episodes, repeated storylines throughout a program's history, and, of course, a repetitive visual and aural aesthetic. At this moment in the 1950s, while there was a definite sense of aesthetic inconsistency between and within programs, there were still a number of consistent features. Broadly, the same types of aesthetic choices were being used across the genre. Soap opera scenes consistently began and ended with music, for instance. The soundscape was filled primarily with dialogue, background music, and effects; the use of announcers and narrators was generally sparing. Visually, most scenes, as one might expect, featured a combination of establishing shots, medium shots, and close-ups as well as some camera movement, though not always in a predictable order. Many scenes followed the dialogue, moving to make sure each character remained in the frame as they spoke, and moving between a variety of shots and angles as the scenes progressed, but often without a clear logic or an expected formula. In these early years of television, the question of how best to frame a scene was clearly in flux. On the earliest television soap opera episodes, viewers saw and heard some of the same aesthetic features that viewers see and hear in soap operas today,

but the sense of predictability and repetition that eventually became the norm for daytime soap operas was still developing.

The literalization embedded in the process of bringing the vision of television to life moved soap operas further toward opposing extremes of realism and implausibility. As programming moved to television, the call for verisimilitude became greater, requiring realist sets, props, and performances, in which the actors now had to perform the character's actions. Where once the characters could simply discuss or even ignore these actions, they now had to actually perform them—whether it was making breakfast, picking up the phone, or sitting in the living room having a conversation with a friend or family member. On the one hand, the move from sound alone to sound plus image meant that spaces, places, emotions, and ideas that may or may not have seemed true to life had the opportunity to feel even more believable than ever. "Seeing is believing," after all. Suddenly, the once unseen was now right there in the viewer's living room, constantly proving that the fictional world of the daytime soap opera did in fact exist in a way it never had before.

On the other hand, the concreteness of the visuals made implausible moments seem more implausible than ever. In discussing the development of the NAB Television Code throughout the 1950s, for instance, Deborah Jaramillo addresses the fact that the inclusion of visuals to broadcast programming was central to the moral panic surrounding television and raised the stakes on the public's fear of immorality. She argues that variable meanings on radio led to less standardization, while the opposite was true on television: "In radio, sonic variables impeded the strict imposition of standards. In television, the addition of sounds to images may have slowed viewers' runaway imaginations, but it contributed to a new type of communication (visuals plus sounds plus liveness) that required additional layers of oversight to quiet the loud expressions of moral panic."[9] With

[9] Deborah L. Jaramillo, *The Television Code: Regulating the Screen to Safeguard the Industry* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2018), 13.

new visual representations, transgressions like extramarital affairs, criminal activity, and non-white racial and ethnic identities were now more visible than ever. As the new medium took hold, it created not simply a new presentation but also a new perception—even of similar content. With the new visual representation brought into American living rooms by television, the ideas and images felt real—and were real—in a whole new way. At the same time, if sights and sounds of the television soap opera were especially *unlike* reality, that disruption of verisimilitude was now also more evident than ever. With this literalization that came with television, the chance of showing something that flouted a viewer's expectations was constant, bringing questions of realism to the fore. On the radio, imagination helped the listener to develop a sense of identification with the characters, but as the need (as well as the opportunity) for imagining what the characters looked like or where they were in the world disappeared, the imperative to create not only a believable visual world but also a believable emotional world became ever more pressing.

Janice Radway notes a dissonance between narrative and situational realism for romance readers. For these readers, realism stems from a "separation of plot and setting."[10] In terms of the plot, "reality is neither as just nor as happy as the romances would have it. Rewards do not always accrue to the good nor are events consistently resolved without ambiguity in the real world. A romance is a fantasy, they believe, because it portrays people who are happier and better than real individuals."[11] On the other hand, the readers expected and believed the settings to be cohesive, consistent, and well researched. The assumption that this fiction could be realist and non-realist at the same time was not an issue for the romance readers. In terms of the readers' expectations, there

[10] Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Raleigh, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 109.
[11] Ibid.

was simply a divide between realism and fantasy, in which they were both functioning at the same time, but within different aspects of the fiction.

Within soap operas, realism and fantasy are also intermixed. The term "emotional realism" was coined by Ien Ang in her analysis of *Dallas* fans and the practices that motivate their viewing. In *Watching Dallas*, Ang draws a distinction between connotative realism and denotative realism, noting that viewers did find the program realistic, but only on a connotative level. This distinction was a paradox, but it also allowed Ang to identify how this realism functioned. "At a connotative level, they ascribe mainly emotional meanings to *Dallas*. In this sense, the realism of *Dallas* can be called 'emotional realism.'"[12] That is to say, the viewers did not necessarily believe that individual plot points were especially realistic, but that the emotions those narratives provoked were. The program *felt* real. While Ang's research was focused on a weekly nighttime program, her findings are relevant to daily daytime programming as well. As Anna McCarthy writes: "Insisting on the specificity of emotional realism and distinguishing between different levels of realism that are made possible in serial television is crucial for feminist approaches to the study of soap opera as a genre. Popular representations often depict it as a fantasy genre and its viewers as deluded and gullible persons, unable to distinguish between reality and fiction."[13] The *Dallas* audiences that are dismissed in popular representations receive the same treatment as daytime soap operas, and the conflict between narrative excess and emotional accessibility is also present in the daytime programming. As McCarthy points out here, the presence of different levels of realism is a paradox, not a delusion.

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[12] Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London, UK: Routledge, 2015), 45.
[13] Anne McCarthy, "Realism and Soap Opera," in *The Television Genre Book* (London: British Film Institute, 2015), 78.

At the same time, McCarthy's point helps to clarify the relationship between the longevity of soap operas and the importance of emotional realism. The investment of the soap opera viewer is an investment in a world rather than a narrative. This is what Ang addresses with the concept of emotional realism. She writes, "A constant to and fro movement between identification with and distancing from the fictional world as constructed in the text therefore characterizes the involvement of the [audience]."[14] The sense of conflict and contradiction embedded in the existence of this fictional world is not something that the soap opera viewer has to get over, but, indeed, part of the viewing experience. As such, whether individual storylines seem plausible is far less relevant than whether the characters' motivations or emotional responses do. The function of emotional realism has been widely accepted within soap opera scholarship over the past forty years; the idea that this is reflected not only in the narrative but equally so within the visual and aural features, prioritizing the representation of "relatable" emotions (ones that seemingly feel familiar to the viewer, whether or not they are related to her own personal experiences) over visual or aural verisimilitude, has rarely been addressed.

From Radio to Television

> Once we understand that television owes its most basic narrative structures, programme formats, genres, modes of address, and aesthetic practices not to cinema but to radio—and once we begin to see television not as a failed or lesser form of cinema but as a portfolio of inventive narrative forms each with its own highly effective techniques, comprehensible to and highly valued by audiences around the world—we can begin to appreciate the unique and complex narratives that television's sonically-oriented streamed seriality has made possible.[15]

[14] Ang, 50.
[15] Michele Hilmes, "Television Sound: Why the Silence?," *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 2, no. 2 (2008): 160.

Television was influenced not only by radio but also by other media forms, like film, theater, and literature. The new medium borrowed aesthetic features, narrative structures, and creative talent and performers from these existing media.[16] Soap opera in particular drew on cinematic melodrama, with its emphasis on sentimentality, expressed in part through formal conventions like score and cinematography. Nonetheless, television programming is uniquely beholden to radio aesthetics, and television sound has the potential to sound like radio because it *came from* radio. In the quote above, television and television sound can only be given their due once we understand television's history in radio. As the genre moved away from its home on radio, the transition to television proved to be strongly author-driven, resulting in a televisual form that owed many of its aesthetic features not only to the medial forms that came before it, but also to a handful of early creators and authors who were invested in the genre's look and sound. Perhaps the most recognizable example of this phenomenon is Irna Phillips, who was one of the architects of the daytime soap opera form on radio and a strong advocate for its move to television. Other early creatives include Roy Winsor, who developed many of the earliest television soap operas; writer-producer Agnes Nixon; and director-producer Ted Corday, all of whom worked on soap operas on both radio and television. Phillips in particular had a vision for what television soap operas could be and the tenacity to see that vision through. In the rocky transition to television, these creators were deeply invested in soap opera aesthetics and developing the genre in its new medium. To do so, though, the genre first had to get through the transition.

After the soap opera's significant success on radio, networks and advertisers were convinced that it was time to start experimenting with the new medium of television. As the post-

[16] See Christine Becker, *It's the Pictures That Got Small: Hollywood Film Stars on 1950s Television* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2009); Christopher Anderson, *Hollywood TV: the Studio System in the Fifties* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994).

war television boom began to go national, domestic viewing quickly became popular, with television sets in less than ten percent of homes at the beginning of the decade and nearly ninety percent by the end of it.[17] Daytime advertisers wanted to get in on the burgeoning market.[18] Between 1947 and 1950, soap sponsors and producers made a number of attempts to cash in at both the local and national level. Some noteworthy early endeavors included *A Woman to Remember*, a 1947 Dumont program broadcast out of New York; *These Are My Children*, a 1949 attempt by Irna Phillips that was broadcast from Chicago's NBC affiliate and lasted less than a month; and *The First Hundred Years*, which started in 1950 and ran for a year on CBS.[19] The first "big time soaps" (in the words of soap opera historian Robert LaGuardia) began in 1951 and were television originals. Winsor's *Search for Tomorrow* premiered on CBS on September 3 of that year and ran for thirty-five years, and his follow-up, *Love of Life* (CBS, 1951-1980), ran for almost thirty.[20] The following year, Phillips's long-time radio hit *The Guiding Light* premiered its simultaneous television broadcast, marking the beginning of its television run.

While the genre as a whole found long-lasting success on television, few individual programs made the transition quite as successfully; *The Guiding Light* was an exception.[21] It ran on television for fifty-seven years, from 1952-2009, the first four years of which were concurrent

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[17] Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 1.
[18] Jennifer Hyland Wang, "'The Case of the Radio-Active Housewife': Relocating Radio in the Age of Television," in *Radio Reader* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002).
[19] "Radio and Television," *The New York Times*, March 3, 1949, 50. See also: Robert LaGuardia, *From Ma Perkins to Mary Hartman: the Illustrated History to Soap Operas* (New York, NY: Ballantine, 1977), 42.
[20] *Search for Tomorrow* ran primarily on CBS, but it moved to NBC for the last four years of its run, from 1982 to the end of 1986. LaGuardia, 43; "On Television," *The New York Times*, September 3, 1951, sec. Business; "On Television This Week," *The New York Times*, September 23, 1951, X13.
[21] Some academic sources that address *The Guiding Light* include: C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby, *Soap Fans: Pursuing Pleasure and Making Meaning in Everyday Life* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1995); Laura Stempel Mumford, *Love and Ideology in the Afternoon* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995); Martha Nochimson, *No End to Her: Soap Opera and the Female Subject* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1992); Louise Spence, *Watching Daytime Soap Operas: the Power of Pleasure* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005).

with the end of its radio run.[22] Even though not all of her attempts were as successful as this one, Phillips was instrumental in guiding this transition to television and was one of the only creators and head writers (what we today might call a showrunner) who was able to find success in both media. Phillips also led the transition of *The Brighter Day*, which ran for nearly fifteen years, on radio from 1948-1956 and on television from 1954-1962. Like *The Guiding Light*, it ran concurrent television and radio programs to ease the transition.[23] Some other attempts to transition from radio to television included *Young Doctor Malone* (NBC, 1958-1963), *Valiant Lady* (CBS, 1953-1957), *Road to Life* (CBS, 1954-1955), *Portia Faces Life* (CBS, 1954-1955), and *One Man's Family* (NBC, 1954-1955).[24] In addition, the 1950s saw original soap opera programming added to the daytime schedule all the time. The most stable were the Winsor programs (*Love of Life*, *Search for Tomorrow*, and *The Secret Storm*), but there were many others that lasted one or two years. This meant that the first years of soap operas on television saw a combination of groundbreaking original programming—from Winsor, Phillips, and others—and familiar titles transported from radio.

On the whole, soap opera audiences for both radio and television were demographically similar; individual viewers, however, were not necessarily the same, and one of the first things the transitioning programs had to do was catch their new audiences up on what they had missed. In one early television episode of *The Guiding Light*, sisters Meta and Trudy delve into their complicated sibling relationship, rehashing the long history of their troubled past, their erstwhile

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[22] The program title changed from *The Guiding Light* to simply *Guiding Light* in 1975. For that reason, it will be referred to using its former title when discussing its early years on television.

[23] Marsha Cassidy notes that soap operas stayed on the radio for longer in part because they were financially supporting their television counterparts. Cassidy, 4.

[24] LaGuardia, 47, 71; Jim Cox, *The Great Radio Soap Operas* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999). The dates and networks given in the text are for television runs. The following is the relevant information for radio runs: *Young Doctor Malone* (NBC, 1939-1949; CBS, 1940-1960), *Valiant Lady* (NBC, 1938-1946), *Road to Life* (NBC, 1937-1959), *Portia Faces Life* (CBS, 1940-1951), and *One Man's Family* (NBC, 1933-1959).

jealousies and rivalries, and the years of turmoil that Meta experienced on the show (including, notably, the death of her child, a murder trial, and a secret marriage). This process of recapping through exposition, which has become the norm for soap operas on both television and radio, served to give new television viewers a sense of the program's history and the expert knowledge they needed to catch up.[25] *The Guiding Light* team attempted to open the door for new viewers to the program without alienating long-time listeners of the still-successful radio version.

On Friday, June 27, 1952, it was just a radio program; on Monday, June 30, it was also a television program. Phillips, as *The Guiding Light* team leader, worked to introduce an old genre to a new form. Phillips was a consummate researcher and seemed to consider herself an excellent judge of character—she often paused in her own story breakdowns to ruminate on the human condition and to explain what motivated her characters and why they made the choices that they did. She created the first daytime soap opera, *Painted Dreams*, and many more that followed. In her years on radio, she worked with young creatives who became central to the history of television soap operas, including Nixon and Corday. Even as other genres struggled with the transition, the soap opera eventually thrived. Jim Cox—among many others—credits Phillips for *The Guiding Light*'s survival: "The experiment of carrying an audio narrative to a visual medium in almost every case met with misfortune. Some speculated that *Light*'s prosperity resulted from the fact Phillips knew what audiences wanted and gave it to them."[26] Even though *The Guiding Light* had the potential for disaster at every turn, it managed to survive the transition mostly intact, perhaps because of Phillips's strong hand and understanding of audiences. In addition, Phillips—both directly and indirectly—had a hand in many of the most popular early soap operas, influencing

[25] Irna Phillips, *The Guiding Light* script, July 2, 1952, Irna Phillips Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
[26] Cox, 63.

every aspect of the genre. While Phillips did not simply or single-handedly create the look and sound of television soap operas, many of the aesthetic choices she developed—through her scripts, her creative decisions, and her choices of which directors, writers, and producers to employ—continue to influence the genre.

Prioritizing Sentiment

In 1953 *New York Times* television reporter Jack Gould noted a difference between daytime soap operas on radio and television: "In the age of the radio it was pretty certain that the dominant theme would be fouled-up family relations, or sickness, or some run-of-the-mill neurosis. On the video screen, however, the writers of the soaps seem to be leaning on straight crime stuff. The crises don't seem quite the same."[27] As the programs moved to television, Gould sensed that the narratives were shifting away from everyday storylines. But not everyone agreed with this sentiment. Soap opera historian Robert LaGuardia perceived the television crime plots as duplications of those heard on radio, rather than ones that were somehow, suddenly, more outrageous. LaGuardia also saw a continued emphasis on family and domesticity: "All of the characters on [Winsor's] *Search for Tomorrow*, *Love of Life*, and *The Secret Storm* had problems stemming from marriage, children, and family. Nearly all of the scenes took place in kitchens and living rooms, and the talk occurred over coffee cups."[28] It seems possible that the narratives had not *become* more farfetched, as Gould suggests, but instead simply *appeared* more farfetched as the genre moved to television.

As the soap opera made the major transition to television, it took time for the genre to find its footing in the new medium. The process was certainly about ratings success and finding

[27] Jack Gould, "Television in Review: Soap Operas," *New York Times*, November 4, 1953, 40.
[28] LaGuardia, 43-44.

sustainable commercial models for television, but it was also about figuring out how to present this emotionally-driven, conversation-based genre in a visual medium. This challenge often centered on questions of realism and how such expectations would be reflected within the format's dominant aesthetic practices. Was it possible to make the necessary changes to fit the genre into the new medium and still provide a seemingly realistic impression of everyday life? Irna Phillips saw this as a key project of the transition, focusing on how to represent characters and emotions she felt her viewers could "relate" to—within the affordances and limitations of television. These were often centered on characterization and building worlds for soap opera viewers that visualized emotion, even as the narratives were often considered overblown and absurd. The link between realism, sentiment, and form is conspicuous throughout Phillips's work.

As *The Guiding Light* moved to television, Phillips's scripts were invested in specific aesthetic choices, explicitly asking the rest of the creative and production staff to pay close attention to both sound and visuals. These instructions were pleas for the creative team to consider more closely how the visual and aural aspects of the programs reflected a sense of realism and maintained a space for viewer identification with the text. Phillips was acutely aware of and responsive to the work as it was produced, leveling criticism when she felt the production values fell short of where they should have been. In April 1953, for instance, she pointed out what she felt was shoddy work in an episode of *The Guiding Light*.[29] After months of lying to her family about who the father of her baby was, Kathy Grant was admitted to a long-term care facility to keep her anxiety at bay and her late-term pregnancy safe. Kathy was alone and estranged from her husband, and yet still unwilling to tell him that he was not the father of her unborn baby but that it was instead Bob Lang, the man she had secretly married and had recently been acquitted of

[29] Irna Phillips, *The Guiding Light* script, May 7, 1953, Irna Phillips Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

murdering. While at the facility, Kathy makes friends with a young boy named Timmy, whose father was dead and whose terminally-ill mother was also a patient in the hospital. Kathy, about to give birth to a fatherless child, is drawn to the fatherless Timmy.

Figure 1: Timmy plays with his soldiers as Kathy looks on (*The Guiding Light*)

Figure 2: Kathy's unvoiced emotion in close-up (*The Guiding Light*)

One scene of this episode begins as organ music fades and is replaced with the sound of a clock chiming outside the window; as Kathy sits in a chair sewing, Timmy soon asks to enter the

room. While Kathy and Timmy discuss the toy soldiers in his pockets, the scene continues in a medium-long shot. The conversation continues with Kathy sitting in her chair and Timmy sitting on the floor across from her (see Fig. 1). Occasionally, as the characters begin to address more serious topics, this series of medium shots is intercut with a close up. Through this formal choice, the viewer is given a hint as to Kathy's internal thoughts. While ruminating on war and soldiers, for instance, she says, "No, I guess not. There are times when they have to accept defeat." At that moment, a close-up focuses the viewer on Kathy's face, intimating, among other possible interpretations, that Kathy also feels defeated (see Fig. 2).[30] As Kathy and Timmy finish their conversation and he leaves, the camera zooms in to a close-up of Kathy looking overwrought as Timmy's voice repeats in her head: "I kind of miss not having a father. They have fathers and sons' nights. Fathers' night at school, too. Mom can't go to them. Mom can't go to them. I kind of miss not having a father…a father…a father…"[31] As the organ music crescendos, the camera zooms into a close-up on the baby bonnet Kathy has been making and the scene ends.

In critiquing this episode, Phillips was particularly concerned with the ways in which the soundscape did not match what she felt it should be. "The Thursday, April 9th show I'm frank to admit left me rather cold. Number one, the angelus chimes sounded anything but melodious or coming from a nearby mission."[32] These "angelus chimes" are what is identified as "a clock" above—a clock that sounds very unlike chimes.[33] She continued by getting to the heart of the matter, noting a clear relationship between camera angle, camera movement, and a feeling of identification.

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[30] "April 9, 1953," *The Guiding Light* (CBS, 1952-2009).
[31] Ibid.
[32] Phillips, May 7, 1953 script.
[33] She also critiqued the performances: "Number two, I think we should remember that when a child plays he doesn't sit on the floor Indian fashion, he's on his well-known tummy. I saw no play on the soldiers whatsoever, nor did I believe he had any soldiers." The impetus for this bit of criticism, though, is less clear, since the soldiers are, in fact, visible on screen. Phillips, May 7, 1953 script.

> Had the camera stayed with the boy's face, hands, and the soldiers, I think we would have gotten the feeling of identification. The way the scene played, it was too much of a feeder for Kathy. Again I felt we stayed with a picture at the end when movement seemed more than indicated. That father theme that the boy was merely voicing for himself should have made a terrific impact on Kathy, where she would not be content to sit in a chair, but get up, and at first show a reaction to something she's trying to get away from; and then the voices of the boy on recording came way too fast without any movement on Kathy's part previous to the voice. I don't know why the taps, which I indicated in the script, were omitted. You see, my feeling about the use of taps was two-fold—two fathers are dead, Tim's and an unborn child's, which would have given much more poignancy to the closing scene. And if we did have taps, the words "a father—my baby" would have had special significance.[34]

One can begin to see how preoccupied Phillips was in nurturing—and controlling—all aspects of the program's soundscape and visuals.

Even though Phillips was critical of the nuance and skill with which the characters' internalities were demonstrated, attempts on the part of the director and creative team to express emotions visually were not entirely absent. In particular, this is seen in Kathy's close-up (see Fig. 2). This use of the close-up is timed and positioned so that the viewer understands that Kathy is experiencing some emotion that is left unvoiced, but, while that emotion is implied, it is also ambiguous. It is expressed but not entirely resolved. This close-up lies somewhere in the middle of the scene, making it just one moment among many. If it were the final image, this placement would reinforce the close-up, and the emotion expressed therein, as the most (perhaps even the only) important moment in the scene; instead, the viewer is given only a sense of subtext. This leaves room for more possibilities of interpretation, inviting viewers to wallow in this moment of emotional possibility. This close-up denotes an interrelationship between the visual, the aural, and the emotional. In Phillips's view, emotions deserved time and attention within the soap opera form. Sound was meant to be "melodious" and "poignant"; by including certain sound effects, Phillips

[34] Phillips, May 7, 1953 script.

wanted the viewer to have an affective response to the text—one that was sentimental and evocative. Similarly, visuals, used correctly, could produce a sense of identification and insight into the inner workings of a character's mind. Here, Phillips seemed to issue a challenge to the rest of the creative team—and industry—to use television to create a new soap opera aesthetic that emphasized greater insight into the real emotions of her fictional characters.

Phillips was invested in how the visual and aural features of the program created a sense of realism and identification with the characters and their motivations. In voicing concern over the chimes and, later, the troubling omission of "Taps," she brought attention to the soundscape. In both of these instances, Phillips was attentive to the psychological uses of sound and its potential to reflect the characters' emotional state. Using the framing of religion (chimes from a mission) and war ("Taps"), Phillips wanted to imply Kathy's deeply conflicted psychological state, in which she felt guilty for both keeping the truth of her baby's paternity from her husband and the reality that her baby would have to grow up without a biological father. Furthermore, Phillips expressed concern over Tim and Kathy's positioning and movement, criticizing the production staff for not having Kathy stand up in frustration and for allowing Tim to kneel and sit rather than lie on his "well-known tummy." These choices rubbed Phillips the wrong way, seemingly degrading the sense of dramatic realism that she worked to bring to this scene. Finally, she criticized the pacing and camera movement for failing to linger closely on Tim's face and hands to create a "feeling of identification." Phillips addressed multiple aspects of the visual and aural potential of the new medium, showing a hope that, a year into production, there would be a better sense of how to use television to create an emotionally resonant world with which the television viewer could identify. In so doing, she addressed the specific formal aspects of the medium that became the basis for soap opera on television: music and sound used for psychological purposes, more time for deeper

characterization, and camera movement and framing that allowed for sense of identification—all motivated by a need to better represent characters' inner emotions, both visually and aurally.

In her ongoing and strategic efforts to convince the mostly male creatives with whom she worked that her perspective on emotions and character development should be prioritized, Phillips focused on the importance of world-building. Her goal of keeping her programs on the air, and for more minutes per day than they previous had been, centered on the importance of creating characters that soap opera viewers would want to keep coming home to. "We must tell this story thru people five days a week, fifty-two weeks out of the year, and never lose sight that it is a serial story, concerned with characters in whom the audience is interested, characters in whom we have invested a good many years, characters that an audience will stay with for twenty-two minutes as they are now doing for ten minutes."[35] In the midst of a fight to move the daytime serial from a fifteen-minute daily episode to a thirty-minute one, Phillips argued for the necessity of more time to create more substantial and believable characters for the soap opera audiences that she knew to be canny, attentive, and deeply committed.

Phillips's scripts and letters show a deep investment in realism—of character, emotion, and narrative—and a sense that realistic characters were necessary for convincing audiences to commit to a daily serial. Phillips was acutely aware of what (according to her) was believable or not, and she was critical when she felt believability was absent, especially when it came to character motivation and emotion. The detail and precision with which she wrote her scripts and story breakdowns was a strategic attempt to convince the imaginary reader that her stories were based, most importantly, on believable human emotions. It was this investment in emotions and characterization that seemed to be Phillips's primary concern. Phillips's stories tended to be well

[35] Letter from Irna Phillips to Storrs Haynes, December 27, 1954, Irna Phillips Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

researched but also slow-moving, allowing emotion to take precedence over narrative. Phillips would rely on experts to explain complicated legal, medical, and historical issues that might be relevant to a particular storyline.[36] To linger over emotional realism, Phillips would rely on her own instincts—and expected the rest of the team to do the same. In terms of narrative plausibility, there seemed to be much less concern about whether it was likely that a woman and her stepdaughter would both fall in love with the same man than whether their behavior after the fact was based on realistic and "relatable" emotional responses that would allow them to both remain in the audience's favor.[37]

To defend her efforts toward emotional realism, Phillips depended on her own convictions.[38] One 1955 story addresses this belief Phillips had in her own instincts. After writing extensive dialogue for Bertha and Kathy about their relationships and emotional states, Phillips underscored this section by noting, "And so we have two women tell the home maker about love, and how it changes, and how it must change. I <u>believe</u> Kathy, because I've experienced very much what Kathy will experience, and I'm sure many, many other women have experienced. This is believable, and I feel confident that the Guiding Light audience will accept this because it's unlike the end of a fairy story. They don't always get married, they don't always remarry. An audience,

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[36] For instance, Phillips once got a doctor's consultation on an amnesia storyline and decided, eventually, to switch it to "deep" depression because the type of amnesia she was thinking of was not scientifically sound. Revised Outline for *The Guiding Light*, September 27, 1954, Box 42, Irna Phillips Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

[37] In a 1955 story breakdown, Phillips introduces a new character, creating a love triangle between Meta and her stepdaughter Kathy. Phillips writes, "By the time Meta thinks she's falling in love with Mark, and possibly <u>is</u> in love with him – Kathy returns from Europe - and falls in love with the same man. We have again a great deal of background upon which to draw. Can Meta give up this man who finds her stepdaughter attractive – and oh yes, who has something Meta doesn't have – Kathy thirty, Meta in her very early forties. How do you weigh these things? Kathy can give this man children, he has a right to his own children. Does he want children? She too has a right to go on with her life. Because she's in her forties and because she's a widow, does she not too have a right to be wanted, to be needed, to be loved again possibly? Every woman is entitled to this – even Kathy. […] This is a triangle in which no one character, believe it or not, should be portrayed unsympathetically." Irna Phillips, Storyline Breakdown, October 29, 1955, p13-14, Irna Phillips Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

[38] Though others agreed. Jim Cox noted that "No one could be accused of stretching the typical listener's imagination beyond belief in a Phillips drama." Cox, 40.

even as you and I, will ultimately accept sincerity and honesty."[39] As in this example, Phillips's script notes and script breakdowns often read as deep introspection into the human psyche—and her own psyche—explaining at length how or why a character would make a particular choice that ensures they are not jeopardizing their own internal logic. In doing so, she not only emphasized the need for realism but also the understanding that an investment in love and romance—and its concomitant sentiment—could be a path to believability.

This emphasis on emotional realism that began in the earliest days of soap opera programming—later reenvisioned with the move to television—was the cornerstone of Phillips's style. Often, it was not entirely clear for whom precisely Phillips was making these justifications. Whether intended for the other writers, the production staff, the networks and producers, or herself, her notes seem to be in response to a common criticism of daytime soap operas—that they were an absurd, exaggerated fantasy, where no one behaved as real people would. These efforts to defend her scripts' sense of realism often led Phillips to take on a role for her characters not unlike a psychologist, in which she delved deep into the human psyche to determine what motivated these character and determine how they would and should think and behave. In introducing a potential new love interest for one *The Guiding Light* character, Phillips writes, "Why an engineer? An engineer is a builder first of dreams, and then of bridges. An engineer is a man of sensitivity."[40] In Phillips's imagining, this new romantic interest was not an engineer because it was a respectable middle-class profession but because it was a profession that brought the appropriate emotional stakes to the storyline.

There is no reason to believe that Phillips had some kind of unique insight into what motived people in interpersonal relationships—except for the fact that it worked. Whatever it was

[39] Phillips, Storyline Breakdown, October 29, 1955, 9-10.
[40] Phillips, Storyline Breakdown, October 29, 1955, 12.

that Phillips understood about creating these relationships kept audiences tuning in year after year. As Cox notes, "Phillips placed strong emphasis on characterization, revealing details over time about the figures in her stories and allowing audiences to closely relate to those individuals."[41] Phillips's commitment to what she considered to be "real" emotions allowed the genre to be successful in not just one medium, but two. Her efforts to visualize realist emotions, though, often elongated time and story—sometimes stretching narratives beyond the point of believability and forgoing narrative realism for the sake of emotions. As such, the focus on the slow-moving portrayal of emotions and interpersonal relationships reinforced the everyday implausible, putting realist emotions at odds with realist narratives. As the programs got longer, decisions had to be made about how that time would be spent, and Phillips's commitment to emotional realism and world building continued.

The New Half Hour

If the longevity of individual daytime soap operas proves nothing else, it speaks to the format's investment in worlds—character development, settings, themes, emotions—over narratives. This investment resonates in Phillips's advocacy for the half-hour soap opera. In the 1950s, soap operas were still holding fast to the norms of their radio predecessors, with blocks of short programs back to back. Nonetheless, producers and creators alike could see the narrative and financial benefits of creating longer daily episodes instead. Half-hour episodes made it easier to retain audiences for longer, instead of having to rely on viewers staying from one program to the next; they allowed networks and producers to scale fixed costs (like sets) to fill more hours of the day; and they reduced rehearsal time—and, therefore, actors' fees—per half-hour block. Phillips,

[41] Cox, 40.

who vocally advocated for this change, was prepared to sell the financial benefits but showed even more enthusiasm for the textual ones. The half hour would allow more time for visual storytelling, slow down the pacing, and allow for a greater focus on character development and emotional expression. This new format was a radical shift in the soap opera form, changing not simply the amount of story that could be told, but *the way* it could be told—visually and structurally. Like so many daytime soap opera innovations, Phillips was at the forefront of this shift, a shift that would revamp daytime soap operas and their storytelling structure.

Even before daytime soap operas moved to television, Phillips was pushing for the half-hour daily format, hailing its benefits for effective storytelling.[42] But the move to television provided even more motivation to shift to half-hour episodes. As one 1955 *Variety* article pointed out, Phillips had long thought that fifteen minutes was just not enough story time in the visual medium of television:

> Irna Phillips is about to carve out a new niche vis-à-vis the daytime weepers. The "Guiding Light" (et. al.) writer is convinced that the tv sudsers (her own included) are merely a carryover from radio both as to the length of periods and the manner in which they're played. She rejects the traditional quarter-hour heartbeaters as virtually impossible to put over videowise when it comes to delivering the story, since that means only 10 or 11 minutes of narrative. She feels that the same amount of time has long since established itself as effective and reasonable in the sound medium, since the "ear" values ride parallel with the imagination-and-illusion facets to provide a substance in terms of time that television must perforce miss out on.[43]

The new half hour provided more time to exist in the soap opera world and the opportunity to indulge in the emotions that came with it. While *The Guiding Light* sponsors Proctor and Gamble

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[42] In a letter from Phillips to Storrs Haynes, Compton Agency, November 22, 1954: "Many years ago, I presented a half-hour version of *Today's Children* for Pillbury's amazement. I don't believe there was any reason given as to why the idea was not accepted." After two long, non-contiguous runs on NBC radio, *Today's Children* was cancelled for the final time in 1950, never to make it to television or to the half-hour mark. Nonetheless it, like many of Phillips's programs, influenced what came after. Irna Phillips Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

[43] "Irna Weeps for the Weepers," *Variety*, February 9, 1955, 33.

were reluctant to make another giant transition so soon after its television run had begun, Phillips's conviction that this was the right move for soap operas was endorsed in 1956, when she was given the opportunity to introduce the half-hour format to daytime serials with a brand-new program, *As the World Turns*.

On April 2, 1956, *As the World Turns*—alongside fellow Proctor and Gamble program *The Edge of Night* (CBS, 1956-1975; ABC, 1975-1984)—premiered, bringing the daily half hour to the daytime soap. Set in the fictional midwestern town of Oakdale, Illinois, *As the World Turns* was a slow-moving, character-driven midday drama in the vein of Phillips's other programming. She created *As the World Turns* with the writing, producing, and directorial support of Agnes Nixon (née Eckhardt) and Ted Corday, who would go on to create long-running daytime soap operas that included *All My Children*, *One Life to Live*, and *Days of Our Lives*.[44] In contrast, *The Edge of Night*, was an aptly-titled late-afternoon mystery program based on *Perry Mason* and written by one of *Perry Mason*'s former writers, Irving Vendig.[45] Both programs explored the possibilities and potential of this new, longer soap opera format.

While *The Guiding Light* did not find its way to this new half-hour format until 1968—sixteen years into its television run and twelve years after the radio program ended—Phillips began advocating for this switch early on. The concept of a half-hour, daily daytime serial became a central discussion point between Phillips, Proctor and Gamble, and the rest of the creative team. The conversations between them showed an enthusiasm for the idea (even with a very real hesitance on the part of Proctor and Gamble, who owned and financed the program) and a sense that it was well suited to the visual storytelling of television. Phillips felt strongly that fifteen minutes did not provide enough room for storytelling on television: "It must be recognized that in

[44] Ibid.
[45] LaGuardia, 203-204.

adapting a 15-minute radio show for television you are unable to really explore the new medium as you should like. I wouldn't have said this two and a half years ago, I didn't know the medium then, I didn't know the tremendous possibilities of the visual. Perhaps you don't know that *The Guiding Light* radio script is usually cut for television to make room for the visual."[46] Even before the move to the half hour, accommodations were being made to "make room for the visual" and to consider the role of visual storytelling, but the move to thirty minutes underscored the fact that soap opera creators were now—by the mid-1950s—becoming aware of what the visual medium had to offer. Phillips's notes often focused on the movement of characters and cameras, as she worked to express characters' internal emotions through external functions (e.g. actors standing up and sitting down, actors moving closer to or further from each other and the camera). But the short program format had its limitations. She wanted to expand on the possibilities presented by television, maintaining the speed of narrative progression and using the extra time to focus on feelings.

Phillips felt so strongly about the need to take time for visual storytelling that she supported retaining the fifteen-minute format for *The Guiding Light* radio program while using slightly longer versions of the same scripts for the half-hour television program. In this way, the same amount of narrative would be given much more time on television than it had been on radio. While Phillips was eventually successful in creating a thirty-minute daytime soap opera, there was also a great deal of pushback to this idea, and this change was not quickly effected. In an enumerated list, *The Guiding Light* director Ted Corday noted the significant improvements he predicted with the switch to the half-hour, considering fiscal efficiency as well as the opportunity for more substantive storytelling and "completely rounded episodes." In response to Phillips's and Corday's

[46] Letter from Phillips to Haynes, November 22, 1954.

suggestion, Storrs Haynes from Proctor and Gamble was "intrigued" but not easily convinced, voicing concerns not simply about the so-called production efficiencies proclaimed by Corday (of which he was skeptical) but also about storytelling and narrative possibilities: "Obviously, we cannot embrace the classic half-hour structure if for no other reason than that it would consume large gobs of story; but just as obviously, to me at least, we cannot consume it at the fifteen-minute rate."[47] It is clear from his comments that Haynes was concerned about both running through story too quickly and running through story too slowly, expressing a paradox that continues to haunt the daytime soap opera today: it somehow manages to have too much narrative and too little narrative simultaneously. By creating a world rather than simply a narrative, television soap operas—like everyday life—developed as both emotionally active and narratively boring at once.

Phillips, on the other hand, saw only potential in bringing this new dramatic form and its narrative possibilities to daytime television.[48] She saw television and its expansive possibilities as a whole new form of storytelling and was committed to finding new ways to innovate the format. "We could not 'embrace the classic half-hour structure', not because we 'would consume large gobs of story' but because, Storrs, we are not concerned with the half-hour episodic form that has only made its appearance in the nighttime field."[49] Furthermore, "Who are any of us to say what our audience would accept in a half-hour idea of the <u>daily serial</u>. […] Please remember that as yet there has never been a <u>daily daytime</u> half-hour serial either on radio or television." [50] As Phillips saw it, the half hour daily daytime serial was entirely new and had not been done before, so there was nothing to compare it to and no way to know what the audience would or would not accept.

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[47] Letter from Storrs Haynes to Irna Phillips, December 20, 1954, Irna Phillips Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
[48] She did so, though, by claiming it was not a new dramatic form—"I do not agree that in the half-hour we are concerned with a different kind of dramatic form"—while simultaneously explaining how it had never been done before. Letter from Phillips to Haynes, December 27, 1954.
[49] Letter from Phillips to Haynes, December 27, 1954.
[50] Letter from Phillips to Haynes, December 27, 1954.

What was clear to her, though, was that the half-hour would allow more time for character development and could radically shift the potential of what the soap opera could do as a genre. Even when Phillips writes "who are any of us to say what our audience would accept," it seems more to be a strategy to get her readers on board than a concession that she may not know what her audiences wanted. The implication was that she knew what they would accept, and it was to the benefit of the admen and producers to heed her advice. She was convinced that more time for emotion and conversation was the only way to tell a story that would resonate with soap opera audiences.

At the same time that Haynes was skeptical, though, he was excited by the possibilities of this new form of storytelling. In fact, he believed the move to the half-hour could change what the daytime soap opera was altogether.

> I believe that in a half-hour we are concerned not just with an expansion of the fifteen-minute dramatic form, but with a quite different kind of dramatic form. We know that the half-hour form as practised in television today and as it had been set forth in radio for years, is a fairly formal, fairly rounded, fairly complete kind of drama construction. Now, the question is, in view of this, is our audience going to be satisfied with a stretched version of quite another dramatic form, when they have been so conditioned?[51]

In fifteen-minute episodes, each soap opera episode typically focused on one or, at most, two stories and sets of characters; while there were often multiple stories being told within the program, there was often only one story being told within an episode. Over the last seventy years, so much of what has become recognizable about the soap opera format is the frequent movement between storylines and the series of cliffhangers that this alternation creates. This inclination to leave the audience wanting more was always evident in soaps, as the announcer regularly implored the viewer to "learn more about that in a moment" or "stay tuned" or told the audience what to expect

[51] Letter from Haynes to Phillips, December 20, 1954.

on "the next dramatic episode," but the movement back and forth between storylines was rarely possible with only ten or eleven minutes of storytelling time per episode.[52] These conversations between creators, producers, and sponsors about how narrative might function in this new genre were what allowed for the development of the contemporary daytime soap opera structure and format, a format that is focused in large part on multiple, intertwining narratives and on realism based in emotions and everyday conversation. The half-hour seemed to work and, indeed, by the mid-1970s, was eventually overtaken by the hour-long format, leaving even more room for developing characters, experiencing emotions, and moving between stories.

Reenvisioning the Soap Opera

> We haven't begun to explore the possibilities of the daytime serial in T.V. Everyone has been slavishly copying established radio traditions on the basis of if they were good enough for radio then why not for television, too. But TV is not radio – it's new, it's different and presents innumerable challenges. It's time everyone in the medium sat down, took their blinkers off, and, recognizing that T.V. is a fresh medium, re-evaluated audience habits. I think if this were done by enough people with imagination and ingenuity, a fresh perspective would result, and a lot of changes would be made, resulting in improvement to the medium.[53]

In this letter to Phillips, Corday—arguing for the move to the half hour—is adamant that the television soap opera is not simply a visualization of the radio soap opera. The soap opera on television had the potential to be a whole new entity, with new structural and aesthetic properties that were unique to this new medium. While the first few years on television were spent trying to determine what these properties were, it is striking that, even early on, soap operas already had many of the moving parts of what the highly controlled television aesthetic would become (see Chapter 3). An emphasis on close-ups, slow zooms, and shot/reverse shot quickly became essential

[52] "On the next dramatic episode of *The Guiding Light*" was a tagline on that program for many years.
[53] Letter from Ted Corday to Irna Phillips, November 29, 1954, Irna Phillips Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

to the soap opera's visual style. In their volume on media transitions, Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn write, "In some instances the earliest phase of a medium's life may be its most artistically rich, as pioneering artists enjoy a freedom to experiment that may be constrained by the conventions and routines imposed when production methods are established."[54] As the dominant conventions of the soap opera format developed, individual programs were still playing with and exploring what this new medium could do. As with radio, this exploration centered around effective presentation of emotion. When *The Guiding Light* made its transition from radio to television, running on both simultaneously for four years, the scripts used in both media were primarily the same, with small changes that were made to maintain clarity, consistency, and timing. In these scripts, Phillips's detailed descriptions of emotions and how people do and should behave were written as fact, as she tried to determine what her audience would believe—and to find the "correct answer" for how people should feel. As the freedom provided by the new medium developed into generic conventions, that expectation—that emotions were knowable and visualizable—was inscribed onto Phillips's programs and other daytime soap operas. In the transition to television and with the establishment of new conventions, the daytime soap opera divested itself of the voiceover narration, replacing it with visual cues. Once the character's thoughts and emotions were no longer voiced by the narration but instead visualized, the generic conventions both developed and expected a kind of skill and expertise in its viewer. This process not only relied on an expectation of empathy but also help to teach the viewer how to interpret and analyze emotions within the conventions of the format.

In addition to establishing a visual aesthetic that relied on emotional expression, the soap opera format also needed to effectively convey space and place on television as well as radio.

[54] Thorburn and Jenkins, 6.

Sometimes, this complication was addressed by pairing radio dialogue with visual cues on television. The same dialogue and story that were used to invoke space and place on radio could provide a sense of action and motion on television. In one early television episode, for instance, a conversation was included in the radio version that was cut for television. This exchange between Bill and Meta after he suddenly showed up at her place communicated in a casual, familial way where the two characters were located in space. Bill asks, "I didn't scare you, did I, Meta?" and Meta responds with, "What do you think? I thought I was alone in the apartment. How did you get in?," and a short conversation about Bill's aversion to his hotel room follows.[55] This exchange, in which the radio listener quickly learns that brother and sister are in Meta's apartment together, is deemed unnecessary for the television script. On television, the viewer gets to see Meta's surprise at Bill's entrance. In her script notes, Phillips suggested skipping this interchange for television for the sake of time—and presumably because there was not the same need to orient the audience or to give them a clear sense of space and where they were located in it. The television audience could see for themselves that these characters were in Meta's apartment. Instead of time spent talking, on television, Bill enters and moves across the room, visually situating this character and providing the viewer with a sense of his movement and mood. In addition, more time was now available in the episode to linger on visual cues and emotions, including Meta reaction to Bill and Bruce's conversation while hiding in her bedroom later in the episode.

Included in her script for this episode—the second televised episode of the show—Phillips wrote in detail about what her visual expectations were. One section read: "Her movement should be motivated by conflict, indecision, until Bruce's speech on page 7 with the line 'Get a divorce.' I think he gets up, goes over to her, and the end of the scene should be with both of them standing—

[55] Irna Phillips, *The Guiding Light* script, July 1, 1952, Irna Phillips Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

as tho not only with his words but with a physical dominance, without touching her, he tells her what she should do."[56] Phillips provided an extremely detailed description of how she envisioned this episode, considering character movement and performance, editing, sets, costuming, and character internalities and motivations. With this detailed description, she worked to articulate the process of visualization, communicating actions and emotions that were both implied by the radio script and ones that were not conveyed at all on the radio, like Meta listening in at the bedroom door.

While the scripts were primarily the same for both radio and television, occasionally the entire script for one medium—or large sections thereof—would be replaced with a different one. Sometimes the dialogue or audio that was needed for radio did not work well for television and vice versa. Some scripts included brief narration for radio or an additional sound effect. Some televised episodes included characters that were present onscreen but never heard from and, therefore, irrelevant to the radio episodes. For some of the Christmas and Easter episodes, the radio and television versions had entirely different scripts. The scripts for Friday, April 3, 1953, Good Friday, for instance, were completely different from one another. The radio script was primarily a musing on the significance of the day and the importance of Jesus as a great humanitarian. It was narrated by local minister Dr. Keeler and interspersed with background music, and it told the story of the crucifixion of Christ.[57] The script for television was substantially different. While this script dealt with many of the same issues of Christian morality presented in the radio episode, it was not a sermon. It was written instead as a conversation between characters Joe, Mac, and Hanley, three

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[56] Ibid.

[57] Irna Phillips, *The Guiding Light* radio script, April 3, 1953, Agnes Nixon Collection, Northwestern University Archive, Evanston, IL. "'The Last Seven Words' sermon [an Easter special of which this was one iteration] was a *Guiding Light* radio staple in the last decade of its run. In its last appearance, on March 30, 1956, Reverend Marsh delivered it in the fictionalized story line by way of a national radio broadcast. This allowed some of the soap's characters then living in New York to hear it from their vantage point." Cox, 64.

journalists discussing issues of forgiveness and respect. The dialogue, in implied reference to the holiday, included lines like, "Good heavens, man, day in and day out we see people crucified, literally crucified, because somebody wanted to be right." The television episode then ends with a short speech about Christ.[58] The television version presented the same ideas as the radio version, but expressed them within the fictional story world. These moves all speak to ways that the radio and television versions diverged almost immediately as they moved from one medium to the other. Even when the scripts were largely the same, conventions and aesthetic practices were still being established within the new medium, leading to seemingly superficial yet aesthetically substantive shifts.

In these earliest episodes, Phillips was exploring the potential of this new medium and, in doing so, differentiating between one medium and the other; while she continued to prioritize the expression of emotions, she and others were finding creative ways to communicate them in visual terms on television. One of the other early concerns was finding ways to replace the lost voiceover narrator and the establishment of the new aesthetic features needed to take over the narrator's tasks. As addressed in Chapter 1, the male narrator provided context and fodder for the listener's imagination as she envisioned what was happening in the unseen world and the unseeable thoughts of the soap opera characters. In the move to television, some of these tasks were easily taken over by the inclusion of visuals—sets and settings representing the characters' specific locations, for instance. Other narrator's functions, though, were replaced with specific visual cues to help convey insight into the characters' inner thoughts and feelings, thoughts that were now unvoiced. The narration was used to develop the feeling of narrative tension within the text while both hiding and revealing information. As Kristen Hatch notes, "Right and wrong were no longer determined by

[58] Irna Phillips, *The Guiding Light* television script, April 3, 1953, Agnes Nixon Collection, Northwestern University Archive, Evanston, IL.

an announcer, but interpreted by the audience, largely through visual cues."[59] This function was replaced, in part, by a set of aural and visual cues that combined with the viewer's own skill at understanding and reading emotions. To do this complex work of emotional interpretation, the viewers were aided by an aesthetic that relied on expressing emotions and were designed to bolster rather than disrupt the sense of emotional realism. Visual features like the close-up and aural ones like the provocative score told the viewer what she needed to know about real emotions in these fictional worlds.

The role of the narrator on radio soap operas was multifold. He set the scene, giving the listener a sense of space and place within the fictional world. He caught up listeners who had missed information, either within the episode or in previous episodes. He provided insights into the inner thoughts and feelings of the characters, expressing their fears or insecurities; at the same time, though, he masked their inner thoughts, letting the listener know there was information she was not yet privy to without actually letting her in on the secret. He provided fodder for the listener's imagination as she envisioned what was happening in both the unseen world and the unseeable thoughts of the soap opera characters. On the whole, he controlled the space, providing the limits for what was and what was not included within the story world. In an unbounded medium, the voiceover narrator provided boundaries, much like the frame does on television. In many ways, though, this voice had no place outside of radio. Michel Chion understood all radio voices to be acousmatic—voices for which there was no possibility of being seen. By classifying all radio voices in this way, Chion suggests that all these voices are imbued with the same acoustic properties. "It should be evident that the radio is acousmatic by nature. People speaking on the radio are acousmetres in that there's no possibility of seeing them; this is the essential difference

[59] Kristen Hatch, "Selling Soap: Post-War Television Soap Opera and the American Housewife," in *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s*, ed. Janet Thumim (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 45.

between them and the filmic acousmetre. In radio one cannot play with showing, partially showing, and not showing."[60] When radio programming began moving to television and showing what had never been shown before, though, this was no longer the case—the voices on the radio would now be embodied. In fact, envisioning many radio soap opera voices seemed to be a decidedly surmountable task. The ease with which many of the acousmatic voices were able to be embodied gives the sense that they were, in fact, longing to be deacousmatized. In this new visual world, the presupposition of visuals that existed on radio—the one built in the listener's mind—was finally realized.

The voiceover narrator, though, was different. The voiceover narrator functioned on an acousmatic level even less embodied than the other radio voices. While central to the storytelling, this voice was not precisely part of the diegetic world of the radio soap opera and was not designed to be imagined as a visual, visible being. With the knowledge that he existed somewhat outside of the story world, he was a figure that gained power specifically from not being seen. It was exactly this existence outside of the story world that seemed to be his downfall as well. Since this acousmetre was never meant to be visualized, embodying him in the new medium (by making him a figure within the story world or by giving him a non-diegetic but visual space from which to speak) ran the risk of abruptly taking the viewer outside of the diegesis. Leaving him as a disembodied voiceover, though, ran a similar risk, with the potential to puncture the fragile sense of realism that the daytime soap opera and its creative teams were working so hard to develop. In the move to television, the narrator was largely excised from the daytime soap opera scene, but his many functions did not disappear with him. Some of the narrator's roles were naturally taken over by the image, but others proved more complicated to replace. Many of the new visual and aural

[60] Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), 21.

practices of the daytime soap opera on television reproduced one or more function of the now-absent soap opera narrator. As such, the narrator largely fell by the wayside, assigned fewer and fewer responsibilities within the narrative until he was gone altogether.

As the move to television took hold, the role of the narrator shifted, primarily serving to bring the listener in and out of ad breaks as efficiently as possible, confined to lines like, "We'll learn more about that in a moment" or "stay tuned tomorrow." This immediate shift was evident on *The Guiding Light*: The narrator's extensive expository speeches continued in the scripts well into the television years, but these additions were "for radio only." One early radio/television script includes a lengthy monologue from the narrator describing the internal thoughts of sisters Meta and Trudy. "Trudy doesn't question you any further, Meta. But you know, don't you, that your decision to return to California more than meets with your sister's approval. And you, Trudy—as Meta leaves the apartment, you're tempted to phone your family in Los Angeles—your family who are as unaware as you are of what transpired between Bruce and Meta in your living room this evening. We'll learn more about this in a moment."[61] For the television episode, this entire speech was cut except for the last sentence, keeping the plea to stay tuned but leaving these women's internal thoughts and feelings unspoken.[62] In *The Guiding Light* scripts, handwritten notes were used throughout the radio-television period to indicate that the television announcer should cut these second-person monologues and explanations.[63] Once there were other ways to convey that information visually, the expository voiceover narrator could be replaced.

The male narrator as exposition and narrative progression was not entirely gone, but he was largely relegated to providing program identification to transition into and out of episodes and

[61] Irna Phillips, *The Guiding Light* script, July 10, 1952, Irna Phillips Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
[62] *Guiding Light: July 10, 1952*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4Xb17kSttY.
[63] Phillips, July 2, 1952 script.

ad breaks. However, there were exceptions to this, even on television. On *Love of Life*, for instance, the narrator also recaps what happened in that day's episode and foreshadows what might happen in the future: "Well, whatever happens to Beanie, one thing is certain, Meg was not altogether wrong in complaining about Van's strangely perverse mood, and so unlike Vanessa. So contrary to her usual personality, one cannot help but believe the tensions that have been mounting around her have begun to break through the surface, and this awareness of danger may well mean new explosions."[64] This holdover from radio days, though, was unusual, and had largely disappeared altogether by the 1960s. In both this example and *The Guiding Light* example above, the narrator expresses the characters' internal thoughts, exposing how these women are doing the hard but seemingly intuitive work of interpreting what each other is thinking and feeling. More and more frequently, this was exactly the kind of work that was now shifted to the television soap opera viewer. The excision of the narrator allowed the viewer to replace his expertise and interpretation of events with her own.[65] This expert knowledge that viewers were now asked to bring to the text included the ability to interpret character emotions and personal turmoil. With the new emphasis on characters and emotions provided by television, viewers were invited to bring their emotional expertise to their viewing experience.

Representing Emotion

With the acousmatic voice of the narrator gone, new visual and aural features were established. The transition saw the development of specific conventions that were inscribed into the television soap opera in order to produce an emotionally realist aesthetic. In particular, these included the use of the close-up and an emotionally evocative score and sound effects. Sound

[64] *Love of Life - March 20 1953*, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNuZyc7iVNQ.
[65] Hatch, 47.

effects, which primarily functioned to replicate the everyday world, continued to give the soap opera world a real and everyday context on television. They also served a psychological purpose, not simply replicating the real world but also intensifying it. At the same time, background music was becoming more frequent, functioning to create a heightened sense of emotion and encourage emotional responses.

The close-up is one of the most distinctive, prominent, and repetitive features of the daytime soap opera. In the contemporary soap opera, nearly all scenes move toward and end with a close-up, creating—through the closeness—a feeling of intimacy with the characters as well as an impression of access to their thoughts and feelings. This access to the characters' inner thoughts became especially important with the move to television and the concomitant removal of the omniscient narrator. Early on in *The Guiding Light*'s television run, Phillips began advocating for the use of the close-up both as a form of access to the characters' inner thoughts and as a means of creating a sense of suspense at the end of a scene. Notes like, "If we can see Kathy's tears on a closeup, it would be swell," make it clear that she was actively advocating for the close-up to do more narrative and emotional work.[66] Elsewhere, Phillips noted: "Meta might leave the room to go out and get the money, and you can show Alice giving the impression that she's really putting over a deal. Or if you don't want to show Meta leaving the room, show a closeup of Alice on her last line."[67] While Alice would subsequently scheme over many months to blackmail and take advantage of the Bauer family, their awareness of Alice's duplicitousness was still developing, so this early suggestion from Phillips used the close-up to convey important narrative information through implication, hinting that there was more to Alice than met the eye and creating a sense of

[66] Irna Phillips, *The Guiding Light* script, July 28, 1952, Irna Phillips Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
[67] Irna Phillips, *The Guiding Light* script, July 18, 1952, Irna Phillips Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

suspense. The convenience of the close-up is, in part, its efficiency; it does all this narrative and emotionally-resonant work in just one shot. This practice of ending scenes with a close-up quickly became a standard move for the daytime soap opera on television.

Another dominant aesthetic practice developed in the earliest years of television soap operas was the use of sound effects and music for psychological and affective purposes. While television sound served practical functions like beginning and ending scenes, it also served decidedly abstract ones. Musical interludes, for instance, were not necessarily meant to be "visible," but they did more than just distinguish between scenes and were by no means "neutral abstract sound-material," in contrast to Rudolf Arnheim's conception of them.[68] Instead, they produced particular emotional resonances, shifting the perspective of the narrative and the audience as they did so. Claudia Gorbman, addressing film music, considered another role of sound on screen: an emotional one. Her emphasis on the important "presence" of music on screen resonates with television as well as film: "Whatever music is applied to a film segment will *do something*, will have an effect—just as whatever two words one puts together will produce a meaning different from that of each separately, because the reader/spectator automatically imposes meaning on such combinations."[69] When music is added to any visual genre—like the soap opera—it produces a meaning that is greater than what can be conveyed by the visuals alone. Music serves to determine and invoke a specific emotional response: "It *interprets* the image, pinpoints and channels the 'correct' meaning of the narrative events depicted."[70] Music creates a feeling, a sense of what has happened and will happen in the future, moods that the dialogue itself cannot necessarily convey.

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[68] Rudolf Arnheim, *Radio* (1936), 116-117.
[69] Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies* (London: BFI, 1987), 15.
[70] Ibid., 58.

However, music does not simply highlight and hint at what the characters are feeling but also produces emotions that might not otherwise already be there. As Gorbman notes, we instinctively want to make sense of music: "In fact, as long as the general musical style is not completely at odds, whatever the music at the moment, the scene seems to justify it."[71] In soap operas, this sense of justification is part of the viewing process—in which the viewer makes sense of the music, but she also allows the music to make the sense, giving meaning to scenes or images that might otherwise be meaningless. The unseen and often unobserved music imbues otherwise meaningless moments (an otherwise innocuous look or movement, for instance) with particular emotional resonances. Music creates a sense of suspense and emotionality that may have previously been conveyed through expository dialogue from the narrator. Background music seems particularly well suited to doing this kind of emotional work because of its invisibility. Unseen, music could be put in place to evoke a specific emotional response outside or adjacent to the diegesis without taking the viewer out of diegetic space.

Historically, sound on television has been thought of as serving a practical function, in which it communicated as much information as possible and served to keep the viewer engaged. Michel Chion notes that, "Sound, mainly the sound of speech, is always foremost in television. Never offscreen, sound is always *there*, in its place, and does not need the image to be identified."[72] Here, Chion limits television sound to a functional and practical purpose. It is in its place, in the foreground, and functions primarily as dialogue. But television sound also performs more complicated aesthetic functions. On television, soap operas offered opportunities to rethink how music and sound effects were being used. Because sound is invisible, it is often able to hold a

[71] Ibid., 5.
[72] Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 157.

space within a media text that is outside of the story world. While these sounds often served to represent or develop sentiment, their sense of invisibility also provided a freedom from realism—sound not only mimicked the real world but also existed outside of it. For instance, having a score (which is non-diegetic) has become normative for soap operas, as it has for most television programming, naturalizing an aesthetic feature that certainly does not heighten our sense of verisimilitude. (And, indeed, having no score would now seem disruptive or disturbing.)

In fact, background music is so important to the early days of daytime soap operas that they are almost synonymous with the organ. As discussed in Chapter 1, the use of the organ on the radio soap opera, while undeniable, is exaggerated in the memories of scholars, critics, and audiences. This was perhaps because of its frequent use in the earliest days on television. In the soap opera's first decade on television, the organ was used to transition into and out of scenes and ad breaks. The repetition, which has become central to the contemporary television soap opera's highly ritualized aesthetic (see Chapter 3), could be heard in the soap opera's earliest moments in the medium. Rudolf Arnheim notes how this sort of sound placement served as an "acoustic curtain" between scenes in radio programming: "The musical interlude is likewise a device for separating scenes. Many listeners may wonder why music is so frequently used between the scenes of a radio play. They do not realise that music in such cases is used as an 'acoustic curtain' because, as neutral abstract sound-material, it divides up the different parts of the action in a simple way."[73] On television, even as visual cues like set changes were able to do this work, there was still practical and narrative utility in creating aural distinctions between scenes; in this way, music did serve as an acoustic curtain—but was certainly not neutral.

[73] Arnheim, 116-117.

Similarly, sound effects, which often functioned to ground the text in realism, also served an emotive purpose—one that both produced sentiment and conveyed sentiment. The example showcased in the introduction to this dissertation, in which Kathy is in the hospital and hears a "foghorn in distance," functions both practically and psychologically.[74] It both provided a time of day (nighttime) and echoed Kathy's inner turmoil (representing her isolation and anxiety). In this example, the same cue is used to create a sound that is simultaneously grounded in the real and functioning as surreal. These effects were representative of the everyday implausible—reinforcing its own sense of believability and undercutting it at the same time.

Often, music was used to similar ends, working to create a particular feeling in the viewer, to imply the emotional state of a character, or to do both at the same time. In 1952, as Bertha continued to worry about the strain *The Woman Gloria* and its beautiful lead were putting on her marriage, music served to represent these emotions outwardly for the audience members. As Bill left for yet another trip to New York, Bertha was left home alone with the sound of Gloria's theme song in her head. "Bring in here," the script requested, "as tho going thru Bert's mind the organ strains of 'My foolish Heart' – Gloria's theme song."[75] The script suggested that the theme rise and fall throughout the episode, growing quieter as Bertha supposedly quieted the negative voices in her head and louder as those voices began to take over again, convincing her to meddle in Bill's work life. This music was being used to represent Bertha's emotional state and internal turmoil. Within the first few years on television, soap opera background music was functioning to represent the characters' emotional and psychological state and to encourage the viewer to go on a similar emotional journey. On television, sound was not contained by the frame or limited to the diegetic

[74] Agnes Nixon, *The Guiding Light* script, April 20, 1953, Agnes Nixon Collection, Northwestern University Archive, Evanston, IL.
[75] Irna Phillips, *The Guiding Light* script, July 17, 1952, Irna Phillips Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

space, and therefore allowed more room to produce this kind of psychological journey than visuals. This is not to say, though, that the surreal and avant-garde were never represented visually in the early days of the television soap opera. Shows like *Search for Tomorrow* and *The Guiding Light* included early episodes that featured psychological representations through visuals that were invested in replicating a state of mind rather than mirroring the real world.[76] The opportunity to create these effects through sound was more readily available, though, with an invisibility that allowed semi-diegetic music and voiceovers to express the thoughts and feelings inside a character's head and non-diegetic (but expressive) music to exist outside of the story world entirely. The presence of sound—especially background music—to define and create emotion remains as a notable feature of the daytime soap opera today.

While the invisibility of radio soap operas allowed for the potential of their worlds and spaces to be infinitely large, the domestic narratives and simple sound design often had the opposite result, serving instead to limit the spaces and positions that the audio occupied and, in turn, limiting the spaces and places that the listener could occupy. There is a similar effect with contemporary soap operas: Despite the fact that the worlds have the potential to be infinitely large and infinitely long, the focus instead is on close-ups and the strict, repetitive visuals that can make the fictional world narrowly defined. The listener or viewer is given space to focus on the emotional and relational elements more intimately, but not the freedom to decide for herself what information or emotion is most compelling or important.

[76] For instance, one 1953 episode of *Search for Tomorrow* involved an elaborate visualization of a dream sequence, with multiple shot superimposed on each other. "March 27, 1952," *Search for Tomorrow* (CBS, 1951-1968), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ci2OojRpK9A.

Conclusion

Phillips was a woman creator and writer in a genre made for women. While soap operas had women working at every level from their beginning—as creators, writers, producers, and performers—it still existed within an economic structure and a production process that was primarily paid for and dominated by men. On one 1952 script, Phillips writes, "Ordinarily I wouldn't do this type of interpreting. I'm sure Ted knows better than I, but I think that by indicating how I feel it might at least suggest changes in movement of these two people. You tell me if I'm getting a little bit obnoxious, will you?"[77] In moments like this one, Phillips displayed a conflicted relationship with the process of envisioning what the television soap opera should look like, especially in a genre that was often written by women for women. On the one hand, she had very specific ideas of how scenes ought to be visually interpreted and how that might work in tandem with her scripts. On the other hand, she worked to communicate her understanding of the fact that—even as the creator—her power was still limited, often overshadowed by the sponsors, ad agencies, networks, and even directors. In addition, while Phillips had an opinion on all aspects of the production process, she was based in Chicago and television production took place in New York, making it even more difficult for her extremely specific opinions to have the power and impact she might have wanted. She certainly understood the division of labor in broadcasting and production and seemed genuinely to want to avoid micromanaging, but it is impossible not to read the gendered power dynamic into these conversations. "As to the practical considerations of this project to which you referred," she writes to Haynes of Proctor and Gamble, "any comments upon these would be a little stupid on my part. This is something I know nothing about, and from that standpoint any reason you might give for not considering the *Guiding Light* half-hour serial I

[77] Irna Phillips, *The Guiding Light* script, July 24, 1952, Irna Phillips Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

would have to accept without question."[78] In Phillips's words to her producers, directors, and networks executives, it is evident that she fought for the form, while also trying not to "overstep." In so doing, she narrated the process and problems of trying to create a women's genre in an industry run by men.

Almost all soap opera directors were men, as were many of the producers. This meant that, even as Phillips had a kind of insight into her audience that her male colleagues did not, she still had to defer to them to make many of the production decisions. These kinds of negotiated maneuvers—in which Phillips, on the one hand, adamantly and repeatedly stated her opinion about how the show should proceed, and, on the other, rhetorically deferred to her male colleagues—seem to represent larger trends in the process of determining daytime soap opera aesthetics. Even while rhetorically kowtowing and deferring, Phillips aggressively and repeatedly insisted on creating conventions that represented the way her characters felt, and she expected an audience that displayed as much emotional expertise as she did herself. By negotiating her instincts with those of her male colleagues, Phillips managed to imbue the format with an emotionally realist aesthetic, influence almost all of the creators of contemporary soap opera, and still create a genre that regularly stretched the typical listener's imagination close to the breaking point.

In embracing both realism and effective representations of emotions, the television soap opera aesthetic that began to develop in the earliest years of the medium represented an ambivalence, one not dissimilar from what can be seen in Phillip's notes. As the format has become more established on television it has been read as aesthetically limited and weak, and certainly not in the same vein as the "realist" prestige TV that burgeoned in the early twenty-first century. What the soap opera aesthetic suggests, though, is that visual verisimilitude is not the only form of

[78] Letter from Phillips to Haynes, December 27, 1954.

meaningful realism. Instead, the emotional realist aesthetic of the television soap opera expresses the importance of feelings in general, including the everyday negotiations of its core audience. These negotiations are what we see in the everyday implausible, which captures the ways in which the women who are watching are caught between the assuredness of their expertise when it comes to reading emotions and having to defer to the judgements of men who think they know better.

As this aesthetic developed, it eventually became the highly repetitive style that now relies on frequent use of shot/reverse shot and a constant move toward the close-up, often through a slow zoom in; this is paired with everyday yet exaggerated sound effects and an intentionally affective score. This transitional period in the early years of television searched for realism but just as often found the surreal—visual and aural cues that were more excessive and expressive than they were realist, and narrative structures that were more about expressing internal emotions than about representing reality. During this time, there was a sense of indeterminacy, a space in which what it was possible to know was still in flux. This moment allowed women's voices—both those of the creators and those of the viewers—to be centered within their own programming in a new and different way. As the male voice of the narrator got replaced, more room for women's voices became available, but the limitations of television aesthetics and television production did not mean that women had total control over their space. Like their women viewers, these soap operas were still living in a man's world. Soap operas tried to find a balance in this incongruous situation; fitting the radio stories, characters, and aesthetics into the mold of television took time, but somehow it succeeded, allowing the form to outlast all possible expectations. Daytime soap operas not only survived, but thrived, figuring out along the way how to best represent sound on screen while creating a television genre. Even as the investment in realism guided the aesthetic shifts during the transition, we will see in the next chapter that the extension of these choices in the long-

term was an aggressively repetitive aesthetic that became almost a caricature of itself, creating an even deeper rupture and simultaneity between the everyday and the implausible in the daytime soap opera.

Chapter 3:

Fantastic Families and Uncanny Close-Ups: Aesthetic Repetition and the Everyday Implausible in the Contemporary Daytime Soap Opera

Figure 3: Greg, Mason, and Julia in "The Capwell Zone" (*Santa Barbara*)

In the 1980s, the Capwells were the reigning family of Santa Barbara (*Santa Barbara*, NBC, 1984-1993), so it was a surprise to everyone (except, possibly, the viewers) when patriarch C.C. Capwell discovered, in 1989, that he had a long-lost adult son, Greg. While C.C. was glad to reconnect with his new son, Greg did not receive the same kind of warm welcome from the rest of his long-lost family. In the face of this resentment, Greg considered ending his life. While contemplating this, he was visited by a couple who looked exactly like his newly discovered brother and sister-in-law Mason and Julia—except for their pointy ears, green skin, and silver jumpsuits (see Fig. 3). Leading him through a science fiction–themed *It's a Wonderful Life*–style scenario, the aliens took Greg into "The Capwell Zone," a world that looked almost exactly like *Santa Barbara* and the lives of the Capwells, but not quite.[1] While soap operas are not always thought of as supernatural, there was a period in the 1980s and 1990s when supernatural storylines

[1] "The Capwell Zone," *Santa Barbara* (NBC, 1989).

were common. *Santa Barbara* had aliens. In 1988, Clint and Viki Buchanan traveled back in time to the Old West on *One Life to Live* (1968-2012). *Days of Our Lives* (NBC, 1965-) featured a storyline in which well-respected psychiatrist Marlena Evans became possessed. And *Passions* (NBC, 1999-2008) was entirely preoccupied by witchcraft and other aspects of the supernatural—and, in doing so, was reminiscent of the 1960s supernatural soap opera *Dark Shadows* (ABC, 1966-1971). These are just a few examples of soap opera engagement with fantasy and supernatural storylines. Indeed, most of the daytime soap operas have had some brush with science fiction or fantasy. What happens when the extraordinary—or, as Tzvetan Todorov calls it, the fantastic—enters the soap opera landscape?[2] What does this tell us about daytime soap operas more broadly? Science fiction storylines like these (that also feature daytime soap opera narratives and aesthetics) confuse and disrupt understandings of and expectations for realism. They are also useful in making visible the ways in which the uncanny is central not only to science fiction and supernatural storytelling but also to the fantastic elements of soap opera's everyday implausible.

For the most part, instead of being thought of as supernatural, the domestic settings and focus on romantic and familial ties of daytime soap operas often place them among the most ordinary (or even boring) television genres; they are not about the fantastic, but about the quotidian. And yet, at the same time, they infamously deal with the implausible, improbable, and impossible. As with science fiction, this everyday—yet often implausible—sensibility is not only found in the syntax of the genre, but it also deeply embedded in the semantics. The form of the genre has developed over time and multiple media; this particular storied history contributes to the fact that the daytime soap opera is at once fantastic and quotidian. The everyday implausible can be understood through formal elements such as sound, cinematography, and use of space, and

[2] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973).

through common thematic elements such as the frequent and recurring storylines on confused parentage. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the question of realism has always been at the heart of soap opera scholarship—is it realistic or unrealistic? It is a genre in which characters are regularly brought back from the dead; drastically and "permanently" change personalities and/or faces; and discover family ties that they have always had but never knew about. But it is also a genre in which people go to work, build families, and sit quietly and talk about their feelings. Soap operas are constantly flouting the limits of plausibility, but they also largely portray ordinary, unremarkable activities and settings, often in what feels like real time. They do all of these things at once, and herein lies one of the major, yet underexplored, contradictions at the heart of daytime soap opera.

The unique soap opera look—that makes them easy to parody and often difficult for the uninitiated to watch—is explained, in part, through the technological history of soap operas, which were initially broadcast live and later recorded on tape. Their aesthetic is also indicative of their fast-paced shooting schedule and ever-shrinking budgets, as they get edged out by cheaper daytime programming. But the genre has also had nearly a century to develop its specific aesthetic features, influenced by invested creators, commercial interests, frequent industrial shifts, and committed viewers. An interest in the multifaceted yet repetitive, genre-specific look of the soap opera is an opportunity for its intended viewers to display and develop their expertise. Soap operas look and sound the way they do because of a long technological and industrial history as a commercial product aimed at a feminized audience—an audience that has been in conversation with soap operas for nearly a century. In light of ongoing technological shifts, this project of identifying the

key aesthetic features of contemporary American daytime soap operas continues to be relevant, despite previous work in which media scholars to analyze, reinterpret, and reclaim this format.[3]

This chapter looks at the aesthetics of daytime soap operas at a moment of substantial technological transition. Just as the technological and industrial shifts of the 1950s were paradigm-shifting, so too are the technological and industrial shifts of the early twenty-first century. Here, I analyze what daytime soap operas look like today, in a period when YouTube, DVR, and Wikipedia have become part of the vernacular even as generations-old soap operas have been forced to come to an end. This analysis and interrogation of contemporary soap opera aesthetics demonstrates how the genre's aesthetic and industrial history is imprinted on its present. In many ways, that history can be read out of the soap opera text, creating an effect that could be uncomfortable and anachronistic to the unfamiliar viewer but, to a more experienced one, could also be a comforting reflection of a long intergenerational history. As Bernard Timberg and Ernest Alba have noted, "There is a sense of intimacy, history, and continuity not just in the narrative outlines and verbal texts of soap opera, which establish certain aural/verbal codes that allow listeners and viewers to follow stories even when they look away from the screen or leave the room. We also find these same principles in soaps' visual codes."[4] This chapter analyzes the soap opera's visual and auditory codes, considering questions of aesthetics and of history. In the

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[3] Robert Allen's *Speaking of Soap Operas* (1985), Martha Nochimson's psychoanalytically focused *No End to Her* (1992), and Louise Spence have all explored soap opera aesthetics alongside questions of narrative and narrative structures. Some contemporary work on television soap operas includes Elena Levine's work, most especially *Her Stories* (2020), and the 2012 edited volume *The Survival of Soap Operas* (Ford, de Kosnik, and Harrington), which took on questions of the soap opera text in the digital era. Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); Sam Ford, Abigail de Kosnik, and C. Lee Harrington, *The Survival of Soap Opera*. (Jackson, MI: University of Mississippi Press, 2011); Elana Levine, *Her Stories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Martha Nochimson, *No End to Her: Soap Opera and the Female Subject* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1992); and Louise Spence, *Watching Daytime Soap Operas: The Power of Pleasure* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005).

[4] Bernard M. Timberg and Ernest Alba, "The Rhetoric of the Camera in Television Soap Opera Revisited," in *The Survival of Soap Opera: Transformations for a New Media Era* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 173.

process, I explore how soap operas exist in a world that is domestic and quotidian at the same time that it is fantastic, extreme, and entirely implausible, and I explore how the genre's history is embedded in the current aesthetic.

The contradictions that are born out of divergent interests can be seen and heard within the generic conventions of the soap opera. The everyday implausible embodies this contradiction, which is at once a realistic and unrealistic dramatic mode. Soap opera aesthetics simultaneously rely on a sense of the everyday and of the extraordinary, creating stories that are both familiar and unfamiliar, realistic and unrealistic at the same time. Almost every soap opera scene relies on the same kind of aesthetic practices that combine to be both extraordinary and realistic. In particular, the use of affective music and everyday sound effects; a combination of the close-up, slow zoom, and shot/reverse shot; and fantastic narratives that portray frequently shifting narrative structures all play out the contradictory role of the everyday implausible. As a result, the extraordinary becomes the ordinary. With the everyday implausible, settings such as jail cells and hospital rooms—settings that often denote something catastrophic has happened—become ordinary through consistent usage, everyday conversations, and a recurring set of aesthetics that sensationalize and normalize the spaces and events that occur within them. What "The Capwell Zone" brings to the surface is the way in which the ordinary and the extraordinary are embodied in the same visuals, sounds, characters, and narrative features, and serves as a glaringly obvious reminder that this contradictory sense of the everyday implausible is not present so much in an unusual and fantastic storyline, but more so in the everyday life of the contemporary daytime soap opera. The everyday implausible yields an uncanniness that reflects the subtle and daily misalignment that the assumed female viewer experiences existing in patriarchy, wherein she is both part of the system and oppressed by the system.

One of the most significant features of the everyday implausible is the use of repetition—in dialogue, cinematography, sound, and music. This repetition often takes the place of narrative closure. In their redundancy, the aesthetic features can create a skewed and prolonged temporality. Like all repetition, it can be banal and confusing. There is an undiscerning nature to the landscape and soundscape that comes from repetition that prevents new information from becoming apparent and limits possibilities. At the same time, this repetition can allow for individual interpretation, providing a skilled viewer with familiar signposts from which she can make assumptions about current storylines and predictions about future ones. Embedded in these contradictory effects, and in the everyday implausible, is a sense of hesitation. The repetitive visual and aural conventions paired with an open-ended temporality that prolongs conversations and storylines means that interpretation and hesitation work in tandem with each other. On the one hand, this provides the viewer with the opportunity to use her expertise to deduce what is happening and what may happen next, based on her understanding of what these aesthetic cues have meant in the past. On the other hand, there is a sense of hesitation: in the near future, nothing will happen except more repetition of the same conversations and cues. In the long term, nothing is fixed (including family, identity, and what constitutes reality), so any efforts to deduce what will happen next week or next month cannot possibly account for the ways in which that might be subsequently undone. As a result, every time information is revealed information also is concealed—providing knowledge but leaving open the possibility that what one knows could change at any time. Within the framework of the soap opera, knowledge is always uncertain, or at least provisional. This constantly shifting reality invites an ongoing engagement with the text and a willingness to adapt as new information builds off of and negates the old.

Close-ups, for instance, simultaneously reveal very little and give the viewer room to speculate about character internalities and future storylines. This makes the viewing experience both intriguing and boring; it also makes it participatory. It is not relevant that little information will be immediately revealed—the viewing process encourages interpretation and prediction based on convention and experience. The fact that reality is continuously shifting means that the real excitement in the narrative comes from short-term emotional interpretation and long-term investment. In this space, being responsible for and tracking emotions in the long-term is valued, repeating the same kinds of tasks and conversations day after day is accepted and expected, desiring and valuing short-term results or change is futile, and "finishing" a storyline or a task is, in the long-run, impossible. As such, the values promulgated by daytime soap operas are traits that are shared by household management, emotional labor, and interpersonal relationships—tasks central to everyday existence but relegated to women.[5]

Existing hegemonic and capitalist norms perpetuate the idea that there is one dominant experience of existence—that knowledge and experience are fixed, and those that who cannot succeed within those norms are not trying hard enough. Those on the margins understand that the experience of existence is not fixed, but instead shifts based on one's history and positionality. The process of upending established structures of power is based in knowing that reality is complex and that power and knowledge are not necessarily monolithic. This is what the interpretive but hesitant aspect of the everyday implausible reflects in soap operas. Indeed, reality is never fixed, and experienced viewers never expect that. The everyday implausible is defined by and redefines

[5] My work is building off of other scholars who have noted the significance of repetition and open narratives in the soap opera. Robert Allen, for instance, notes that, "events in a daytime soap opera are less determinant and irreversible than they are in other forms of narrative, and identity, indeed ontology itself, is more mutable." He also points out that, even as information is repeated, how and to whom it gets repeated is important to developing and understanding interpersonal relationships. My claim is that it is also important for interpreting and analyzing emotions. Robert C. Allen, *To Be Continued--: Soap Operas Around the World* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 19. See also: Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas*.

family, identity, and hegemonic normalcy, developing a dual and contradictory aesthetic that mirrors an experience of being marginal.

The Everyday Implausible and the Soundscape

It is Thanksgiving in the fictional town of Port Charles, New York, and every doorbell is ringing. At the Quartermaine mansion, matriarch Monica (Leslie Charleson) is telling her guests about a previous Thanksgiving when she assumed her estranged son would not call, until the phone unexpectedly rang—when she is suddenly interrupted by the doorbell ringing. Surprise! Her estranged son, recently returned from the dead, has unexpectedly arrived. Across town at the Davis household, Ava (Maura West) leans on the doorbell after getting the door slammed in her face by Alexis (Nancy Lee Grahn), Thanksgiving host and her brother's ex-girlfriend, hoping this time to get admitted. When the doorbell rings at the Drakes, Anna (Finola Hughes) is shocked to open her son-in-law's door to the one person who knows all the secrets she has been keeping from her family. Doorbell after doorbell rings, with families across town opening the door to new dramas and dysfunctions. Despite being Thanksgiving, this is no very special episode of *General Hospital*. This is simply the world of American daytime soap opera, where the sounds of everyday life work to convey the implausible and outrageous domestic dramas as they unfold. In many ways, sound in contemporary daytime soap operas echoes the kind of sound design that one could hear on the radio serials of the 1940s and 1950s. Decades later, the sound of soap operas, still produced quickly, continues to be repetitive and surprisingly spare, perhaps for similar reasons as the radio serials of the last century, but to different effect.

The cold open of a 2016 episode of *General Hospital* provides an example of this. This segment cuts between a scene of Nina (Michelle Stafford) talking with Olivia (Lisa LoCicero) and

Julian (William deVry) about a woman's right to breastfeed in public and a scene of Franco (Roger Howarth) talking to Elizabeth (Rebecca Herbst) and Jason (Billy Miller)—who was later discovered not to be Jason, but his twin brother Drew—about the possibility that their son Jake might be a sociopath.[6] As the first scene begins, one can hear Olivia walking in, beginning with her heels clicking on the floor, her clothes swishing as she walks, and her phone being placed on the bar. This is accompanied by diegetic music and crowd sounds from the Metro Court hotel restaurant in which Olivia works. As the scene draws to a close, though, the music shifts; Nina states her case (with the ultimate goal of getting Olivia to pose nude in her magazine), and the music begins to crescendo. Finishing the scene, Nina pronounces: "Pushing a woman in a closet every time she needs to nurse her baby is not normal. It's just the opposite. It's wrong. It sets a bad precedent for future generations."[7] And as she says it, the music rises to a final keyboard chord and fades into an elevator ding as the segment transitions to the next scene, of Elizabeth, Jason, and Franco at General Hospital. Phones ringing and elevators dinging (which can be heard continuously alongside the dialogue) is a common soundscape for the General Hospital reception area and places the viewer in this everyday professional space. (A space that is professional and public and yet home to near constant extremely personal and often private emotional conversations.) It is not until Franco is nearly done assessing Jake's condition and the program cuts to Elizabeth's reaction shot that the music begins. As Franco finishes saying, "And hopefully he gets better before he graduates to the kind of behavior that can cause someone else physical harm," the combination of Elizabeth's reaction and the dramatic music that leads into the next scene works to establish the seriousness of what is transpiring.[8]

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[6] "February 1, 2016," *General Hospital* (ABC, 1963-).
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

The key aspects of the soap opera sonic environment that emerge here are fairly standard across daytime soap operas: dialogue accompanied by everyday sounds finished with a dramatic score. Because the soundscape of each scene is repetitive yet dissonant, it is difficult to know what to feel, which simultaneously produces a situation in which one is expected to feel all the things at once. On the one hand, the soap opera provides a soundscape that is doing contradictory work within itself by highlighting, in turn, the quotidian nature of events and the sensational nature of events. On the other hand, through the emotional heightening of non-diegetic music and repetitive audio, it is often difficult to know exactly what the intended affect is for any given scene or how it differs from one to the next. In this example, the sound equates the right to breastfeed with the fear of having a son who may become a serial killer. Who's to say which is more dramatic or emotionally resonant? The first scene addresses public policy, the second, private trauma; the first scene considers a matter of personal choice, the second, a matter of life and death. And the formal aesthetics of these scenes do not do the discerning work for the audience, as one might expect. They tell the viewer and listener that *something* dramatic and emotionally resonant is happening, but the question of whether these scenes have different dramatic or emotional stakes is left entirely unanswered. Dialogue, melodramatic music, and simple, everyday sounds are used repetitively in every episode and nearly every scene of the contemporary daytime soap opera, creating a world that is simultaneously mundane and emotionally overblown. The soundtrack underscores what happens in the narrative and in doing so it creates emotion but also confusion.

One of the most striking aspects of the daytime soap opera soundscape is that the sound of everyday objects are common and often loud, evincing the radio serial within the lineage of the contemporary soap opera. Like radio, what one hears on daytime soap operas today is primarily talking. Also like radio, additional sounds of everyday life are included to create a vivid scene for

the listeners at home. The daytime soap opera is filled with clacking heels, slamming doors, ringing phones, shuffled papers, dropped bags, and other distinctive sounds of everyday life. Sound effects like doorbells, phones, or light chattering in the background in public spaces are added occasionally but are just as often absent. Typically, what can be heard are the everyday sounds that are picked up by on-set microphones. These are not only the sounds of the everyday lives of soap opera characters, but also of soap opera sets and actors. The "natural" source of these sounds represents soap opera's everydayness, even in their often confusing and perhaps even ridiculous loudness; the production of these sounds is, at its essence, unextraordinary.

Like the rest of the soundscape, this ambient sound is contradictory, confusing, and evocative. These sounds can be heard with such frequency and in such mundane ways that it is almost difficult to pin down a specific instance; any example is so insignificant it is difficult to understand it as noteworthy. And yet, the idea of unwarranted—and probably even unwanted—sound being so loud that it might distract from hearing the dialogue of a scripted television program is so disorienting and out of the ordinary that it cannot to be ignored. In one scene from a 2018 episode of *General Hospital*, Alexis Davis and Detective Harrison Chase (Josh Swickard) run into each other in the police station and have a short conversation about breakfast. In brief, Alexis inquires how Chase, who is new in town, is adjusting, and then schemes to reunite him with his estranged brother—who happens to be her then-boyfriend—over breakfast. What can be heard throughout this scene, nearly as loudly as the dialogue, is the sound of Alexis zipping and unzipping her handbag and Chase grabbing his car keys while opening and closing his desk drawer. These sounds do not seem to be added in post-production—there is no meaningful narrative or aesthetic reason to add them in (though a meaningful aesthetic is produced) and certainly not at

volumes that rival the dialogue.[9] In addition, the police station sound effects added in the background at a less disruptive volume make the loudness of these other sounds even more obvious. These sounds are produced through the everyday actions of the actors and become integral to the soap opera aesthetic.

These everyday sounds that are captured as they occur have a strangeness. What the viewer experiences is a sense of being both situated and out of place. These sounds of bags zipping, drawers slamming, and so forth, do give a sense of the everyday, because they are the kind of sounds the viewer hears in her everyday life and also because they represent the everyday of the soap opera set. On the other hand, they are often so loud that they seem out of place. In this scene with Alexis and Chase, for instance, their everyday sounds are clearer and louder than expected, perhaps even to the point of distraction, but they are not precisely disorienting. Other times, though, these kinds of sounds are too close to the microphone, skewing the sound perspective and aurally placing the viewer closer to the bag being set down, for instance, than the character she is meant to be listening to. With this change in perspective, their loudness seems to distract from the main feature of the soap opera—the dialogue and conversation—and places the emphasis solidly on the everydayness instead. So, even though most soap opera scholars have (rightly) emphasized the central role of conversation in the soap opera structure, it seems that even that can be overtaken aesthetically by everyday sound effects. These ambient sounds can often be aggressively loud so that they either distract the viewer from the narrative or, at minimum, overemphasize moments that are otherwise insignificant, but they also reflect the persistent, everyday nature of soap operas—in their ordinariness and as representations of the rapid pace of production.

[9] "May 1, 2018," *General Hospital* (ABC, 1963-).

Another element that makes up the soundscape of the daytime soap opera is music. Unlike radio serials, which relegated music to advertisements—or occasionally to moments of narration and scene setting—contemporary soap operas include both diegetic and non-diegetic music throughout. This music is often included to add a sense of suspense, mystery, or drama to a scene, whether or not the narrative supports it. But the amount and frequency of music varies widely between different contemporary soaps. *Days of Our Lives*, for instance, includes both diegetic and non-diegetic music almost constantly, with music included in every single scene, usually switching from one track to another between scenes. *The Young and the Restless*, on the other hand, features music much less frequently, with the dramatic music playing throughout the cold open and in the final scenes but rarely in between.

While background music and scoring can be heard to greater or lesser extents in different programs, there are also ways in which the soap opera score functions consistently across the genre. Diegetic music often exists in public places, like cafes or restaurants, and serves to create a sense of publicness (and to mask the simplicity or non-existence of other sounds typically heard in public places). Non-diegetic music, on the other hand, evokes specific emotions and sentimentality in general, even when nothing especially evocative is happening. This use of music makes even the most mundane everyday moment seem dramatic. Music cues in daytime soap opera serve not only to direct the viewer/auditor toward a certain emotion, but also to determine what the affect is; the score can often work not simply to emphasize and underscore a particular sentiment, but sometimes invent that feeling entirely. The music can create a sense of dread or an implication that the information revealed within a scene belies something much more sinister; it can create a feeling of romance or love between characters, even if little else is happening to represent that; it can evoke sorrow and dread, even if the conversation it underscores seems

innocuous. At the same time, the fact that music is often diegetic simultaneously imbues it with a sense of the everyday. The sound can serving to both reveal that there is a secret (some affective response that is more complicated than can be seen on screen) and also to continue to hide that secret, as it is often unclear what specific event or affect that music is meant to evoke. With this, the uncanny nature of the aesthetic duality is underscored, as it reveals a secret and conceals a secret simultaneously. There is a constant sense that more than one kind of work is being done at once; the soundscape serves a dual role of creating a world that is simultaneously mundane and overblown. And this determining of affect often means that every scene is equally dramatic, as can be seen with Olivia, Franco, and the rest. The music that plays while someone is trapped in the basement in a life-threatening situation carries the same weight as the music that plays when a couple chooses to go back to her place at the end of a date.

The narrator on radio soap operas often let the listener know that there were things to be known that had not yet been revealed. The soundtrack in contemporary soap operas takes on this function (supported by the camerawork discussed in the next section). With frequent use of crescendos that create a sense of building toward something and a seriousness that implies much more is going on beneath the surface than can be seen, the music provides a sense of movement and expectation—one that is just as often deferred, and perhaps ultimately disappointed. In this way, the music functions to echo the long-dead soap opera narrator and literally underscore the dramatic and revelatory (though often disappointingly so) nature of the other aesthetic features. In one scene from *Days of Our Lives*, Leo (Greg Rikaart) approaches Sonny's (Freddie Smith) house. The scene begins with Leo on the phone: "Look, Vivian," he says, "I don't know why you're not returning my calls, but since I haven't heard differently, I assume you still want me to seduce

Sonny. Which, I'm warning you, is not gonna be easy. He is as stubborn as he is hot."[10] All the while, slow percussion and keyboard music plays in the background, starting more quietly under the phone call, getting louder throughout, and, eventually, getting much louder after Leo pushes the doorbell to announce his presence at Sonny's. As Sonny answers the door, the music decrescendos and quiets, but this music belies something suspicious and unsaid, with an almost fantastic sense of other worldliness. This soundscape relies on repetition, creating the same contradictory message here as it has in many others. This is a space where confusion lies—it becomes difficult to know the stakes of any individual moment when the repetitive aesthetic seems to position them as all the same. An experienced viewer can use her textual knowledge and expectations to do interpretive work based on the sound cues provided, but there is a moment a hesitation as the viewer determines what she should make of the intrigue conveyed by the evocative aesthetics—or whether anything is being conveyed at all.

In this instance, since it is quickly revealed that Leo does in fact have devious machinations in which he plans to seduce Sonny for a paycheck, the dramatic music that plays throughout the scene, hinting that there is more to come than meets the eye, is not entirely unwarranted. Except there is *not* more than meets the eye. Leo has already revealed his entire plan in his voicemail to Vivian, so when Sonny opens the door, there is no suspense or sense of wonder about what is about to occur, despite what the score seems to be implying. Leo will manipulate and seduce Sonny, as Vivian has enlisted him to do. Therefore, the dramatic music seems to be unearned, implying that there is something extraordinary going on when in fact there is not. Do these evocative sound cues mean something significant or nothing at all? To some, the joy and excitement is simply in the potential of the sound cue. In these moments, the audience pauses, enthralled, ready to see what is

[10] "May 2, 2018," *Days of Our Lives* (NBC, 1965-).

next. The music seems to belie something extraordinary when in fact waiting to see what happens is the ordinary work of the soap opera viewer.

Through both the aural and visual aesthetics of soap opera, there is often this sense of something being revealed, but there is rarely a real moment of revelation. The sound as well as the visuals often imply something meaningful and important is occurring, but in fact the only thing that is revealed is deceptively, uncannily, routine. Of course, what is routine is contextual. Soap opera narratives are not designed to pay off quickly, but over weeks, months, years—even generations. In this case, a weeks-long series of conversations that are both part of an elaborate scheme and, at the same time, foreplay, is absolutely routine, and provides an opportunity for soap fans to attempt to predict how each storyline will play out in the long run: Will Leo and Sonny fall for each other, making this seduction part of a complicated how-they-met backstory? Will Leo become a hardened villain, scheming to maintain control over Sonny? Will Leo realize the error of his ways and bow out? All of these are certainly possible but knowing when and if there will be an end to the storyline is not. It is especially difficult to know what this particular sound cue is conveying. While the score seems to indicate something affectively and narratively significant, it is notoriously difficult to know what or whether information is being transmitted. Paired with the confusion, everydayness, and repetitiveness of the sound effects, the viewer/auditor is invited to feel and to interpret, but mostly she is invited to wait and find out what may or may not happen next.

Close-Up, Conversation, and Visual Repetition

Like the hesitation produced by sound effects and score—wherein emotional and narrative developments are created by and confused by aesthetic features—visual repetition invites a similar

mode of engagement. Repetitive cinematographic conventions simultaneously allow for and foreclose viewer interpretation. The everyday implausible focuses on emotional production, which is very much embodied by (and confused by) the soap opera camerawork. As Timberg and Alba note, despite "monumental advances in the production of television soaps, the basic semiotics of camera production on [*General Hospital*] in 1963 (and in 1993) remain intact in 2009—with one fundamental difference. In 1963, emotion was conveyed primarily through actors. In 2009, emotion is still conveyed of course by the actors—but also, increasingly, through the camera."[11] The common and extensive use of close-ups and camera movement in daytime soap operas imbues personal and domestic moments with drama and emotion. In doing so, it creates sentiment, narrative development, and confusion.

Tania Modleski addresses the role of hospitals and waiting rooms as key to the narrative structures of the soap opera; these confined spaces are necessary as places to discuss and convey emotion while delaying any further action—the action is the thing that brought the characters to the hospital so the real work of soap operas can begin: conversation.[12] Movement in cinematography and framing can provide these conversations with a feeling of drama and immediacy, creating motion even as action is delayed and the characters are stationary. The repetitive nature of this camera movement, though, can provide a feeling of familiarity and, in turn, uneventfulness. This repetition includes the slow zoom (which is so ubiquitous on many soap operas it has become nearly parodic); the successive use of pan, tilts, and reframing; frequent employment of shot/reverse shot; and constant, inevitable close-ups. This familiar sequence of cinematographic techniques that, as Timberg and Alba note, has been in use for nearly as long as television soap operas have been around, not only provides mundane moments with a sense of

[11] Timberg and Alba, 170.
[12] Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* (Routledge, 2008), 99.

movement but it also turns unusual, implausible, or traumatic moments into a mundane and ordinary part of the soap opera landscape.

To find an example of how and when this is employed, one can watch nearly any daytime soap opera at nearly any time. Here, I will illustrate this using the opening of a 2016 episode of *General Hospital*. This episode opens with a close-up shot of Anna waking up on her ex-husband Robert's (Tristan Rogers) shoulder, wondering where they are.[13] As Anna wakes up confused, there is a slow zoom out, revealing visually what Robert is saying, which is that they are locked in a jail cell. After this first head-on establishing shot, the rest of the scene cuts between angled shots from either side, sometimes with both characters visible within the frame and sometimes just one. Through a series of slow zooms and frequent cutting to shots that move progressively closer, within just a few minutes the framing moves from close-up to a series of medium-long shots to a series of close-ups of Robert and Anna. Here, the camera movement (slowly pulling back and slowly zooming in) does the work of revealing and then concealing the ostensibly high-stakes location that they happen to be in, while also emulating the direction of their conversation, which moves from the criminal and political to the personal: Robert—after listening to Anna's litany of the trouble they have gotten themselves into—wraps up the scene (or nearly so) by saying with a smile, "I get to sleep with you again."[14] At the same time, this last part of the exchange is covered by shot/reverse shot, which does the work of following each character and giving the viewer a thorough look at each participant's reaction to this exchange—first Robert saying his line and then Anna's surprised reaction and tepid response. Here, it is revealed that what seemed to be a scene about policing and criminality was actually just about Anna and Robert's decades-old, long-dormant romantic relationship. In this way, the repetitive visuals, which focus on the individuals

[13] "February 2, 2016," *General Hospital* (ABC, 1963-).
[14] Ibid.

and their emotional responses, underscore the personal nature of this interaction while also bringing movement and intrigue to a scene that simply features two people, sitting still, talking largely about nothing of note.

This scene, like many soap opera scenes, is visually constructed to highlight the relationality between the two characters and their responses to each other. Compare this, for instance, to similar *General Hospital* scenes from the same week featuring married (but separated) couple Dante (Dominic Zamprogna) and Lulu (Emme Rylan) and featuring Nina and Franco.[15] Though Dante and Lulu's conversation takes place in their apartment and Franco and Nina are at local bar and restaurant The Floating Rib, both of these scenes, like the one described above, combine slow zooms and shot/reverse shot. The repetitive nature of this combination makes it highly predictable, but it also works to create a sense of intrigue, suspense, and drama as more and different information about the characters' emotional state continues to be revealed—but also concealed. In the scene with Dante and Lulu, they are in their apartment attempting to rekindle their seemingly failing marriage (which they had been attempting to do—or at least discussing—for months). The scene is short and forgoes any kind of establishing shot. It cuts between Dante and Lulu, starting out at medium/medium long shots and moving into close-up, with a consistent slow zoom throughout the scene, giving the sense that the viewer is getting closer and closer to something important, when in fact this conversation—or one very similar—has already occurred multiple times. The scene in The Floating Rib uses a similar set of visual and cinematographic features, making them repetitive not only within a storyline but also between storylines. These scenes, like others, rely on the combination of slow zoom and shot/reverse shot to imply a sense of suspense and drama, but without always revealing specific emotions or reactions.

[15] The Dante and Lulu scene is featured in the February 1, 2016 episode of *General Hospital*; the Nina and Franco scene is featured in the February 5, 2016 episode of *General Hospital* (ABC, 1963-).

Along with sound, the visual aesthetics of daytime soap opera create a flattened effect, in which each scene is very much like the next, even if intrigue and emotions are running high. This makes it difficult to know whether one scene is more important than the next, as they all seem to have the same set of visual and auditory conventions. Even when the camera seemingly acknowledges the constraint of the jail cell with Anna and Robert—finding itself at first barred outside of it—the scene still features the same kinds of camera movement that can be seen in Lulu and Dante's living room or with Nina and Franco at the bar, accentuating the fact that this jail cell is simply another everyday space in which two characters talk about their relationship. Louise Spence addresses the role of police activity on soaps as an everyday occurrence—something that seems dramatic and out of the ordinary actually functions as quotidian. She notes that the narrative structures of soap operas position extraordinary police activity as ordinary.[16] In the examples articulated above, aesthetic features of the daytime soap operas—that bring public dramas and personal dramas together visually—do the same kind of work of making the extraordinary ordinary and vice versa.

The use of both conversation and the close-up serve as prime examples of the repetitive (indeed constant) and contradictory nature of the everyday implausible. These features accentuate the narrative and temporal open-endedness of the soap opera. This temporality, as well as the importance of conversation and the primacy of emotion, are features that have been frequently explored by soap opera scholars, considering especially the ways which they function in relation to each other. As with real life, conversations are not finite—they can and do repeat and extend through multiple scenes over multiple episodes, story days, and locations. As such, they are the key component of the soap opera text. However, the repetitiveness means they also disrupt the

[16] Spence, 107.

narrative by preventing forward momentum. These conversations are sometimes about what has or will happen, but more often they are about how the characters *feel* about what has or will happen. Similarly, the equally ubiquitous close-up is also focused on representing and producing emotions. These features, alongside the repetitive use of shot/reverse shot accompanied by a slow zoom and close framing, serve to further elongate temporalities and create a dynamic contradiction between expanded interpretive possibilities and shrinking them down. The inscrutability and frequency of these moments provide viewers with room to interpret based on their own expertise, but they are limited by the frame and what they can see on the screen. In some ways, the repetitive and oppressive cinematography does the interpretive work for the viewer; in others, these moments call on viewer experience to make sense of what would otherwise simply be misdirection and confusion. This push and pull between, on the one hand, opening up paths for the feminized viewer to assert her expertise and control her own text and, on the other hand, reinforcing hegemonic values becomes another representation of the tension between the radical and the reactionary potentialities of the everyday implausible.

The soap opera narrative is structured to continue indefinitely. This lack of closure is positioned by many soap opera scholars as one of the key features of soap opera as a feminist form.[17] This open-endedness can be seen in the soap opera temporality in a variety of ways—for instance, in constantly deferred and disrupted narrative resolution and in the elongation of minutes, days, and weeks, so that understanding of time within the soap opera world begins to lose meaning. One of the ways that soap operas disrupt resolution is through conversation. As Tania Modleski notes, "Despite the numerous murders, kidnappings, blackmail attempts, emergency operations,

[17] See: Charlotte Brunsdon, "*Crossroads*: Notes on Soap Operas," in *Regarding Television* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983); Tania Modleski, "The Rhythms of Reception: Daytime Television and Women's Work," in *Regarding Television* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983); Nochimson; Spence.

amnesia attacks, etc., which are routine occurrences on soap operas, anyone who has followed one, for however brief a time, knows that these events are not important in themselves; they merely serve as occasions for characters to get together and have prolonged, involved, intensely emotional discussions with each other."[18] In soap opera, conversation (whether it be about unusual events or the mundane occurrences of everyday life) holds a primacy over action. These conversations become both the soap opera text itself—the thing that the viewer comes to see—and the means by which time and the text are disrupted, preventing any kind of narrative action and allowing individual events or moments to take up a seemingly infinite amount of time and space. Charlotte Brunsdon addresses the way that conversation is even used to take over masculine spaces, feminizing and privatizing them: "Ideologically constructed as the feminine sphere, it is within this realm of the domestic, the personal, the private, that feminine competence is recognised. However, the action of soap opera is not restricted to familial or quasi-familial institutions but, as it were, *colonises* the public masculine sphere, representing it from the point of view of the personal."[19] Conversation is essential to soap opera as a feminist form, pervading all space and time with the personal and the emotional, but also serving as yet another way to create narrative and aesthetic repetition and defer resolution.

In addressing the ways that soap operas are invested in the emotional lives of their characters, Modleski explains that soap operas are driven by emotion. "On soap operas, action is less important than *re*action and *inter*action, which is one reason why fans keep insisting on soap opera's 'realism,' although critics continually delight in pointing out the absurdity of its content."[20] What she notes here is that soap operas are driven not by action but instead by emotion, a mode

[18] Modleski, "Rhythms of Reception," 68.
[19] Charlotte Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes* (London: Routledge, 1997), 15.
[20] Modleski, "Rhythms of Reception," 68.

that encourages the externalization of characters' internalities (so that narrative can be driven by what characters are thinking and feeling). These decades-long daily programs have been driven by finding ways to express what is going on inside people's heads. This emphasis that many soap opera scholars have noted is encouraged by the soap opera's specific form of narrative structure that includes frequent breaks, repetition, and an emphasis on conversation—but it is also encouraged by the visual and aural conventions.

The open-endedness of soap opera is also expressed through the use of repetition and interruption, creating a text that is disjointed, with a temporality that folds over on itself rather than simply moving linearly through time. Scholars argue that this process of interruption, repetition, and deferred resolution is an important part of the pleasure of soap opera. As Modleski writes:

> The multiple plot lines of soap operas, for example, keep women interested in a number of characters and their various fates simultaneously. When one plot threatens to become too absorbing, it is interrupted, and another story line resumed, or a commercial is aired. Interruptions within the soap opera diegesis are both annoying and pleasurable: if we are torn away from one absorbing story, we at least have the relief of picking up the thread of an unfinished one.[21]

Here, Modleski claims that the annoyance the viewer feels when being left hanging is also enjoyable, creating a frustration but also an excitement as she waits to find out what will happen next. This deferred resolution through repetition becomes an important part of the pleasure of soap operas, but it is also, inherently, contradictory.

In discussing this prolongation of events, Brunsdon argues that the text is not simply interrupted but, between the many forms of interruption and repetition it experiences, radically discontinuous. She also argues that there is pleasure in this process of waiting to find out what will happen—but only if the viewer is already extensively involved with the text. "Against critics who complain of the redundancy of soap opera, I would suggest that the radical discontinuities of the

[21] Modleski, "Rhythms of Reception," 71.

text require extensive, albeit interrupted, engagement on the part of the audience, before the text becomes pleasurable."[22] Without expertise or engagement in this programming, it is difficult to fully enjoy or appreciate. Brunsdon refers not only to knowledge of the text's characters and storylines, but also to specific social and culture referents and ideologies. For instance, "*Crossroads* textually implies a feminine viewer to the extent that its textual discontinuities require a viewer competent within the ideological and moral frameworks, the rules, of romance, marriage and family life to make sense of it."[23] By relying on information that the feminized viewer is an expert in, these discontinuities expect an expert viewer and also become the source of pleasure for that viewer. In this way, the text once again becomes a space of comfort and empowerment for its woman audiences. Nonetheless, as I have demonstrated, the contradictory aesthetic does not function simply to one effect.

The visual aesthetic of daytime soap opera, first, causes individual everyday moments to exist out of time, moving at a pace that does not reflect a realistic temporality and, in that way, pushes the boundaries of plausibility. Simultaneously, this aesthetic and the ways that it plays with time are implausibly repetitive yet familiar within the bounds of the genre. The same set and sequence of visual and auditory generic conventions are repeated in almost every scene. Through this combination of frequent use of shot/reverse shot, a repetitive slow zoom, and close framing often moving toward a close-up, there is a sense throughout every scene that the viewer is constantly being directed to look closer and closer at the objects or characters on the screen. The following scenes from *The Young and the Restless* continue to underscore how common it is.

[22] Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes*, 18.
[23] Ibid., 18.

Toward the beginning of a 2017 episode, one segment includes two short consecutive scenes, comprising only fourteen shots (seven in each).[24] The first is a conversation between Nicholas (Joshua Morrow) and Sharon (Sharon Case) that takes place inside Sharon's coffeeshop Crimson Lights. The second is a conversation between Nicholas's sister Abby (Melissa Ordway) and Scotty (Daniel Hall) that takes place directly outside Crimson Lights. Both scenes begin with limited but perceptible camera movement as the camera tracks into position to frame the two-shot (Nicholas and Sharon in one case, Abby and Scotty in the other). Both progress to a series of medium shots in shot/reverse shot featuring each character. Both end in a close-up reaction shot of one of the characters. And both feature conversations that revolve around Nicholas and Abby's father, Victor. In the first scene, Sharon and Nicholas discuss their daughter Faith, framed in medium shots of each character individually as he or she speaks to the other. These shots get progressively closer in, ending with Sharon asking Nicholas about his fraught relationship with his father and a close-up of Nicholas reacting to this query. In the second scene, Abby and Scotty discuss Victor's disappearance, in a similar series of ever closer in shots. This scene ends with Scotty accusing Abby of being a liar and a close-up of Abby reacting to this accusation. On the surface, the similar subject matter ties these two scenes together. Of course, if one considers discussion of offscreen characters as a similar subject matter, then this would tie many soap opera scenes together. In fact, in terms of storylines, these scenes are largely unrelated. Yet the sequence of cinematographic conventions is very similar. The common and extensive use of camera movement in daytime soap operas provides these personal and intimate moments with intrigue and immediacy, and the frequent use of the close-up seemingly gives the viewer access to the emotional lives of the soap opera characters.

[24] "July 24, 2017," *The Young and the Restless* (CBS, 1973-).

In these scenes, the slow zoom is not employed, but the combination of shot/reverse shot and progressively closer in framing serves a similar purpose.[25] Whether through camera movement or editing, this increasing closeness works to create a sense of suspense and drama: What will be revealed at the end of this shot or scene? What will be concealed? This repetitive convention begins with an establishing medium or medium-long shot that includes both or most of the people in the conversation and a sense of the space that is being occupied. (Notably, though, the fact that most settings and even scenes have already been seen multiple times earlier in the same or previous episodes means that establishing shots are somewhat superfluous.) As each individual scene progresses, it moves through a series of close-ups and then eventually to one final close-up that is held as the scene ends. All the while, there is a slow zoom that runs throughout the scene or a series of ever closer close-ups, giving the viewer greater and greater access to what seems like should be a significant denouement or something else narratively important. More often, though, even when this close-up underscores new and exciting information, the current iteration of a conversation is just one among many. This effect works to create a sense of suspense and drama while still focusing primarily on reaction and emotion.

These close-ups allow the viewer to relish moments of emotion and intimacy while also having an inscrutability that allows for a multitude of interpretations. They also serve as another means of deferring resolution and disrupting temporality. Louise Spence, for instance, writes about this use of the close-up as something that is unique to the daytime soap opera. "The prolonged large-scale reaction shots at the end of the segments, often of two characters in succession, also suspend ordinary time. In *The Young and the Restless*, meaningful intensity comes from dwelling

[25] Not all of the current contemporary American daytime soap operas have the same aesthetic features, but there is nonetheless significant overlap. While *Days of Our Lives* and *General Hospital* frequently use the slow zoom, *The Young and the Restless* uses it infrequently.

upon an everyday moment. In most drama, ordinary time is foreshortened to achieve a meaningful intensity."[26] Spence analyzes the close-up both as a mode of suspending and confusing time, and as a way of emphasizing and underscoring sentiment. The prolongation of this reaction shot provides time and space to focus on quotidian emotionality and conversation. Spence adds, "Soap operas elevate thoughts and feelings to tragic status; but they are, at the same time, socially extended and quotidian. Each of the characters' everyday thoughts are favored in a close-up and shared with the television audience."[27] These close-ups combine drama and tragedy—as well as everydayness—to create a space in which emotionality is front and center and also contradictory. The close-up grants access to tragedy and trauma as well as everyday thoughts and feelings; its muteness and repetition denies access to the same things. It provides the viewer with the sense that specific emotions are being conveyed, but those emotions are neither clear nor necessarily consistent (from one scene or episode to the next).

Often, these intimate close-ups, which seem to represent not only a specific image, but also a specific thought or emotion, are either inscrutable or a form of misdirection. In one 2017 episode of *Days of Our Lives*, for instance, Nicole (Arianne Zucker), Brady (Eric Martsolf), and Victor (John Aniston) are speaking in the foyer of the Kiriakis mansion.[28] Concerned about Victor's grandson Sonny possibly going to prison for the murder of Victor's brother Deimos—a murder almost everyone in town is pretty sure Sonny didn't commit—the scene concludes as Brady asks: "What are you going to do?" and Victor replies: "I'm going to confess."[29] This proto-confession is followed by a round of close-up reaction shots of each person in the scene, each looking vaguely but not deeply surprised (see Fig. 4), and then a cut to a commercial break. This confession is

[26] Spence, 94.
[27] Ibid., 97.
[28] "July 24, 2017."
[29] Ibid.

somewhat shocking, since up until then no one had suggested Victor as the culprit. Nonetheless, this is structured to seem like a plausible confession, as the episode cuts between this scene and, later, one in which Victor's nephew, imprisoned in Greece, is claiming that Victor is responsible for the murder. But when we return to Nicole, Brady, and Victor later in the episode, both the confession and the series of surprised close-ups are immediately undermined. When Nicole asks Victor, "Are you the one who killed Deimos?" Victor replies with the entirely non-revelatory, "I'll say whatever I need to say to get Sonny out of jail," obscuring whether Victor is the murderer and revealing only that he is the manipulative and power-hungry but loving grandfather he is already known to be.[30] Here, the viewer learns that while the series of close-ups seemed to be the precursor to something shocking and revelatory to come, they were in fact simply a form of misdirection, a way of giving the appearance of the story moving forward without any new information being provided. In this example, Nicole, Brady, and Victor only looked vaguely shocked, leaving open the opportunity to renege on the confession or the level of emoting when the episode returns to this space only a few minutes later.

Figure 4: Scene closing close-ups of Victor, Brady, and Nicole (*Days of Our Lives*)

With these close-ups, everything is familiar yet unfamiliar and possible while also impossible. Victor has just told the viewer that he is about to confess to Deimos's murder, and the scenes around it are making it seem plausible, yet this frequent use of misdirection and the fact

[30] Ibid.

this possibility has never been discussed before make it also seem entirely implausible. As Mimi White notes, "The contingencies of production and plotting in the soap opera thus combine, over and over again, to yield uncanny repetitions as routine, rather than exceptional events in the life of the soap opera."[31] Something similar is at stake with the visual aesthetics. This series of camera movements and framing implies a big reveal, something meaningfully important, but in fact often the only thing that is revealed is that it is deceptively, uncannily, routine. These close-ups serve as a space of intimacy and emotion—giving the viewer access to the character's internality and to an aesthetic that is familiar to her—yet they also create a sense of distance by being nearly impossible to interpret. They provide the viewer with an opportunity use her expertise to do interpretive work, and yet it is notoriously difficult to know what or whether information is being transmitted, making interpretation that much more of a challenge.

Scheming, duplicitousness, and misadventure have often been the bread and butter of the daytime soap opera narrative. At the heart of this is an investment in suspense—the sense that something troubling is about to happen—but the viewers or, much more often, the characters do not know what. Hitchcock's oft-quoted explanation of the difference between surprise and suspense is useful in this instance. Surprise is when a bomb under the table explodes; suspense is when the viewer is shown a bomb under the table and knows it will explode. "In the first case," he said, "we have given the public fifteen seconds of surprise at the moment of the explosion. In the second, we have provided them with fifteen minutes of suspense."[32] This suspense is an essential part of the ongoing narrative of the soap opera and its severely segmented structure. Sometimes, it is the suspense of knowing that a bomb will go off at some point (though usually, in these cases, the viewer gets days and weeks of suspense, rather than a mere fifteen minutes). Sometimes,

[31] Mimi White, "Women, Memory and Serial Drama," *Screen* 35, no. 4 (1994), 347.
[32] François Truffaut, Alfred Hitchcock, and Helen G. Scott, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 73.

though, the thing that is at stake is emotion driven rather than action driven; in that case, what is there to be revealed to create the necessary sense of suspense? Close-ups serve to showcase a specific character or object, informing the viewer that this is the thing that she should pay attention to and, working together with performance and score, make it clear that there is more going on than meets the eye. Occasionally, it is a close-up on a concrete object—an earring left behind or a file knocked under a table—more often, the combination of close-up and conversation inform the viewer that there is something being concealed while delaying the inevitable reveal. Repeated conversations on the same topics provide ample opportunity for characters to articulate their plans and their feelings. Nonetheless, the slow zoom, shot/reverse shot, and close-up broadcast the fact that the dialogue is not sufficient to express a given character's complex series of thoughts and emotions; the emphasis on their faces reveals simply that something has yet to be revealed. It becomes a means by which the viewer gains access to the characters' emotional lives and emphasizes the soap opera as deeply rooted in a practice of emotional expression. On the daytime soap opera, emotions take precedence and can be closely considered and discussed, leaving room for viewer involvement and interpretation.

At the same time that the aesthetic conventions provide the viewer with the invitation to interpret and a sense of expertise and ownership in this emotional space, they also, incongruously, reproduce the masculinized, patriarchal structures within which the viewers (as well as the characters) live their everyday lives. Kristen Hatch addresses soap opera's transition from radio to television, noting that with the loss of the narrator, "right and wrong were no longer determined by an announcer, but interpreted by the audience, largely through visual cues."[33] As described above, these televisual conventions did indeed create space for audience interpretation as viewers

[33] Kristen Hatch, "Selling Soap: Postwar Television Soap Opera and the American Housewife," in *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s* (London: IB Tauris, 2002), 45.

work to make sense of character internalities. Nonetheless, claiming the interpretation is now fully in the hands of the viewer underplays how much work these visual cues themselves do to make sense of narrative expectations for the viewer. Hatch continues, "The viewer assumed the announcer's mantle of expertise, interpreting characters' actions and emotions for him or herself."[34] And while there is the appearance of and the potential for this expertise and interpretive power to be more self-directed, there is still a push toward a "correct" interpretation from the camera and the other cinematographic conventions. In other words, programmatic control may be less overt, but it has certainly not disappeared entirely.

On the radio, the narrator worked both to set the scene and to conclude it, giving the listener a sense of where the action was happening, what she may have missed in previous scenes or episodes, and what she can expect in the scene or episode to come, often including insight into a character's (sometimes duplicitous, tormented, or beleaguered) internalities. In addition, the narrator summarized what just transpired, predicted what was to come in the narrative (the phrase "Tomorrow on…," for instance, was a familiar one), and highlighted ways in which either the listeners or the characters may be out of the loop on key aspects of what was taking place. Once soap operas made it to television, this narrator was quickly removed, but it was replaced with a camera that guided the viewer's perspective and assumed knowledge of character internalities. While it took time for soaps on television to settle into highly consistent and repetitive aesthetic practices as can be seen today, the camera's knowingness and control displayed by the close-up and the slow zoom were already present in the earliest days of television soap operas (see Chapter 2). On television, the cinematography, camerawork, and framing often took over the work of the radio's male voiceover by informing the listener/viewer of what she should and should not know.

[34] Ibid.

Here, the visual conventions call attention to certain information and also delimit the scope of the viewer's perspective. In addition to telling the viewer that there is something on which she should be focusing, close-ups also severely limit her perspective and disallow the opportunity to see anything else that may be occurring.

In many ways, the camera becomes a silent narrator, who, using a different form of narration—slow zooms and increasingly close close-ups—provides the viewer with exactly and only the information that is deemed necessary. The camera takes over the role of the male narrator, similarly serving as a omnipotent figure that guides the viewer/auditor through the narrative and controls what she can and cannot know. Throughout each scene, the viewer gets a smaller and smaller view of the world she is watching, opening on a domestic or professional space and closing, by the end of most scenes, on just one perspective on one person. And just when this closeness and limited point of view has the potential to become too stifling, the scene ends and the process repeats, opening just wide enough to provide a sense of relief and hope that something new or different is to come, but inevitably ending once again with the limited perspective of the close-up, controlled by outside forces. As the camera continues to close in on its characters, our visual narrator is creating coherence through repression and exclusion. The camera creates suspense and a meaningful narrative structure by deciding for the viewer exactly what can and cannot be included in the frame, therefore leaving out many other perspectives and leading the viewer away from ownership and interpretation.

This means that, on one hand, the close-up values expertise and provides room for viewer participation but, at the same time, can serve as a tool of hegemony, with outside forces controlling the viewer's perspective. So, too, do we see this radical/reactionary duality and conflict within the narrative structures. In the polemical text *Love and Ideology in the Afternoon* (1995), Laura

Stempel Mumford questions the idea of the soap opera as a feminist text. While Mumford does not dismiss the scholarship that has come before or the pleasure viewers get from viewing, she attempts to tackle her own "struggle to reconcile my pleasure in the genre with my recognition of the form's tendencies to reproduce the repressive ideology of capitalist patriarchy."[35] In doing so, she specifically positions her work through gender and in terms of—though at odds with—feminist television scholarship, speaking directly to the work of scholars like Brunsdon and Modleski and the question of gender and ideology in soap operas. In particular, Mumford calls into question assumptions about deferred resolution and narrative non-closure that soap opera scholars have been theorizing since the 1970s. Mumford makes the point that while soap operas may be "open" narratives (as Robert Allen refers to them, as many scholars have suggested, and as I have been claiming thus far), there are many forms of soap opera closure.[36] Individual plots and storylines do indeed end, even if the programs themselves are not designed to do so.

Not only do individual storylines end, but they end in ways that reinforce normative ideology and capitalist values, rather than upending them. Mumford argues that, "Closure exerts an especially powerful force by drawing stories to a conclusion with events that reinforce the essential rightness of the programs' moral and ideological rules."[37] This sense of closure in morality and rule following reproduces patriarchal norms. As Mumford states, when there is closure, it ends in monogamy and heterosexual love:

> Heterosexual love within a committed monogamous relationship (ideally marriage) is preferable to all other possible romantic relationships, with nonmonogamy always configured as betrayal. The traditional patrilineal family represents the only bulwark against loneliness and chaos, work serves mainly as a distraction from the far more important personal sphere of life, and no amount of money, success,

[35] Laura Stempel Mumford, *Love and Ideology in the Afternoon: Soap Opera, Women, and Television Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 4.
[36] Ibid.; Allen, *To Be Continued*, 18.
[37] Mumford, 92.

> glamour, fame, or sexual satisfaction can compensate characters who do not find romantic love and a secure place in a family.[38]

She goes on to describe a specific and extremely common form of closure in the soap opera—that of the paternity plot, in which paternity becomes the central question of any number of storylines. In the paternity plot, the resolution—and pleasure, for both the character and the viewer—is always found in the discovery of the father. With the paternity plot, Mumford asserts that pleasure does not come from ever-deferred resolution but is placed instead safely in the arms of the capitalist patriarchy.[39] As Mary Brown points out, the role of hegemonic ideologies is always present in television in general and women's television specifically: "The work of ideology, however, is rendered invisible because it is so overdetermined or comes from so many different sources that it seems like commonsense."[40] These scholars explain how dominant ideology functions, safely folding itself into the ongoing narrative structure in ways that can be difficult or impossible to see. In this case, it is done by seeking resolutions that end safely in hegemony and normativity, even if those resolutions are not immediately evident because they are so long deferred. Nonetheless, in a reversal of even that position, the infinite nature of the narrative means that most things are never truly, finally resolved, so these resolutions within normativity are still never really the final resolution. With a format in which resolution is long deferred, eventually determined, but always changeable, it make sense that multiple realities can be true at once.

What this seems to reinforce is the fact that soap operas are not doing only one thing—they are not simply empowering or controlling, not simply feminist or oppressive. Instead, the visual conventions of the everyday implausible are multiple—they are radical and reactionary

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[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Mary Ellen Brown, *Television and Women's Culture: The Politics of the Popular* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1990), 18.

simultaneously. The aesthetic features open up new worlds and possibilities *at the same time* that they reproduce stifling and normative ideals and ideology. The close-up, as well as the other repetitive cinematographic features, serve as evidence of this, disempowering the viewer by controlling and limiting what she can see, while also empowering her, valuing her expertise, and inviting her to draw her own conclusions. The combination of the slow zoom, shot/reverse shot, and the close-up creates a space that is driven by emotion, giving the viewer the opportunity to linger in this space in ways that are often denied to her by real life and by other forms of popular media. This generic convention is driven by emotion and the question of what will be felt rather than the question of what will happen or what task needs to be taken care of next. In particular, the move toward the close-up at the end of the scene speaks to this. However, the close-up also does contradictory work, not only opening up a space of emotion and interpretation, but also closing that space down. The repetitive visual features move within each scene from a world of possibility (where the viewer can choose what to pay attention to) to a space of control (where the viewer only has access to the very small part of this fictional world). On the other hand, this familiar sequence provides the viewer the opportunity to use her expert knowledge to appreciate these moments. And even as each scene ends within the tight space of control, it forever moves to the next scene, opening up new possibilities and new opportunities for interpretation, but the fate of that scene is inevitable, too. It will open to a world of possibilities that it will never make good on, ending in a place of emotion, conversation, and exploration, but also one in which interpretation and knowledge is limited and has already been decided for the viewer. The open-endedness of the narrative competes with the fact that storylines do end and, in doing so, reinforce patriarchal values, often through the paternity plot. And, yet, nothing really ends.

Uncanny Paternity and the Everyday Implausible

Definitions of uncanny help to identify the aspect of the everyday implausible that is reliant not simply on contradiction but also on reversals. The paternity plot is an apt example of this; it provides a challenge to normative family structures but does not challenge the central and centering structure of the family. Instead, it allows families to grow bigger and more complicated and individuals to be less reliant on the nuclear family. By making family unfixed, it also allows for identities to frequently shift and be reevaluated, and it provides characters with the possibility of layering multiple identities and understanding of self on top of one another.

It is helpful now to return to *Santa Barbara* and the uncanny, both of which I introduced in the beginning of this chapter. The uncanny, or in German "*unheimlich*," was theorized by German scholars and psychologists at the turn of the twentieth century and popularized by Sigmund Freud. Freud defines *unheimlich* using both it and its opposite, "*heimlich*." In addition to defining *heimlich* as domestic, Freud also brings forth a definition of *heimlich* as something that is secret—as private or enclosed, which both homes and secrets have in common.[41] This concept, however, is layered, suffused with reversals and contradictions at all stages. As Freud states, "the essential condition for the emergence of a sense of the uncanny is intellectual uncertainty."[42] In that way, not only is the *heimlich* something secret, but so is its opposite, the *unheimlich*. This means that the *unheimlich* is a thing that was once secret (the *heimlich*) and remains secret (the *unheimlich*), but it is also transformed (from the *heimlich* to the *unheimlich*). According to Freud, "Uncanny is what one calls everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open."[43] But, importantly, there is still information that is concealed. This idea that there

[41] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin Books, 2003).
[42] Ibid., 125.
[43] Ibid., 132.

are layers of secrets that are constantly being uncovered and discovered—and also re-covered and rediscovered—is also at the heart of the daytime soap opera. This sense of reversals and simultaneity embedded in the uncanny is also embedded in the contradictions and hesitations of the everyday implausible. As I have established, the visual aesthetics create a pattern in which there is always a sense of something being revealed but rarely a real moment of revelation. At the same time, when there is revelation, it often becomes mundane. Furthermore, known information is rarely reliable. The combination of repetition and open-endedness means that information revealed often will be disrupted by time and structure, which allows the possibility of new, contradictory truths to reveal themselves at any time. On soap operas, reality can always change, forcing the known to become unknown and the familiar to become unfamiliar.

As with the example from *Days of Our Lives* in which Victor "reveals" his role in his brother's murder by never actually revealing anything, the moment of revelation is just as often misdirection as it is revelation. The open-endedness and deferred closure mean that truth can—and, inevitably, will—change over time, meaning a secret being revealed does not preclude that secret from being re-revealed in the future when reality has the possibility of being known anew. Any (secret) information could, at any point, become uncovered, altering what is known to be true. These uncanny layers of constantly transforming secrets and truths are embedded in both the aesthetic conventions of the soap opera (where the repetitive visuals and ultimate close-up reveal and conceal simultaneously) and the narrative. The paternity plot to which Mumford refers is a useful example of this. As White explains, "Even when a character's proper parentage is established, the very logic of soap opera narratives sustains a margin of uncertainty for the future,

in which the resolution can again be thrown into question."[44] As long as the stories are ongoing, parentage can be re-revealed, creating a new truth or a new secret alongside the old one.

On *Santa Barbara*, the "Capwell Zone" episode is a turning point in a storyline about confused paternity. In this case, Greg (Paul Johansson) learns his father is C.C. (Jed Allen), and thus a secret is revealed. The initial question in Greg's story, though—that of paternity—is one that is frequently left open in soap operas and unknown to the viewers and characters for months or years at a time. Even when it is revealed, it is often still inaccurate or confused. In the "Capwell Zone," Julia (Nancy Lee Grahn) says, in her poetic, alien speech: "My father had a child that had my name, but it was not me. Do not be deceived by the Cleavers, the Waltons, the Huxtables, Jim, Margaret, Princess, Kitten, and Bud. Only infants are born. Men and women are decided."[45] As a character in this episode that looks like, sounds like, and acts like Julia, but is not Julia (she is instead Julia's alien form), she calls attention to the ways in which family, parentage, and identity are substantially different in daytime soap opera than in other types of television programming. One is not to be deceived by the knowability and normativity of families on classic television sitcoms like *Leave It to Beaver*, *The Cosby Show*, and *Father Knows Best*, but instead to remember that the identities of soap opera characters are constantly changing ("men and women are decided") as familial relationships and familial ties continue to be revealed. When this happens, characters must choose who their family now is. Soap opera families are, indeed, non-normative, moving well passed the heteronormative nuclear family and focusing instead on single-parent and multi-generational family units, extended family, adoptive family, and chosen family. In addition, confused parentage is a constant theme in soap operas and exists as an ongoing narrative seesaw of secrets and revelations played out across conflicting familial and class interests. Parentage is

[44] White, 352.
[45] "The Capwell Zone."

often something that was once a secret and, even after being revealed, can remain a secret—to one or more characters, to the viewers, and sometimes even to the writers and production staff, who cannot predict that the familial ties they created may later (often much later) be broken. These reversals serve as a challenge to normative expectations, but one that is still based in and reliant on family structure and familial relationships.

In 2002, *Days of Our Lives* also explored an alien-related storyline, this time featuring the discovery of two nearly-naked teenagers, Rex (Eric Winter) and Cassie (Alexis Thorpe), who are found in the woods near Salem surrounded by a glowing green light in a self-destructing "space capsule." While this, like the *Santa Barbara* storyline, also resolves in the natural (rather than the supernatural), it persists for much longer, with the residents of Salem believing for many months that these teens may be aliens. Eventually, it is discovered that they are twins and the biological children of long-time Salemites Roman Brady (Josh Taylor) and Kate Roberts (Lauren Koslow), raised and returned to Salem as part of a manipulative mind game by criminal mastermind and enemy to Salem, Stefano DiMera (Joseph Mascolo). Before their "true" parentage is discovered, it is followed by not one, but a barrage of parental reveals, including a short time when they are believed to be the children of long-time Salem residents Tony DiMera (Thaao Penghlis) and Marlena Evans (Deidre Hall). With the twins going through at least two full sets of parents, and all the changes in siblings, half-siblings, and distant relatives that go along with that, by the time Kate and Roman are identified, Rex and Cassie have had some family connection to almost all of the known characters in Salem. Not surprisingly, these constantly changing identities lead to multiple threats of incest, challenging normative familial relationships in an even more troubling way. In the end, it is determined that their mother's eggs were stolen from her, fertilized with their father's sperm, and implanted into a surrogate. Because of this surrogacy, what this storyline leads

to is the much less common case of unknown maternity. It also outlines the way in which parentage regularly remains unfixed. A combination of lying, scheming, mistaken identity, and confusion leads to multiple parental reveals, causing parentage, and, in turn, identity, to be a secret that, even after revelation, can remain a secret, yet transformed.

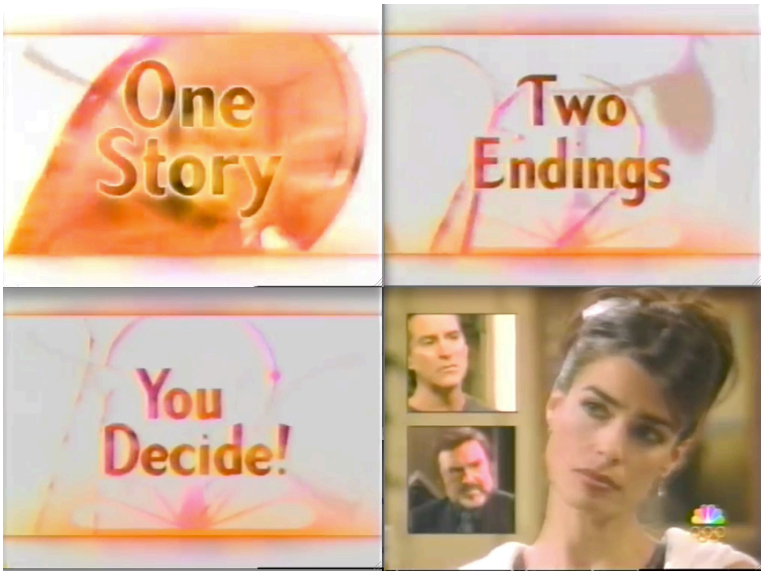


Figure 5: Online viewer participation promo for *Days of Our Lives*

While the viewers, as well as the characters, discover newly determined parentage at a variety of different moments, what these paternity plots have in common is a sense of hesitation, reversal, and an open-ended viewpoint on what is possible and what is not. In a different *Days of Our Lives* storyline, circa 1999, fans got the unique opportunity to be a part of the process. When Hope Brady (Kristian Alfonso) got pregnant, it was—as is often the case—unclear who the father was. As a promotion for the show and its recently developed online presence, the producers decided to let fans in the on the decision-making process, allowing them a say in who the father of Hope's baby was. The promo, which promised, "One story, two endings, you decide!," asked viewers to go to the NBC website to vote for who they wanted the father to be (see Fig. 5). Viewers were given the choice between John Black (Drake Hogestyn) and Stefano DiMera, neither of whom were Hope's husband at the time, Bo (Peter Reckell). This was due, in part, to the fact that,

at the time of conception, Hope had been kidnapped and taken away from her family, making it impossible for Bo to be the father. It was eventually revealed "by popular demand" that the baby's father was John. This, though, apparently did not sit well with fans (even though they ostensibly decided), who were rooting for supercouple Bo and Hope and wanted him to be the father. After an elaborate baby switch, which involved at least three more instances of confused paternity (between two different babies), Hope's baby was eventually returned to her in 2002, and it was revealed that Bo was the father all along—but not before a supernatural-seeming series of events in which Hope and Bo were both plagued with confusing and unclear flashbacks to try to account for Bo being the father when everyone understood that to be impossible.

Eventually, these flashbacks were able to rewrite history, bringing Bo and Hope together during the period of conception. Here, everyday occurrences (becoming and remaining parents) are made fantastic—the viewers, the characters, and the producers are all forced to hesitate, unsure about what is real or possible (since the impossible becomes real), waiting on each other to fill in and redefine reality. No single revelation is sufficient to produce the truth of identity, nor is it ever clear that there is a single truth. Instead, there are simply a series of situations—some everyday and predictable, some implausible and supernatural—that all simultaneously have the potential to be true. In "The Capwell Zone" paternity plot, the alien versions of Julia and Mason are familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, which calls attention to the ways in which confused parentage makes so many characters both themselves and simultaneously an identical person who is also someone else—the potential child of multiple different families. Even once parentage is revealed (as much as it ever can be), characters often layer their two families on top of each other, claiming each as their own instead of replacing one with another. Often, newly discovered parents and siblings (and children, grandparents, cousins, and anyone else who may come along) are just as

quickly embraced as the previous ones, making family gatherings suddenly much larger and more complicated. These characters are family and not family, themselves and, at the same time, someone else. Characters are constantly defined by, but never fully bound to, their own paternity.

The fact that time makes reality—and parentage specifically—forever unfixed means that there is always a sense of uncertainty, for both the characters and the viewer. As Lynn Spigel notes about the fantastic sitcom: "In addition to this hesitation within the mind of the character, the fantastic also makes the reader uncertain about the status of the text. The story calls its own conventions of representation into question and makes the reader wonder whether the narrative situation is possible at all."[46] Here, in referencing the work of Tzvetan Todorov, Spigel explores the role of the supernatural in fiction. As Todorov explains it, the fantastic is the space in which both the characters and the viewer do not know whether what they are seeing is natural or supernatural. "The fantastic implies, then, not only the existence of an uncanny event, which provokes a hesitation in the reader and the hero; but also a kind of reading, which we may for the moment define negatively: it must be neither 'poetic' nor 'allegorical'."[47] The fantastic creates a sense of hesitation largely because the content in which it is embedded provides a sense of realism or plausibility, as is true with soap operas. On the one hand, the supernatural, per se, is rarely a space that soap operas linger in for long; on the other hand, the space in which hesitation is provoked by the uncanny is the exact place where the soap opera lives. Daytime soap operas are suffused with moments of confusion, contradiction, and hesitation, in which it is unclear what is real and what is not. The anxiety about familiar and familial relationships—both connections to and separation from parentage—and the lack of clarity about what is and is not possible mean that

[46] Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 123.
[47] Todorov, 32.

everydayness and implausibility are constantly working side by side. The layers of meaning and identity make it so that characters are both themselves and not themselves; there is always more information to reveal, information that perhaps negates what came before. The paternity plot, like the supernatural, allows for multiple opposing ideas to be true simultaneously and creates a sense of hesitation for the viewer as well as the characters. So, indeed, does hegemony. Like the feminized soap opera viewer, who exists on the margins, the characters are asked to call their own existence and identity into question, forced to hesitate about who they are and whether they have the right to claim space within a particular lived environment or family unit.

Conclusion

In the end, neither "The Capwell Zone" nor other instances of the supernatural are "real," even in their own worlds; instead, the discovery or dream of aliens are just another thing that can happen in the everyday implausible world of daytime soap operas—alongside the discovery a long-lost family or as part of an elaborately devious plot to get revenge for a personal slight. Modleski writes, "If my speculations are correct and the uncanny has its chief source in separation anxieties, then it follows that since women have more difficulty establishing a separate self, their sense of the uncanny may actually be stronger than men's."[48] As a women's genre, the soap opera functions on the level of the everyday implausible, a sense of uncanny reversals and hesitation that is based in the soap opera's repetitive aesthetics and everyday struggle between the ordinary, domestic, and quotidian and the improbable, impossible, and "unrealistic." Daytime soap operas live in a space that teeters between an independence from the home and the family and being beholden to it. The drama is often about holding or bringing families together, but also necessarily about drawing

[48] Modleski, *Loving with a Vegeance*, 63.

them apart; storylines are about women finding independence from parents, husbands, and children and redefining family, but also about rebuilding family structures and domestic spaces and recreating normativity. Soap operas are not science fiction, nor are the science fiction plots pervasive, but they are imbued with moments of hesitation, where one listens carefully to understand the importance of a particularly loud music cue or ambient sound (that may have no obvious meaning); where one is first intrigued by and then waits to make sense of the meaningful close-up at the end of the shot; where one accepts that impossible parentage is possible and time can always disrupt what we know to be true. This hesitation, uncomfortable for some, is perhaps what makes the aesthetic feel meaningfully real for others.

Even as the lives of viewers, especially female viewers, continues to change, they still exist within a patriarchal society that limits the expression of emotion in both professional and personal settings. It is difficult to say what is "real" or "authentic" to more viewers—family relations or civic engagement, love and relationships or corporate affairs—and, in many ways, it is irrelevant. The aesthetics of soap operas serve to offset the realism of these themes, and yet, simultaneously, they serve to underscore them. By looking closely at the aesthetics of the daytime soap opera, it is evident that the contradictions at the core of this form are held not only in the text's narrative and structure but also in the visual and auditory conventions. This aspect of the daytime soap opera is brought about through its history as a radio text. It is also helpful in understanding how this unique and contradictory aesthetic space can be simultaneously appealing (especially to fans who are familiar with the aesthetic) and off-putting. Robert Allen makes a rhetorical distinction between soaps and "ordinary" programs and between soap listeners and "ordinary" listening audiences.[49] Perhaps it is time for soap viewers to be understood as viewers who are, on the one hand, everyday

[49] Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas*, 24 & 29.

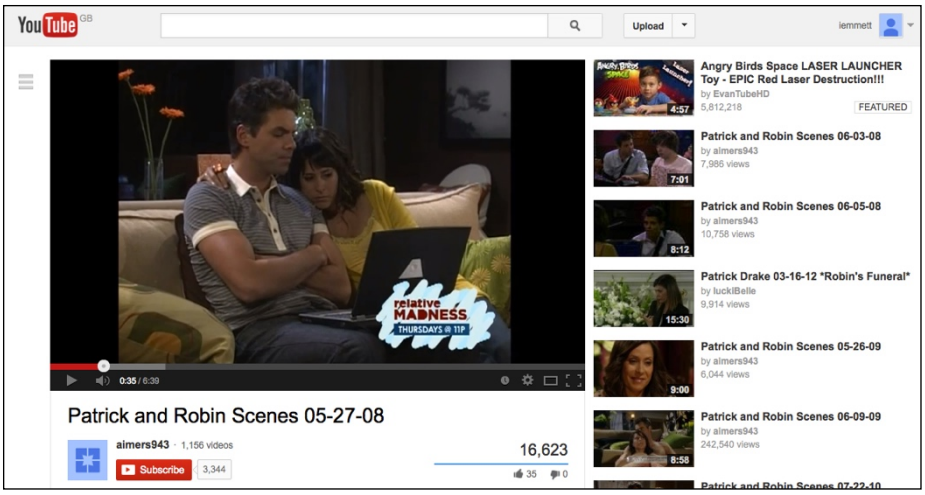
but, on the other hand, out of the ordinary. If one is not invested or familiar with the aesthetic, the repetition is boring. If one is familiar, though, the contradictions and duality of the mundane and the extraordinary can keep the viewer on the edge of her seat.

This is why it is necessary to further define and analyze soap opera aesthetics. The everyday implausible removes a woman from her limited realm and places her back inside it simultaneously. To reference Catherine Rottenberg's *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, women cannot be unencumbered—women always experience a burden or failure if they try to comfortably situate themselves within the patriarchy.[50] This is what we see in the daytime soap opera. While a repetitive aesthetic provides viewers with the experience and expertise to perform their own interpretation, the open-ended temporality creates an unfulfilled promise and ever-changing reality that invites confusion and hesitation on the part of the viewer. The everyday implausible is defined by this dichotomy—expertise and ownership simultaneous with confusion and hesitation—and the idea that emancipated womanhood is a contradiction in terms.

[50] Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), 49.

Chapter 4:

No End In Site: The Daytime Soap Opera in a Digital Viewing Context



"They obviously are doomed to oblivion in the near future," the *New York Herald Tribune* writes about the U.S. daytime soap opera.[1] While the format has not failed, its survival is precarious. How could they possibly survive such a significant media transition, one that has seen major losses in viewership and the cancelation of long-running and beloved programs?[2] Of course (as you may recall from Chapter 2), the above sentiment was written seventy years ago about the soap opera's transition from radio. As previous chapters have demonstrated, though, the soap opera not only survived but, ultimately, thrived in the transition from radio to television. While there have been demographic shifts that have affected soap opera viewing, this chapter looks at the significant transformations in television in the digital era (a boom in the number of channels, shifts in distribution practices, and a move to streamed and individuated viewing) that have changed who

[1] "Has the Soap Opera Bubble Burst?," *New York Herald Tribune*, September 18, 1955, F22.
[2] Long-running soaps that were previously canceled include *Guiding Light* (CBS, 1952-2009), *As the World Turns* (CBS, 1956-2010), *All My Children* (ABC, 1970-2011), and *One Life to Live* (ABC, 1968-2012).

watches television, what they watch, and how they watch. From the vantage of two decades into the twenty-first century, the increasing dependance on streaming media may signal the final blow to the daytime soap opera, though the "death" of the genre has been in question for decades—as evidenced by the *New York Herald Tribune*.

Survival in these new media contexts is not just about making the content available; media shifts are also about transforming and transitioning programming so that it continues to make meaning for its intended audience, even as structures surrounding it change. David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins argue that "the emergence of new media sets in motion a complicated, unpredictable process in which established and infant systems may co-exist for an extended period or in which older media may develop new functions and find new audiences as the emerging technology begins to occupy the cultural space of its ancestors."[3] In the 1950s, the radio soap opera neither disappeared nor remained static as television took over; instead, the genre was reimagined in a way that allowed it to fit within the new medium. The spaces and voices of radio soap operas were considered and reconsidered as the move to television occurred, with key formal and narrative features remaining even as there were irrevocable shifts in structure, content, and visual and aural aesthetics. As the soap opera adapts to emerging technology and other types of programming borrow from the existing format, the genre is neither disappearing nor surviving as is.

While soap operas are often framed and positioned as conservative texts that are fixed rather than fluid, the transition to television proved otherwise. So, too, do changes brought about since then, as explored in Chapters 2 and 3. Erin Meyers writes, "The ways in which soaps have been discursively framed by the television industry since the 1980s reflects a disregard for convergence as a moment of transition marked by the collision between old and new in favor of

[3] David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins, *Rethinking Media Change: Aesthetics of Transition* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 2.

adherence to the more shortsighted rhetoric of convergence in which the new pushes the old aside."[4] Indeed, soap operas and the engagement of their fans are constantly in flux, adapting and adjusting with industrial and technological shifts. Meyers addresses the fact that media shifts enable a process, one in which the old and the new are in conversation with each other. The soap opera is certainly not immune to this. As long as there have been digital platforms, soap opera fans have used the technology to exchange content and information—replicating and expanding earlier practices—and soap opera producers have tried to capitalize on the potential of new technologies. The collision between broadcast television and streaming television has affected soap opera aesthetics, narratives, and viewing practices, affording and inciting both continuation and transformation.

This chapter will look at the intersection of, on the one hand, daytime soap opera aesthetic and narrative conventions and, on the other, normative digital viewing practices, exploring combinations and continuations as well as transformations and divergences. In doing so, I will show that, while daytime soap operas and soap opera aesthetics do not disappear, there are ways in which they are fundamentally incompatible with the norms of online viewing. To explore this, I will return to some of the soap opera conventions that have been addressed in previous chapters—including seriality, intersecting narratives, cliffhangers, and interruption and fragmentation—exploring how they do and do not change and adapt when repositioned within streaming and video sharing platforms. At the same time, these new modes of consumption create new norms; as digital viewing protocols have developed over the past two decades, certain practices have gone from intermittent to normative. These include (but are not limited to) complete series viewing, binge watching, time shifting, and individualized and individuated viewing. There is an expectation that

[4] Erin Meyers, "'Don't Cry Because It's Over, Smile Because It Was': American Soap Opera and Convergence Culture," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 32, no. 5 (2015), 338.

the digital viewer could watch a series starting from the beginning and continuing through every episode in order (an inclination that I refer to here as "completism"), one immediately following the next, in their own time and space, on one screen or on a range of screens of varying sizes. With these practices, we see echoes of soap opera viewing norms—there is a commitment to the ongoing narrative and a sense that the viewer can have control over the viewing experience and the text—as well as ways they are incompatible or incongruous with the soap opera text. This chapter will explore both—how digital viewing allows for the continuation of soap opera practices and how it forestalls and transforms them.

Daytime soap operas and related content are readily available not only on television and on demand, but also online. Today, daytime soap opera episodes are available ad-supported, by subscription, or for purchase on Hulu, Apple TV, Peacock, Paramount Plus, network streaming platforms, and elsewhere.[5] Full episodes of soap operas were first available for download in 2003 and for streaming as early as 2005.[6] Even before that, though, message boards and discussions of daytime soap operas were active in the 1990s, broadening transmission of information from one fan to another.[7] Like other genres with engaged fan bases, daytime soap opera fans found their way online relatively quickly, through message boards, on fan sites, and by producing fanvids and other fan-distributed content on video sharing sites like YouTube.[8] These fanvids remove the content from its officially-authorized viewing and narrative context and place the (often newly edited) content in the frame-within-a-frame interface of video sharing sites.

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[5] See Elana Levine's, "What the Hell Does TIIC Mean?" (2011) to get a full history of how, when, and why soaps made their way to various streaming sites. This process did not happen all at once, but soap operas were some of the earliest programming to make its way to the internet as full episodes. In *The Survival of Soap Opera: Transformations for a New Media Era* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), pp. 201-218.
[6] Ibid., 203.
[7] Nancy K. Baym, *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2000), Vol. 3.
[8] Science fiction fans would be another example of this, as scholars like Henry Jenkins explore. Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (London: Routledge, 2012).

At one time, the viewing options were obviously limited: Television soap operas could be watched when they were originally broadcast and, if that failed, information could be acquired through newspapers, fan magazines and newsletters, or other viewers. When time shifting through the VCR became available in the 1980s, the modes through which narrative and programmatic information could be acquired began to expand. Viewers could still read fan magazines and newsletters, but they could also go to a growing network of local fan events to meet other viewers and industry professionals and watch episodes or clips on VHS (recorded themselves or by others). Today, many of these modes of information acquisition and content viewing remain, but they have shifted largely to emerging technologies—specifically video sharing platforms and wiki sites, with some soap magazines moving entirely online and VHS collecting and transfer largely extinct. Soap opera content in the form of full episodes, clips, fan videos, social media exclusives, and vast archives of other supplementary information—as well as other soap fans—can all be easily found on digital media platforms. Like all other programming—whether it be network or cable programming, or content made for streaming—both official and pirated soap opera content can be viewed on a variety of network websites and streaming sites after their original airdates and times. The VCR may have saved the soap opera in the 1980s, however, digital technology makes mass distribution and bulk collection even easier than VHS did.[9]

When referencing digital viewing and emerging technologies, that could refer to a wide range of texts, contexts, and platforms. In this chapter, I focus primarily on streaming platforms (like Hulu and Peacock) and video sharing sites (like YouTube) and the role they play in the remaking and repositioning of the daytime soap opera. While the structure and content of these types of sites are different from each other, there are important similarities in normative viewing

[9] The difficulty of capturing and owning via DVD also put a damper on the progress made with VHS, limiting the soap opera viewers' ability to collect and archive in the same way.

practices, visual layout and functionality, and corporate interests. I have chosen not to explore or interrogate social media platforms, even though they are significant sources of new and remade soap opera content and engagement. The reasons for excluding social media are multifold, but it is largely because those sites have significantly different forms of content, user interactions, and visual layout. It is notably *not* because they are irrelevant to soap opera engagement or soap opera fan practices. Indeed, networks, performers, viewers, and content are all found on social media platforms, extending the narrative far beyond the television screen. Nonetheless, streaming and video sharing platforms provide the closest experience to viewing on television, and therefore are particularly useful in considering how soap operas have transitioned and transformed over time and where they can go from here.

In some ways, streaming technology seems like it would be ideal for daytime soap opera viewing. Removing content from compulsory daytime and daily viewing recreates what soap opera fans themselves did with the VCR, making it possible for viewers who were not at home during the day to keep up with their soaps. Streaming makes the programming easier to scan and to curate, removing the requirement to watch complete episodes as such—a kind of curation soap opera viewers have long done to different degrees.[10] The soap opera might seem to be an ideal genre for platforms that afford binge watching, keeping the viewer watching as each cliffhanger transitions right into the next scene, storyline, or episode. Fans have taken advantage of this, using online spaces as an archive for themselves and other fans. In doing so, they keep the soap opera alive, even as the genre as we know it is destabilized. However, in understanding this media transition, declining audiences and canceled programs cannot be overlooked, nor can we ignore the

[10] Ellen Seiter, Hans Borchers, Gabriele Kreutzner, and Eva-Maria Warth, "Don't treat us like we're so stupid and naïve: Towards an ethnography of soap opera viewers," in *Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 223-247.

disconnect between daytime soap opera aesthetics and the technology and affordances of streaming and online viewing.

Soap Opera Expertise and the Internet

In describing an experience she had when she was fifteen, while working as a hotel maid, Nancy Baym explains how her education expanded beyond learning how to clean: "My unofficial socialization included an explanation of all the characters on *General Hospital*, the relationships, and their current story lines."[11] Trained by the other maids on soap opera history and fandom, Baym soon became a soap opera viewer herself. My introduction to soap operas was not dissimilar, trained in my first months of high school by my newly discovered best friend. Among the abundant number of academic texts about soap operas that have been produced over the last 40 years by scholars like Christine Geraghty, Ellen Seiter, and Elana Levine, many of these scholars include at least part of their soap opera origin stories somewhere in their scholarship, explaining who introduced them to soap operas or when they begin watching. Perhaps this personal stake is a justification for writing about our own fandoms. However, I would suggest that, with soap opera scholarship, there is a more specific reason. This tendency reflects the fact that becoming a soap opera viewer is a learned skill, one that moves from one fan to the next and that often includes the acquisition of vast amounts of knowledge. Unique to the feminine and feminist structures of the soap opera, these origin stories are a part of the soap opera viewing process. As television programming—and soap opera specifically—attempts to move into a streaming media context, this expertise does not disappear, but it is forced to circulate in new ways, recombining the norms of soap opera viewing with the norms of online viewing.

[11] Baym.

Online clips and other digital resources become a mode to display the soap viewers' otherwise maligned expertise and cultural capital. A number of scholars have written about soap opera fan production in the early days of the internet.[12] In *Tune In, Log On*, Baym talks about the role of early online message boards in further developing soap opera fan communities. Like other fan scholars, Baym is interested in the ways in which fan culture is not only creative and productive but also communal: "The participatory logic of spreadability leads to audiences using content in unanticipated ways as they retrofit material to the contours of their particular community. Such activities are difficult for creators to control and even more difficult to quantify."[13] She argues against the idea that digital media interaction is too atomized and individualized and instead considers fan engagement productive, building community for the fans and continuing world building for the soap operas. Instead, fan production online was about building community, valuing and developing expertise, and being part of something that was both niche and communal. As internet access became more readily available, so did soap opera fan production and communication. As a result, the move from analog to digital content opened up more space to save, store, and circulate daytime soap operas—past and current.

The complex and communal engagement with the soap opera text—that was happening offline before it was happening online—has led to the troubling stereotype of the obsessed soap

[12] For instance, Elana Levine writes, "At that point, the soap industry started to recognize that soap fans had found the Internet to be an ideal spot for collectively communicating about the shows they loved—and loved to hate." Emma Webb also provides a useful history of how soap operas and fan activity circulated via the web in the early days of downloading, messages boards, and streaming, noting greater access to broadband and the related popularity of YouTube as necessary steps in the creation of fan content. Baym, *Tune In, Log On*; Levine, "What the Hell Does TIIC Mean?"; Emma Webb, "The Evolution of the Fan Video and the Influence of YouTube on the Creative Decision-Making Process for Fans," in *The Survival of Soap Opera: Transformations for a New Media Era* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), pp. 219-230.

[13] Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 6.

fan that has lasted throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century.[14] While the idea of a fan who is obsessively immersed in a soap opera connotes an unhealthy relationship with the beloved text, it ignores other aspects of soap opera fandom. In particular, it is entirely dismissive of the meaning, communal connections, and personal pride that can be derived from and circulated through such expertise; the effort required to learn and keep track of decades of storylines, characters, familial relationships, and aesthetic practices is significant. There is often little appreciation for the tastes or cultural competencies of soap opera viewers, who tend to have extensive expert knowledge about their preferred programs. Fan studies as well as soap opera scholars have tried to rewrite these fan narratives, focusing on the productivity and skill of fandom.[15] As many of these scholars acknowledge, the technology and connections afforded by online platforms does not create fan participation, but it does allow for more efficient fan production and communication. Online participation through posting content, communicating with other fans, and even passively viewing and reading content reproduces and reinforces the kind of fan participation that soap operas have long seen, allowing soap opera content not only to circulate but also to do so widely and quickly. These digital fan spaces have given soap opera expertise a new home.

This participation allows soap opera fans both to prove their expertise and to cultivate expertise in others; this knowledge can be central to meaning making and robust engagement with the soap opera text. If from the outside soap operas seem banal and repetitive, expert knowledge

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[14] In 1985, Robert Allen addressed this stereotype of soap opera fans as obsessive and unable to tell the difference between fiction and reality. Despite Allen's efforts to disprove this trope over thirty years ago, it has still not entirely dissipated. *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 25. Denise Bielby and C. Lee Harrington also address stereotypes of the soap opera fan. *Soap Fans: Pursuing Pleasure and Making Meaning in Everyday Life* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2010).

[15] See: Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2015); Baym; Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, eds., *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (New York: New York University Press, 2017); Suzanne Scott, *Fake Geek Girls* (New York: New York University Press, 2019); Seiter, et al.

reveals them to be complex and interactive. This knowledge produces meaning on a variety of levels. Mimi White argues that there is a significant relationship between expertise and meaning making in soap viewing: "Regular viewers have the ability to carry a vast wealth of information about character relations and past events in their heads. According to many critics, it is this knowledge, the reward of longstanding viewing commitment, that provides one of the major ways in which soap operas are meaningful for their viewers."[16] Expertise is important to viewers not simply as knowledge itself; there is pleasure involved in circulating that knowledge, and it serves as a personal reward for loyalty and a significant investment of time. Laura Stempel Mumford further highlights the importance of expertise by creating a classification system to organize the complex levels of viewer engagement. Within these classifications, experts are those who have aesthetic, narrative, and structural knowledge of the genre.[17] On the one end of this spectrum, she identifies a novice or "incompetent viewer, who knows nothing of soap opera convention or history"; this viewer will understand little and "may not even be able to make sense of it in the most superficial way." [18] On the other end, there is an "expert" who "will bring a wealth of historical memory and detailed information to the viewing experience, and therefore will, if she watched attentively, understand nearly everything she sees."[19] According to Stempel Mumford, experts have a generic competency, bringing to the text historical memory of narrative information and the ability to understand generic conventions and aesthetics—even in programs they have never seen before. Here, she further underscores the fact that soap opera expertise is complex, multifaceted, and difficult to acquire. While a novice-expert dichotomy is in and of itself

[16] Mimi White, "Women, Memory and Serial Drama," *Screen* 35, no. 4 (1994), 338.
[17] Allen.
[18] Laura Stempel Mumford, *Love and Ideology in the Afternoon: Soap Opera, Women, and Television Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 5.
[19] Ibid., 5.

simplistic, it does help to identify ways in which soap opera viewing invites expert engagement, allowing for a different kind of pleasure than from novice viewing.[20]

To be sure, the fact that there is unique pleasure in expert viewing is not surprising, given the kind of commitment required to gain this expertise. Even the most "recent" of the American daytime soap operas still on television (*The Bold and the Beautiful*) has run five days a week for over thirty years (producing something like 3,000 hours of content), so the idea of "beginning" any of these texts or diving in is, at best, intimidating—though potentially also boring or confusing. Watching all those episodes would be impossible; even just "catching up" on relevant storylines and characters would take interest, commitment, and a substantial amount of time. It is not, on the other hand, impossible. Mary Jeanne Wilson writes about soap opera fandom in a digital context and the digital circulation of soap operas and other related information. "In the past," Wilson notes, "the easiest way to get answers to these burning questions was to ask your grandmother, or mother, or any friend who watched that particular soap. Now, the best way to find out about the twists and turns of the complicated narrative history of a soap opera is to go online and find one of the hundreds of fan created web sites dedicated to soaps. Soap opera fans, whether in person or on the web, are the real arbiters of soap opera history."[21] Wilson's work explores the variety of resources available to both new and established soap opera fans and the ways in which mentoring and teaching between soap fans is an integral part of the soap opera viewing process.[22] Even at this moment when viewership is in decline, a huge archive of soap opera information is available online through any number of sources, including fan and video sharing sites.[23]

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[20] Levine, 208.
[21] Mary Jeanne Wilson, "More Lives to Live?: Archiving and Repurposing the Daytime Soap Opera" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2012), 68.
[22] As Emma Webb notes, "As soaps' once-solid standing in the U.S. network television line-up continues deteriorating, the popularity of soap opera clips on YouTube and the proliferation of online discussion—and viewing—of soaps across the Web still appears to be expanding." Webb, 222.
[23] Wilson; Levine; Webb.

A 2018 episode of *General Hospital* provides an example of how this expertise can circulate online. On June 28, 2018, Lulu Spencer-Falconeri (Emme Rylan) says a teary goodbye to her police officer husband Dante (Dominic Zamprogna) as he leaves for a long-term undercover assignment, and as Zamprogna leaves the show after nearly a decade.[24] In saying goodbye, Dante and Lulu discuss the first time they met and how lucky they were to have found each other. After Dante walks out and closes the door behind him, a sound bridge of Dante saying, "You know, you haven't even told me your name yet," begins a flashback to a clip of their first meeting. This "flashback" is implied not only by the content of the scene but also by visual and aural cues. The lighting and coloring of the scene shift from the cool blue of Dante and Lulu's home to a distinctly different warm orange of the bar where they first met; at the same time, beginning with the sound bridge, reverberation is added to the dialogue track, indicating that this is a memory conjured up inside the characters' heads. For a novice viewer, this sequence may seem fairly straightforward. As they say goodbye, the couple recalls and is both saddened and heartened by their first meeting; at the same time, the narrative and aesthetic choices make it a fairly recognizable representation of a flashback for an experienced television viewer, even if not an experienced soap viewer.

Yet there is more to the scene. A long-term viewer would know that Lulu was the second child of the original soap opera supercouple (perhaps the most well-known daytime soap opera couple), Luke and Laura Spencer, and would also be familiar with the complex history of Dante and Lulu, their relationship, and their extended families. This knowledge imbues the scene with compelling intratextual information and with the potential to turn a pedestrian goodbye into a deeply moving one. Moreover, the long-standing viewer would note that there is something wrong with the flashback. The "flashback" is performed by Rylan and Zamprogna, the same actors who

[24] "June 28, 2018," *General Hospital* (ABC, 1963-).

portray Lulu and Dante in 2018. However, the teenage and early adult Lulu was not played by Rylan, but by Julie Berman, and it was Berman who played Lulu when Dante and Lulu first met in 2009. The character was not recast with Rylan until 2013, four years after the couple met onscreen. In addition, this iteration of the scene includes the couple's love theme, "When You Came Around," which did not become an aural cue for their relationship until sometime after this first meeting. As a result, this flashback is—for the expert viewer—immediately obvious as a re-creation of this meeting and not the original clip from 2009. As such, the experience of viewing this as an expert is anything but straightforward or pedestrian. What an expert viewer might experience upon watching includes—depending on her perspective, investment, and opinions about characters and storylines—melancholy or joy about Zamprogna's exit, sadness or relief that this couple is parting ways, enthusiasm to rewatch this scene (despite or because of the obvious changes), disappointment or excitement to be reminded of Berman's exit, humor at the absurdity of this situation, and/or pride in the knowledge that she is an expert.

If a novice viewer were so inclined, it would not be impossible to find this information, but it would require effort and interest and at least enough knowledge to suspect there is information missing. She could soon find out about the recast on Wikipedia, Fandom, or any number of soap opera fan sites, or by finding the original 2009 clip on YouTube alongside other clips from the beginning of Dante and Lulu's relationship. YouTube contains many playlists of clips or—as Jean Burgess and Joshua Green call them—quotes, provided and curated by fans that give easy access to the couple's entire history.[25] Any number of sites explain this particular casting change as well as identifying casting changes as a generic convention of daytime soap operas. Wiki sites, which

[25] In their volume on YouTube, Jean Burgess and Joshua Green define quotes as, "snippets of material users share to draw attention to the most significant portion of a program." This is very much the kind of personal and expert work that soap opera fans are doing when they cut clips together on YouTube. Burgess and Green, *YouTube* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009), 49.

are written and updated by fans, would explain this casting information and would also introduce the character of Ethan, who appears in the original scene when Dante and Lulu first meet (though not in the remade one with Rylan). He (like so many in the nearly six decades the program has been on the air) is no longer in the *General Hospital* cast and is almost never spoken of. Still, information about this familial bond is now easily accessible online. Before digital content was readily available, if a similar novice viewer wanted to understand more, this information may have been provided by asking a friend or relative—possibly the person one is watching with—who was an expert viewer. In addition, the original version of the clip would have been more difficult to locate than it is today.

The presence of these online texts and other information that allow fans to gain the expert information needed to be a competent (and, perhaps eventually, an expert) viewer is not simply serendipitous. Fan practices online are often implicitly and explicitly about community building through proving expertise and showing off.[26] In addition to being an archival source where content can be stored and retrieved, digital technologies offer a space for fan interaction and communication. Soap operas have developed extensive fan networks, in which understanding the history of the programs is essential to participating in the conversation.[27] According to Wilson, it is part of a self-conscious and concerted effort by fans to produce material that is accessible, communal, and educational to other fans, sometimes even with the explicit purpose of engaging and educating newer ones. "One soap collector/trader I encountered told me she decided to post her archival clips to YouTube in order to educate newer viewers because of the frustration she felt when other online fans were 'getting it wrong'."[28] Wilson further addresses what she calls "the

[26] "The Internet allowed fans who would perhaps not spend money to travel to another part of the country or who could only meet a few times a year to interact on a daily basis at no cost." Webb, 223.
[27] Seiter, et al.
[28] Wilson, 86.

mentoring process," in which established viewers train new ones on the program history so that it will no longer seem "prohibitive to non-soap viewers."[29] This kind of mentoring is what happened to Nancy Baym while cleaning hotel rooms. Levine—in discussing narrative and contextual information provided by a *General Hospital*–produced blog that was written from the point of view of one of the fictional characters—addresses how this kind of mentorship might be done, in part, with online resources: "In this respect, the blog can perform a sort of initiation function for newer viewers, much as the regular recapping of events in the characters' on-screen dialogue does."[30] This can also be done by fan-produced content online.

Viewer engagement with both the text and with other fans has long been central to soap opera viewing. In addressing the transmedial potentials of soap operas, Henry Jenkins, Joshua Green, and Sam Ford point out that they "are defined by large backstories that cannot be neatly summarized; an ensemble of characters within the current narrative and across its larger history; [and] substantial reliance on program history."[31] In a transmedial context, in which viewers engage with content across multiple platforms, YouTube becomes a substantial tool in the circulation of program history. This kind of fan production and communication is not new, but it would be difficult, if not impossible, for soap opera information and materials to circulate offline to the extent that video sharing sites, wikis and fan pages, and soap news sites make them available.[32] These digital resources—alongside chatrooms, message boards, and blogs—allow fans to perform and prove their soap opera knowledge, participate eagerly in conversations about their stories, and even educate newer fans so that they can acquire the information that they need.[33] The videos

[29] Wilson, 80.
[30] Levine, 207-208.
[31] Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 132.
[32] Nonetheless, prior to the internet, there were a variety of resources for the circulation of soap-opera related information, including *Soap Opera Digest* and a variety of other soap opera news and fan magazines, starting when soap operas were on the radio. Videotapes and other content also circulated from fan to fan via the mail.
[33] Levine; Webb.

create a historical and communal continuity that promotes engagement with communal aspects of soap opera viewership. Through posting and re-editing content, fans are able to create texts that appeal to the experts among them while also giving novice viewers the tools and language to participate fully in the community. This space is reminiscent of the offline context in which soap opera content had circulated for decades, moving informally from one fan to the next or commercially through network-backed fan magazines, novelizations, and video compilations. Online resources provide similar kinds of content (that is similarly supported both by fans and by network interests), but they allow for circulation and distribution to move more quickly, efficiently, and with a larger global reach, as soap opera expertise moves from one stranger to another.

Deferred Resolution and the Curated Quotation

Digital viewing supports continuing practices and logics from broadcast viewing and also provides a space for remaking and engaging in new ways; but continuation and remaking also have the potential to be at odds with each other. Part of developing soap opera expertise is not simply learning about narrative developments, but learning the logics of soap opera aesthetics (as outlined in previous chapters). Key to these structures is interruption and fragmentation, designed to keep viewers attentive through commercial breaks and committed to the storyline from one day to the next. In 2011, Jason Jacobs argued that, in the age of digital television, both the experience and the context of viewing are relevant to analyzing the text itself. He claims that interruption—"a prominent feature of scholarly engagement with the medium [of television]"—continues to be a normative feature of viewing, even though, with digital media, this interruption is initiated by the

viewer rather than the producer.[34] But interruption and fragmentation is complicated by platforms that are designed to keep the viewer's attention indefinitely. The sites are often populated with short clips, often excerpted from other content, or—like with broadcast television—episodes with ad breaks or with the distraction of graphic ad overlays. While streaming and video sharing sites are all about fragmentation, that fragmentation is also about ensuring the viewer continues watching for as long as possible.

With soap operas, these breaks and interruptions—when presented as originally structured—become part of the pleasure of the text, for viewers who are familiar with and accustomed to them. Charlotte Brunsdon, for instance, argues that, with its routine narrative interruptions and repetitions, the soap opera text is radically discontinuous, and the ability to find pleasure and joy in these discontinuities requires extensive familiarity with the text.[35] Brunsdon asserts that, without expertise, it is difficult to engage with the soap opera or even to make sense of it. By relying on information that viewers have acquired as well as information they are already ostensibly experts in like romance, marriage, and family life, soap opera structures and aesthetics become a source of pleasure for an expert viewer in a way that they do not for a novice. [36] This expertise allows the viewer to find pleasure in interruptions and discontinuities—the same interruptions and discontinuities that are presented by real-life relationships. In many ways, these kinds of disruptions are missing from digital viewing. Even with the Dante and Lulu example above, there is a kind of continuation in having all of the relevant information immediately available; this is at odds with older ways that soap opera knowledge and content circulated. Some

[34] Jason Jacobs, "Television, Interrupted: Pollution or Aesthetic?," in *Television as Digital Media*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 259.
[35] Charlotte Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes* (London: Routledge, 1997), 18.
[36] Ibid.

of this sense of continuation comes from the logics and designs of digital viewing platforms as well as the kind of content fans create for them.

In the 1950s, Irna Phillips—alongside other soap opera producers, writers, and directors—fought both with and for advertisers to ensure that the daytime soap opera survived the shift from radio to television, considering carefully how the new medium could be used to both sustain and expand the capacities of the genre. The disparate nature of digital content and streaming further encourages interactivity and participation in a multiplicity of forms, alongside the top-down control produced by network television. While production companies, distributors, and creatives have interest in the success of the genre in the digital viewing era, the relationship between fan production and official production is now murkier than ever. Fan websites and fanvids archive network-produced soap opera content at the same time that they serve as thoughtful and productive engagement between fans and new media technology. While fans make choices about what content to post, networks make choices about what content to pull. This push and pull between viewer and producer does not simply reflect a sometimes symbiotic, sometimes antagonistic relationship, but also a conflict between old media and new. As old media content moves to a new media space, we see echoes of the transition from radio to television—this change in media design, distribution, and industrial structures does not allow for the aesthetic to remain unchanged.

As Erin Meyers argues, soap operas were ripe for convergence in the first years of the twenty-first century, especially given the genre's history of bridging old and new media and the early efforts by fans to take advantage of time-shifting technologies. According to Meyers, networks and producers did not take full advantage of this historical tendency and were slow to make the most of streaming and video sharing platforms. Meyers argues that networks and producers took their time bringing soap operas to online streaming platforms. In 2012, Elana

Levine provided a possible financial incentive for networks to delay their streaming presence, mentioning the now-defunct cable channel Soapnet: "Because ABC owns cable channel Soapnet, which reruns all three ABC soaps as well as other daytime and primetime soaps (until its January 2012 cancellation), the network was not as aggressive at making episodes of its serials available online, seeking to drive viewing traffic to the cable outlet instead."[37] Indeed, while some networks made daily soap episodes available for streaming as soon as network streaming was offered, others delayed their presence on streaming platforms. This meant that officially-sanctioned streaming was not universally the norm for daytime soap operas by the time the cancellation of long-running series began in 2009.

By the time the networks tried to contain fan-produced content, they were also already reaping the benefits of it. Fans could produce soap opera archives more easily and cheaply (for the networks) than the networks themselves ever could. While soap operas on the whole appeared slow to move online, they were even slower to remove proprietary content from video sharing sites like YouTube. When and how this kind of fan content was allowed to circulate on the web was very much controlled by network and official production structures. Ramon Lobato notes that some "grey media"—which circulates illicitly but not necessarily illegally—is made available unofficially but with the support of officially sanctioned outlets, either because networks and distributors uploaded pirated material themselves or because they looked the other way when fans did.[38] However, grey media, even with the support of the content producers, is not stable: "Technological platforms and types of user activity move in and out of the zones of informality and formality according to changes in law, consumer practice and industry structure."[39] The more

[37] Levine, 204.
[38] Ramon Lobato, *Shadow Economies Of Cinema* (London: Palgrave Macmillan/BFI, 2012), 103.
[39] Ibid., 96.

that official channels became invested in streaming soap opera programming themselves, the more likely they were to go after and take down copyrighted content from video sharing sites. As Emma Webb notes, "ABC's policing behavior on YouTube and its preference for official distribution of material over fan video sharing demonstrates a lack of understanding and/or an ambivalence of how to capitalize on the ways video content actually spreads in online communities."[40] As a result, the online soap opera landscape shifted—and continues to do so—leaving soaps more readily available to stream, but often less accessible for fan production, manipulation, and access. The result of this slow online integration meant that, on one hand, the genre appeared publicly to be stodgy, regressive, and unavailable; on the other, soap opera content was circulating freely through a myriad of new media channels.

One of the most popular ways for fans to collect archival soap opera material on video sharing sites like YouTube has been through videos that are re-edited so that individual storyline threads are untangled from the multiple, intertwining narratives of the daily episodes to create videos that feature only a single storyline. These "curated quotations" take clips from the original episodes but remove any "noise" that the fan/producer sees as a distraction from the storyline she has chosen. At a time when the daytime soap opera is dying, an archive of current and past soap opera material is living on video sharing sites and continues to be posted on a regular basis.[41] "Curated quotations," building on Burgess and Green's use of the word "quotes," refers to snippets of the most important part of a program that are typically selected and posted by fans. As Burgess and Green explain in their book on YouTube, "Understanding YouTube as a redactional system, uploading is a meaning-making process, rather than an attempt to evade the constraints of

[40] Webb, 230.
[41] Sam Ford, Abigail de Kosnik, and C. Lee Harrington, *The Survival of Soap Opera*. (Jackson, MI: University of Mississippi Press, 2011).

mainstream media distribution mechanisms."[42] As such, the content of these curated quotations is different from posting full episodes. Content is always mediated, but these clips are the result of a very specific act of curation by fans to produce their ideal viewing experience, one that is both afforded by online spaces and, in many ways, consistent with them as well. Even though the text is made up of direct quotes from television, the choices that are made transform the meaning of the content in a fundamental way.

These clips use the same formal elements and content as the official episodes, but create something quite different. While re-editing and sharing of soap opera material has notably changed since the advent of digital transfer and video sharing, it is not a new practice. Like the kind of curation that could be done with VCRs and DVRs, this process highlights the fact that choices are being made and content is being removed, in a way that is makeshift and self-directed.[43] The curated quotation breaks the text down into shorter segments and the viewer is required to queue up a new "episode" frequently—every five to ten minutes—if the story is to continue. If clips are not set to autoplay or if the next clip does not automatically queue up (something that is likely to happen after content is removed for copyright infringement), there is no opportunity for the viewer to just sit back and watch. This is decidedly different from the removal of breaks from a network-sanctioned platform like Hulu, which reinforces the flow from one segment and episode to the next as natural and seamless. The former is participatory, the latter passive. As a result, curated quotations and other fan-produced content embody the participatory and interactive logic of digital media.[44]

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[42] Burgess and Green, 49.

[43] While these processes echo each other, they are not the same. As Webb notes, "Unlike DVR or VCR technology, YouTube has created an environment where fans can pick and choose scenes/segments, in effect customizing *General Hospital* to suit their particular interests." This process provides more flexibility and ease of manipulation than the earlier technologies. Webb, 226.

[44] For instance, in a *Key Words for Media Studies* contribution, Tama Leaver addresses the relationship between digital media, participation, and interactivity. In providing counterexamples that explore the ways that digital media

Curated quotations allow expert viewers to pull and rewatch exactly the content they want, provide novice viewers with easy access to specific backstories, and serve as a form of original content. In her 2012 dissertation, Wilson explores the question of how soap opera expertise travels, both historically and in a moment of ever-expanding digital resources. She addresses some of the ways that the curated quotation is used to subvert the content and structure of the soap opera text, noting that "soap fans use their own video collections to disavow…particular aspects of soaps' narrative structure with edited compilation tapes in which they edit together scenes of one story/character/couple, therefore removing it from the original narrative structure."[45] Wilson's work addresses the fact that these compilations drastically change the soap opera narrative even while explicitly *using* the soap opera narrative. Over the last decade, the ability to catch up through both actual episode clips and the transmission of key narrative information through fan sites, gossip blogs, and wikis is newly available to new fans.

In some ways, there is no distinction between the content of curated quotations and the content seen in the episodes that are aired on television; they are, in fact, the same exact content, just reconfigured. The clips themselves do not apparently look or sound different. Yet they are not the same. Most obviously, they have been re-edited in a new, condensed way, creating entirely new structural expectations. In addition, they are guided by the technological features of their new context. Autoplay features and removal of ad breaks, for instance, necessarily change the pacing of the content. They become more malleable and easier to move around within. While this can also

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is not uniquely interactive or participatory, he in fact addresses the assumptive ways that it *is*. Other scholars who have engaged with this include Hans Magnus Enzensberger (*Constituents of a Theory of the Media*), Henry Jenkins (*Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*, etc.), and Janet Murray (*Hamlet on the Holodeck*). Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," *New Left Review* Issue 64 (1970); Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Tama Leaver, "Interactivity," in *Key Words for Media Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 108; Janet Horowitz Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).

[45] Wilson, 10.

be said of episodes streamed on officially sanctioned platforms like Hulu, curated quotations and YouTube allow for fan control of the text that is more robust. Because the clips are relatively short and there is a vast amount of content available, they can easily be watched in any sequence. The structure of the YouTube screen makes multiple content options available at once. As such, curated quotations and other soap opera videos blend the hypermediated screen-in-screen aesthetic of the video sharing website with the uncanny aesthetics and the never-ending narrative of the daytime soap opera. In doing so, they bring a sense of interactivity to the daytime soap opera as well as a sense of historical continuity. While both these traits are perhaps already found within the logics of the soap opera, the kind of continuation that digital platforms provide subverts the forever deferred resolution of the daytime soap opera. Instead, content is immediately available in whatever order the viewer chooses—and, in some ways, doing away with the official narrative order altogether.

The combination of a new viewing context and a new mode of storytelling brings the daytime soap opera from broadcast distribution to digital distribution, changing both the pacing and the potential of the aesthetic. On television, the soap opera promises that more will come and that we will find some answers right after the next break, but the answers never come; instead, it cuts to a new scene with new close ups and new unfulfilled potential. With curated quotations, the pleasure in this unfulfilled promise is, in some ways, lost. Frederick Dhaenens—in discussing curated quotations made from a queer storyline on the German soap opera *Verbotene Liebe* (Des Erste, 1995-)—addresses how these videos do and do not impact soap opera narrative structures, noting that these kinds of videos maintain continuity and cliffhangers but exclude other storylines and, what he calls, "complex narration."[46] With curated quotations, the new edits change the

[46] Frederik Dhaenens, "Queer Cuttings on YouTube: Re-Editing Soap Operas as a Form of Fan-Produced Queer Resistance," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 4 (2012), 448.

temporality and remove breaks between clips from the same storylines. This removal of the wait time allows for quicker narrative resolution and delivers immediately on the affective and narrative potential of the close up and the slow zoom. (Even if that potential was simply to learn the resolution has not yet come.) In doing so, the fragmented, deferred temporality of the soap opera is stymied; with curated quotations, narrative is given the opportunity to resolve immediately, and one of the basic narrational strategies of the daytime soap opera is lost. By bringing daytime soap operas to digital platforms and rewriting them through the practice of curated quotation, soap operas are not simply integrated in the norms of digital viewing, but also divorced from the logics and affordances of their original context. The continuation embedded in the curated quotation—and the designs of digital viewing platforms—disrupts the interruption and fragmentation apparent in the daytime soap opera.

On YouTube, while looking at soap opera material, this feeling of a continuing and interactive text is reinforced by the combinations of thousands of episodes containing hundreds of storylines that have spanned dozens of years and an infrastructure that allows for the posting of the same clip an infinite number of times in an infinite number of contexts. One of the many *General Hospital* storylines posted as curated quotations on YouTube is that of Robin Scorpio and Patrick Drake. Robin and Patrick, both doctors at the eponymous hospital, met in 2005 and began a complicated on-again/off-again love affair. By the spring of 2008, they had declared their love for each other, and Robin had become (accidentally) pregnant with Patrick's baby. Despite their commitment to each other, Patrick, a notorious womanizer, was reluctant to take responsibility for the child and, as a result, Robin was keeping him at arm's length. On May 13, 2008, *General Hospital* began a short narrative arc as part of this storyline. As a way of coping with the

unexpected pregnancy and the possibility of single motherhood, Robin decided to start a vlog.[47] After getting wind of the negative comments Robin had been making about him, Patrick began uploading rival vlog posts. This particular arc shows up in about half the *General Hospital* episodes in the month that follows, at which point, it is interrupted and replaced by Patrick and Robin's next narrative arc. Clips of this storyline—along with nearly every other scene from Patrick and Robin's decade-long onscreen relationship—have been posted on YouTube.

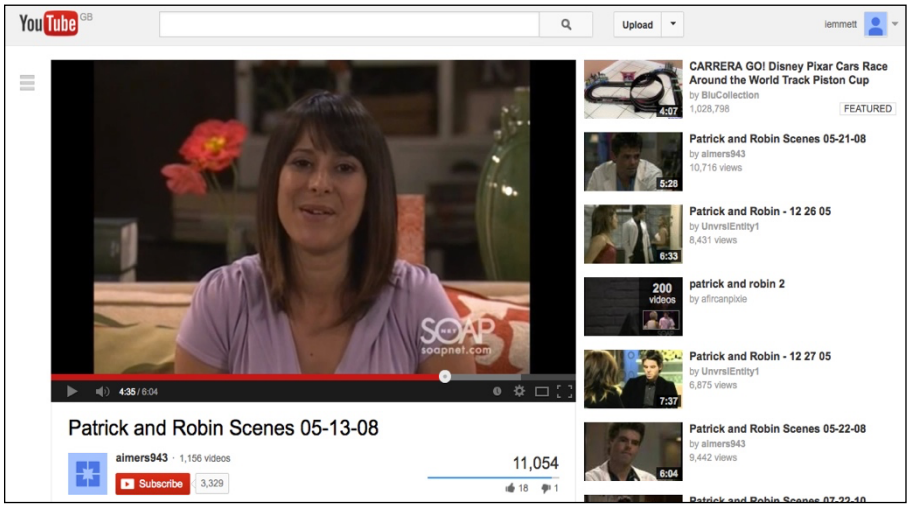

Figure 6: Robin's vlog becomes part of a fanvid on YouTube (*General Hospital*)

Throughout these segments, the characters not only discuss their vlogging, but they also shoot vlog entries as part of the televised serial narrative. For each vlog post, Patrick and Robin use the direct address that is typical of vlogs (and other types of digital video) to speak directly to the audience (even though in this case it is fake direct address to a fake audience) and directly to the camera, mimicking the computer camera within the diegesis that the characters would be using to shoot their vlog entries. In one video, for instance, the camera follows Robin to the couch where she sits to shoot her first vlog entry.[48] While doing so, the viewer now sees Robin from the point

[47] Levine, 213.
[48] Aimers943, "Patrick and Robin Scenes 05-13-08," *YouTube*, May 30, 2008. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fF6DP4BJSE.

of view of the computer camera (see Fig. 6). Robin introduces herself to her anonymous diegetic audience as well as the *General Hospital* audience (many of whom already knows who she is—nonetheless repetitive exposition is a narrative convention of daytime soap operas) and explains why she is posting these vlog entries. This camera angle is maintained throughout almost the entirety of the segment. While *General Hospital* is produced for and aired initially on television, these direct address segments, once placed in the YouTube interface, look as though they were designed explicitly for it.

This storyline, instead of underscoring the appropriateness of this programming on the internet, in fact makes it clear how out of place it is. When soap operas get remade for video sharing sites, they share some of the properties of other videos, but manage to not fit authentically into the video sharing context; neither, though, do they maintain their sense of soap opera-ness, somehow no longer fitting into either space. Vlogs, for instance, are based on a model of amateur aesthetics. Some aspects of soap opera fan videos also take on this amateur or lo-fi look. With the curated quotation, for instance, there are reproduction glitches and the sound and image quality can be diminished in the process of ripping, re-editing, and posting. Sometimes the beginnings or endings of scenes are cut off. Sound quality can be uneven, making music, dialogue, and sound effects hard to hear. And bugs and tags and other ephemera from the original source (from the original network, Soapnet, etc.) are sometimes retained. The aural and visual inconsistencies that can be seen in this amateur digital content is standard in curated quotations, but not to network soap opera content. In addition to these changes to aural and visual expectations, digital viewing also disrupts narrative and structural norms.

With digital viewing broadly and the curated quotation specifically, the nature of fragmentation and disruption shifts. While curated quotations remove the waiting for the next part

of the story in the short term through the removal of commercials and other interruptions, they bring the deferred resolution of soap opera into stark reality. Between meeting in 2005 and Robin's return from the dead in 2013, Patrick and Robin face any number of trials, including an unexpected pregnancy, multiple HIV scares, post-partum depression, infidelity, kidnapping, and her death (just to name a few). Each new development comes on the heels of the last. Modleski notes that soap operas are "continually demonstrating that happiness for all is an unattainable goal: one person's triumph is another person's bitter disappointment."[49] With curated quotations, the viewer is able to witness all the triumphs and the bitter disappointments of any individual character or set of characters one after another after another. What the viewer will never see, though, is an ending—especially in the form of happily ever after. By creating content that removes all of the pollution but keeps the suspense, soap opera viewers have created for themselves a never-ending narrative. They have also developed an archive that allows soap opera histories to live online but makes temporality—so central to scholarly understandings of soap operas—irrelevant. In the video "Patrick and Robin Scenes 06-12-08," Patrick and Robin are on the verge of resolving their vlog bickering (after a month of vlog posts, counter vlog posts, and endless conversations about Patrick's role and responsibilities as a father) when Robin sends Patrick out for food.[50] When he returns, he finds her collapsed on the floor, and the video ends. Just as it seems that Patrick and Robin may be able to resolve their problems, and the viewer may have found a stopping point, they are faced with a brand-new challenge, and the viewer is encouraged to watch and find out if Robin and her baby will survive. With one click of the mouse, the viewer ushers in the next narrative arc for Patrick and Robin, with its own cliffhangers and deferred resolution. While this

[49] Tania Modleski, "The Rhythms of Reception: Daytime Television and Women's Work," in *Regarding Television* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983), 72.
[50] Aimers943, "Patrick and Robin Scenes 06-12-08," *YouTube*, July 5, 2008. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTB0_ YXHU2o.

video does have an ending that might seem to serve as an interruption, the nature of the soap opera narrative causes it instead to resist interruption and ask the viewer to keep watching.

Interruptions are key to the deferred resolution of soap operas. As Tania Modleski remarks, "the importance of interruptions on soap operas cannot be overemphasized."[51] These interruptions can take many forms.[52] Sometime it means repetition of the same or similar conversation multiple times throughout an episode, returning to well-trod ground and acting as if it were new. To show the passing of time between segments, scenes often begin with the participating characters moving back from offscreen into the position they were occupying when the previous segment ended. Even though the segment returns to the conversation in progress, this action lets the viewer know that time has passed. The practice of curated quotation allows the viewer to see this more immediately. In "Patrick and Robin Scenes 05-13-08," Patrick and Robin begin a conversation about her vlog in the main hospital corridor. As the next segment begins, the characters are walking back into this corridor from the patient room area with charts in hand.[53] As soon as they arrive, the previous conversation begins again, with these characters discussing the same topic they had seemingly just wrapped up. These visual ellipses are used to space out the conversation and allow time to pass. The continual return to the same material makes it seem as though any given conversation will never end—no matter how much fictional time passes.

The aesthetic promise of the soap opera leaves the viewer wanting more and implies that it will be forthcoming, even when the stakes are impossibly small. The pleasure in waiting to find this out disappears, though, as the answer—in the form of the next curated quotation—is immediately available. At the end of the video "Patrick and Robin Scenes 06-03-08," after Patrick

[51] Tania Modleski, "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas: Notes on a Feminine Narrative Form," *Film Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (1979), 18.
[52] See Chapter 3.
[53] "Patrick and Robin Scenes 05-13-08."

has asked Spinelli, a computer hacker, to secretly troll Robin's vlog, Robin calls on Maxie to help resolve the issue.[54] The video ends with Maxie saying, "Why is Spinelli posting on your blog?" and Robin responding "That's what I need you to find out." Even with an incident as insignificant as this, the viewer is left in suspense. And, in this case, since the viewer who is watching this clip online likely already knows that Spinelli has been enlisted by Patrick to spam Robin's blog in exchange for advice from Patrick on how to attract women, the only thing left to find out is how these characters will respond to this mundane question. As conversations are repeated and built upon in segment after segment, the text takes on the feeling of a never-ending cycle, a hall of mirrors reflecting back on itself. Incidentally, that is similar to the image that the viewer sees when watching Robin and Patrick's vlog entries as the characters rewatch them within the narrative, and similar to what viewers generally see while watching on video-sharing or streaming sites—a frame (the computer screen on the show) within a frame (the YouTube viewer or browser frame) within a frame (the viewer's computer). It is also similar to the impact curated quotations have on the viewer—through the soap opera aesthetic in this new context, with no end in sight. The fragmentation remains, but the interruptions—and the pleasurable discontinuities associated with it—are far less present in this new digital viewing context.

Soap opera temporality and structures promise resolution but defer and interrupt it indefinitely. Curated quotations and, by extension, the norms of digital viewing practices, promote instant gratification and the sense that answers may be available—even if that is no more feasible through fan videos than it is through network-distributed content. Interruption, disruption, and fragmentation are central to soap opera narratives, but not to online viewing practices, which are often about continuation and completion. As soap narrative practices move into all types of

[54] Aimers943, "Patrick and Robin Scenes 06-03-08," *YouTube*, June 5, 2008. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-wVIQM24NU.

content, the expectation may change to one of continuation rather than fragmentation. Video sharing sites often trade in fragmentation—fan videos or reappropriated content that is brief, incomplete, or only contains snippets of the original content. Nonetheless, the user has the ability to (and is encouraged to) curate her own experience, continuing the narrative immediately. The distinction between cohesion and fragmentation becomes more difficult to map and the pleasure of interruption more elusive. Many of the viewing practices are arranged around an expectation of continuation, and even as a lot of digital viewing is explicitly made up of fragments, the sense of continuation is still embedded (by the corporate interests that designed them) into the logics of the platform.

Implausible Spaces

Scholars like Robert Allen address the fact that the narrative elongation embedded in the genre moves soap operas to the point where narrative progress becomes irrelevant—the focus instead is on pacing, narrative flow, and relationships between and among characters.[55] This sense of meaninglessness in narrative development helps to explain the relationship between time, space, and narrative in soap operas. Individual storylines are often unraveled either too quickly or too slowly (as Allen points out) and are frequently undone at a later date (consider the issues of ever-changing parentage addressed in Chapter 3). Because of this doing and undoing, the storylines in and of themselves are generally insufficient to keep a dedicated viewer watching over years or decades. The diegetic world of soap operas is infinitely pliable, expanding and contracting as made necessary by ongoing and frequently changing narrative turns. The narrative world and the spaces

[55] Allen writes, "It is also said, usually by those trying to watch soap operas for the first time, that the elongation of plot lines over months, if not years, renders any given episode virtually static in narrative terms," 69.

it occupies are simultaneously public and private, individual and communal, and realist and unimaginable. In short, the physical spaces of the soap opera are infused with the everyday implausible. Notably, many of these contradictory traits are also shared by digital technologies, like streaming sites, video sharing sites, and fan sites. And yet the utopic vision presented by digitality is quite different from that of the daytime soap opera. While many think of soap operas as telling vast (and overblown) stories, these stories are also personal, domestic, and intimate. The diegetic spaces of soap operas are loosely defined, allowing soap opera sets and settings to be and do many things at once. The locales in which soap operas are set have all the benefits of small town living and the all the amenities of big city life. The number and kinds of locations that can be seen are always limited, but their uses are often unexpected—domestic spaces are so well occupied they often seem public, while public spaces inevitably become the location for private, emotional, and deeply personal conversations and interactions. Streaming sites, while expansive, are also more fixed, in logics and structure if not content, actively controlling and controlled by the corporate structures that own them. This contradictory sense of space and size allows American daytime soap operas to be undefined yet intimate, everyday yet implausible.

In this way, soap operas must be about far more than narrative enjoyment; instead, they provide viewers with the opportunity to occupy a specific space and time, with a focus on entering a certain kind of world rather than simply a concern for what will happen next, even though one of the features of the soap opera world will always, inevitably, be the question of what will happen next. This has been true since the early days of soap operas on the radio. While one could potentially say that for any number of programs, the degree to which this is, and has historically been, true for soap operas is surely different. This is evident, in part, from the fact that soap operas

are, to many, synonymous with cliffhangers and phrases like "stay tuned" or "tomorrow on…" The story world of the soap opera is never only one thing at a time. As Mimi White recalls,

> Over the course of two episodes, in a number of lengthy scenes, Felicia was shown walking around in the Texas countryside, with a constant soundtrack of emotional music. Through excessive formal means—the use of music, the very duration of the scenes—the programme seemed to signal the definitive end for a major narrative trajectory, including the expected departure of one of its main characters. The formal signs of closure were nearly unprecedented in the context of daytime serial melodrama. Yet the character in question did not end up leaving the show after all, but soon returned to Port Charles maintaining her role as an ongoing character.[56]

Here, White gives an example of how any narrative developments done can always be undone. In point of fact, Felicia has left and returned to Port Charles many times since then, giving the sense of never and always being gone. The changing nature of the story world means that any individual storyline may be a passing pleasure, but it will never fix relationships in place. The soap opera is never exactly what it seems, and it can always be undone. The soap opera narrative's ability to bridge the gap between the everyday and the implausible gives it the potential to be more accessible and more familiar to its intended viewer. In its inability to be pinned down, it has the potential to be many things to many people.

The relationship between soap operas and time has been at stake since the earliest scholarly work on daytime soap opera. Modleski, for instance, was interested in the relationship between how time functions within a program, episode structure, and the structure of the viewer's time within her home. She writes about the ways in which the soap opera text serves as a mirror of the fragmented existence that women experience in the home, as well as the means by which to become comfortable with that existence and, in fact, subdued by it. "Her duties are split among a variety of domestic and familial tasks, and her television programs keep her from desiring a

[56] White, 349.

focused existence by involving her in the pleasure of a fragmented life."[57] Modleski describes soap operas as marked by their fragmentation, allowing each scene to shift to and be interrupted by the next. The work of soap operas is to shift and be fragmented, just like the work of the intended viewer. In the book *No End To Her*, Martha Nochimson writes about the daytime soap opera as a space of non-linear syntax, in which the narrative is full of gaps and, as such, resists the implied masculine subjectivity of Hollywood's linear narrative syntax. "From a feminist perspective, however, those gaps are precisely what make soap opera exciting and revolutionary. The syntax of daytime serial, unfettered by linear action that demands a beginning, middle, and end, privileges the forbidden gap. Thus the daytime serial creates an opening through which the female subject, ordinarily repressed from the patriarchal narrative, can emerge."[58] Here, Nochimson suggests that the narrative structure itself is a feminist and feminine space because it resists the fixity and linearity of Hollywood narratives.

This disjointedness of soap opera time mirrors the disruption and repetition of women's daily work, but, as Mumford also notes, these discontinuities speak to the disruption in the lives of women living within a capitalist patriarchy.[59] This convoluted and non-linear understanding of time also becomes relevant to content as it is posted online. Curated quotations include videos posted both contemporaneously (anywhere from a few hours to a few days after they air on television) as well as historically (months or years after they air). Jason Jacobs's claim that "television always has a 'now'—its moment of first transmission" rings false when referring to curated quotations, which are not necessarily viewed when or close to when they are posted. Value is not conferred strictly by proximity to original airing or even necessarily original context, and

[57] Modleski, "Rhythms of Reception," 71.
[58] Martha Nochimson, *No End to Her: Soap Opera and the Female Subject* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1992), 35.
[59] Mumford.

for curated quotations they may actually be made more valuable as historical documents and aids in viewer engagement with the text.[60] In a world where television is getting further and further from a meaningful "now," being able to access archives of clips from vastly different eras does not seem to take away from the pleasure they may confer.

Domestic spaces in soap operas are often sites of intrusion by unwanted visitors, known and unknown, and family homes are frequently occupied by multiple generations and branches of ever-growing families. Take, for instance, the Quartermaine mansion on *General Hospital*. In 2019, it was occupied—at one point or another—by matriarch Monica Quartermaine, her nephew Ned Quartermaine, his wife Olivia, Olivia's son Leo, Ned's daughter Brook Lynn, Monica's grandson Michael Corinthos (despite the fact that he never had a relationship with her son, his biological father), Monica's adopted son Jason Morgan, Jason's children Danny and Scout, Jason's long-lost identical twin Drew Cain, Drew's son Oscar, Oscar's mother Kim, and a dog named Annabelle the Second (who is discussed often but rarely seen). In addition, Jason's son Jake and Olivia's grandchild and step-grandchild Rocco and Charlotte had frequent sleepovers, usually so their parents could go on personal or professional adventures or work out interpersonal problems. Yet the only parts of the Quartermaine mansion that are seen on screen are the public ones: the grand entryway, the attached family room, and a patio that connects to it. We are left to assume the rest of the mansion is infinitely large—expanding to provide comfortable, private sanctuaries for any family member who may come along. In that way, the space is both infinite and unknowable. At the same time, it confuses the viewer's sense of public and private, serving as both at once. The visible domestic spaces of the mansion—where any number of occupants and guests may appear at any moment—has a publicness to it where one might expect the privacy of

[60] Jacobs, 2011.

domesticity. Conversely, public and professional spaces turn out to be where the most personal and private conversations take place: professions of love in the hospital waiting room, breakups in a local restaurant, reconnecting with a long-lost family member in the hotel bar—all where anyone could walk by at any moment to eavesdrop on these very personal and often secret exchanges (and someone usually does).

Daytime soap operas take place in fictional towns across the United States: Pine Valley, Pennsylvania; Port Charles, New York; Salem, Illinois, etc. They are not places that can be found on a map and, as time passes, and they become imbued with an ever-growing list of assets—like international airports, world-class universities, new restaurants and nightclubs—it becomes more difficult to imagine mapping them. In this way, time shapes the lived diegetic space, allowing it to expand beyond the bounds of plausibility. This seems to belie a loss of control over the narrative and the narrative of space by any individual creator or author. The never-ending temporality means the story world has a mind of its own. This pliability in space over time further speaks to the deeply complex relationship between soap operas and the everyday implausible. Some fans have mapped soap opera spaces, and some do so in ways that account for the lack of fixedness and the everyday implausibility of these spaces. One map of *General Hospital*'s Port Charles, New York, is from a 1981 issue of the fan magazine *Daytime TV* (see Fig. 7). Even in its somewhat professional look, it is still unfixed, in that it represents a Port Charles that is both like and unlike today's Port Charles. Landmarks like the Haunted Star and the Floating Rib have come and gone, disappearing from the Port Charles landscape and then returning, in ways that sometimes go unacknowledged and sometimes are actively self-aware (of their long and storied history, of the relationships between characters known and unknown to each other that they represent, and of previous appearances and disappearances). Topographically, it is difficult to say that this is an accurate representation of the

harbor in current-day Port Charles—but also hard to say that it is not, with little evidence either way. And, of course, there are the characters who have left, returned, died, been revived. The Quartermaine Mansion remains, but on one edge of the harbor it says "Laura Spencer R.I.P.," as Laura had been kidnapped in 1981 and was presumed dead. She has long since come back to life, and has been dead, nearly dead, and on and off the show many times since then. As of 2021, she was the mayor of Port Charles.

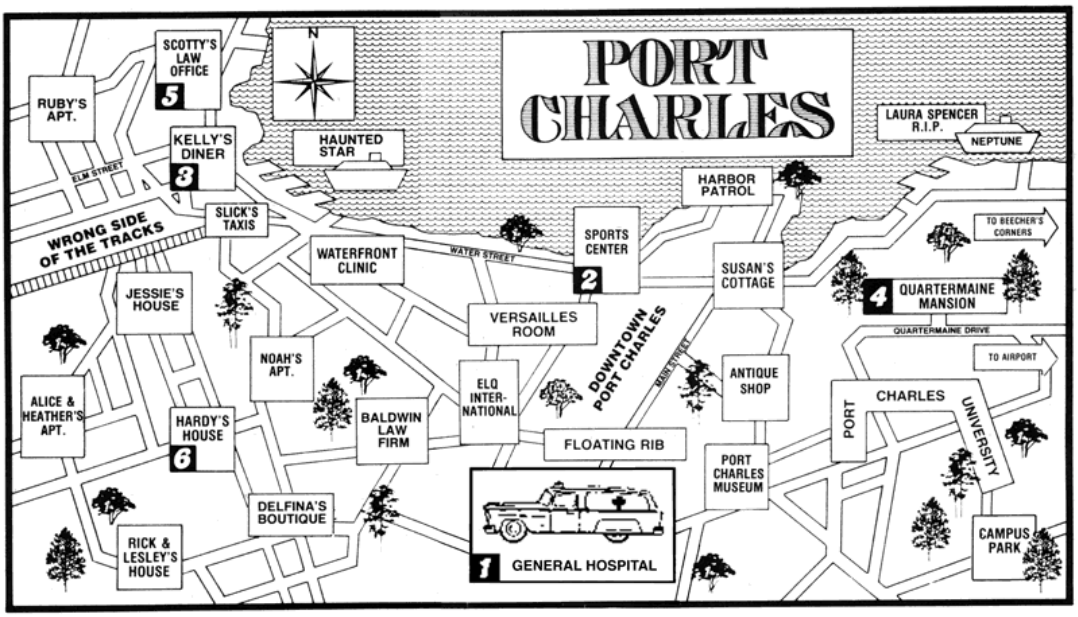

Figure 7: A map of Port Charles, NY (*General Hospital*)

Figure 8: A map of Salem, IL (*Days of Our Lives*)

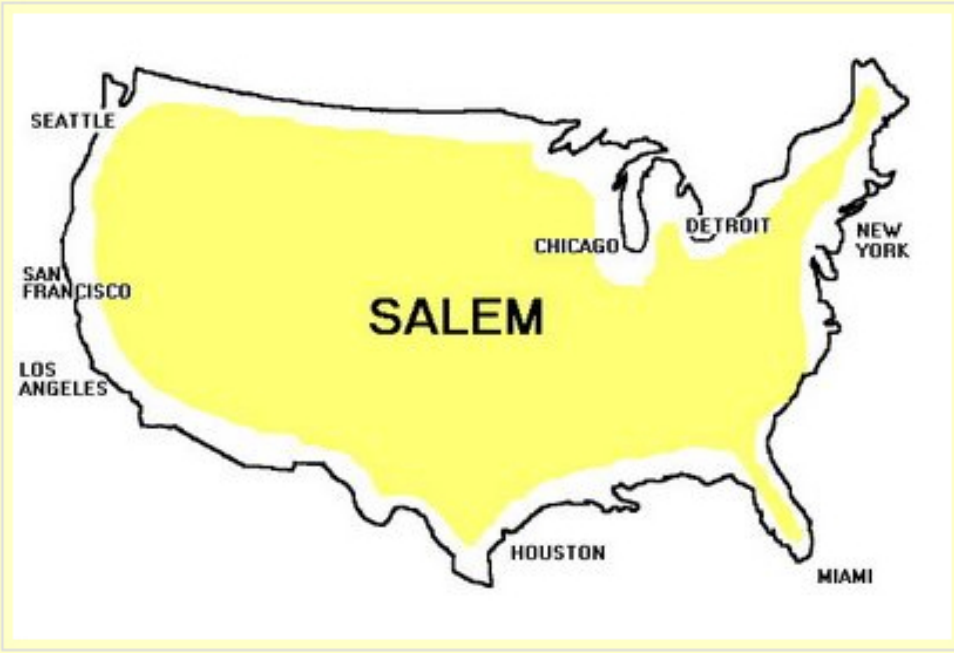

Figure 9: Trying to discern the exact location of Salem, IL (*Days of Our Lives*)

One fan map of *Days of Our Lives*' Salem, Illinois represents a town that can be traversed in a matter of minutes, but also one that has all the resources of a major metropolis (see Fig. 8).[61] Another fan map (see Fig. 9) falls under the following header, "After years of searching, based on information in the show, knowing such things as Salem is near the sea, a convenient drive from New York, a convenient drive from Chicago, near the 32nd parallel, has cold winters, is located in the Midwest and other things, researchers have finally determined the location of Salem…" Below this statement is a map of the United States, indicating only the national borders and a handful of coastal cities, such as New York, Los Angeles, and Seattle. Inside of that is a yellow shaded area that goes nearly to the border on all sides and is marked Salem. Importantly, this shaded area has a blurred edge instead of a sharp one—it does not denote any specific or stable boundaries, even as it (jokingly) covers most of the U.S. What one sees in all of these examples is the sheer implausibility of these spaces—the understanding that they could not exist as they are portrayed, neither across time nor at any given moment. This forces the spaces to stretch, bend, and adapt, and forces the viewer to do the same.

Elizabeth Grosz takes on the project of understanding how utopic spaces—like certain planned cities—can be rethought of as embodied spaces.[62] These spaces, fixed in their temporal and physical limitations, are also limited by the hegemonic ideology of the present, creating spaces that—in their fixedness in time—have no means by which to account for change in space. As a result, they also have no means by which to account for difference. These soap opera spaces, in their implausibility, in their expansion and contraction of space, in their inability to be precisely fixed in time or space, and in their ability to change drastically—often implausibly—are the

[61] "Deb's Map of Salem," Prevuze's Blogspot, June 30, 2017, http://prevuze.blogspot.com/2007/06/debs-map-of-salem.html.
[62] Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

opposite of Grosz's examples utopic spaces, and yet, in so doing, create their own kind of utopia. They are, at once, fictional and non-existent and also deeply lived in and embodied. The result is a world that is complex, confusing, and ever expanding. They can and must change and adapt to make space for everyone within the story world. They are unplanned spaces that necessarily change over time and, in that way, resist the patriarchal utopic visions Grosz describes. At the same time, this fictional embodiment allows them to be entirely implausible, creating both an invitation into this subversive world and a hesitation to enter a place that can never truly be known.

The experience of viewing and navigating streaming content is also infinite and undefined, impossible to pin down or see the edges of. In this way, the daytime soap opera's hyperrealism, implausibility, and vastness can mirror the same features in digital viewing. These are also spaces with no clear edges, where existence over time allows for drastic change and where spaces can feel everyday and familiar and completely unknowable at the same time. Consider the screen-in-screen aesthetic of YouTube discussed above. It has become familiar in many different ways. The website itself is everywhere, ubiquitous in short-form content distribution and video sharing. The contents of the site are often domestic and ordinary, like vlogs or other personal videos. One can continue clicking on boxes to see what other content is out there and never be able to know or see it all. What streaming platforms are not, though, is unplanned. If we can call this commercialized launching pad a world, it is surely one that is explicitly and specifically designed, made to keep the viewer moving from one box to the next. Even in its expansiveness, the logics that are inscribed by media and internet companies like Google, Comcast, Disney, Paramount, etc., are fixed to control the user and their behavior. This sense of control and planning in design looks far more like Grosz's utopia—meant to seem inclusive and inviting while also actively gatekeeping—than it does like the expandable, adaptable world of the soap opera. Of course, the soap opera narrative

is also designed to captivate its audience, but it does so by building an unknowable, impossible, and, possibly, inclusive space.

Resisting Completism

At the same time that daytime soap operas are, in their expectations of space and time, potentially incompatible with normative digital viewing practices, the aesthetics and conventions of daytime soap operas are now everywhere. Conventions that once were largely the purview of daytime soap operas and less visible in other formats—like the use of serial narratives and multiple, intertwining storylines—have now become conventional in many genres, including programming that meets the qualifier of "quality" or "cinematic" television.[63] In the context of twenty-first century television, where multiple, intertwining narratives have become normative, it seems possible that distorted, disjointed narratives can no longer efficiently and sufficiently reflect the unique experience of women's daily work, as Modleski and other scholars have noted (even though women's domestic work has not ended simply because she has entered the workplace). The vast archives of soap opera material, fan remaking online, and the resilience of soap operas: all of this is seemingly insufficient to sustain the genre. The daytime soap opera is still on the brink of extinction (as it has been for many years now). At the same time, the idea of television tied to a specific daypart has lost much of its meaning altogether. In a viewing environment where completism is first possible and then idealized and where "daytime television" has a changing

[63] The range of definitions of the category is vast, but the use of complex and intertwining storylines within this particular television form is fairly universal. Some scholars who address the history and aesthetics of "quality" television include: Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley, eds., *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Michael Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Angelo Restivo, *Breaking Bad and Cinematic Television* (Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Robert Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

meaning when neither viewing during the daytime nor on television are compulsory—we may soon see the end of the genre as we know it—and the beginning of something entirely new.

Many television programs have found new homes on new platforms even after their demise, but similar efforts have not seemed to work for soap operas. "In the increasingly chaotic TV landscape," Harrington notes, "TV journalists debate the limits of viewer patience and whether series even deserve second chances."[64] Nonetheless, many programs have been given exactly these chances. Programs like *Arrested Development* (Fox/Netflix, 2003-2019), *The Mindy Project* (Fox/Hulu, 2012-2017), and *Lucifer* (Fox/Netflix, 2016-2021) were able to revive themselves on streaming sites, before receiving more gentle (as Harrington would call it) deaths. After *All My Children* and *One Life to Live* were canceled in 2011 and 2012, they were purchased by production company Prospect Park and revived for streaming distribution via The Online Network, which made the episodes available via Hulu and iTunes. These revivals of multi-decade programs lasted less than a year and sent The Online Network into bankruptcy proceedings. Erin Meyers concluded that the Prospect Park experiment failed because the industry was reluctant and slow to accept the "old" medium of soap operas in "new media" spaces: "Yet the actual result of the Prospect Park experiment points to the contradictory nature of the contemporary television industry that celebrates the 'new' of convergence culture yet remains reluctant to adapt established industrial structures to address its complexities."[65] Elana Levine takes this one step further, noting that, even as soaps worked to create web content and distribution, without "attending to the ways television texts are written and produced, all of the soaps' online efforts may be too little, too late to save the soaps from extinction."[66] Just as there were structural and narrative changes in the transition to

[64] C. Lee Harrington, "The ars moriendi of US Serial Television: Towards a Good Textual Death," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 16, no. 6 (2013): 588.
[65] Meyers, 344.
[66] Levine, 215

radio, soaps in a streaming context may also be ripe for significant structural and aesthetic shifts. Instead, what we see is a disconnect between soap opera conventions and normative expectations of viewers in a streaming context.

The deferred resolution and always-unfulfilled aesthetic promise of the soap opera—which presupposes there is something more to come—seems to be at odds with the ability to binge infinite programming. Streaming platforms are designed to keep viewer attention by queuing up the next episode automatically, keeping viewers within the platform as they move closer and closer to the season or series conclusion. With streaming platforms providing easy access to complete series viewing, serial television can be watched from the beginning straight through to the end at nearly any time and at any pace. The platforms allow and encourage this kind of viewing. Even if individuals choose not to binge or choose to watch a program week-by-week as it is released, there is also a sense that programs can be—and perhaps even ought to be—watched from beginning to end in order. But with no series end in sight and imperceptible shifts between seasons, the daytime soap opera does not offer clear points of closure or lend itself to "complete" series viewing. Shows like *General Hospital* and *Days of Our Lives*, which have been running continuously since the 1960s, have aired over 14,000 episodes each. If one could get access to all of those episodes (which is not possible), one would have to watch twenty-four hours a day for about a year to catch up. This has the potential to be valuable to streaming sites, since committed viewers would be committed to the service as long as the series continued running. However, with technology that affords and, in turn, encourages starting at the beginning and continuing to the end (even over several binges), the daytime soap opera's longevity make "completism" an impossible achievement.

C. Lee Harrington argues that this drive toward completism could be the death knell for the daytime soap opera as we know it.

> The dire economic climate, changing viewer preferences and the increasingly anachronistic design of open-ended storytelling in the current media landscape have placed the entire US daytime genre on life support, shifting the premise of immortality to one of expectable demise. Even the advent of so-called binge television—watching more than three hours of drama or six episodes of a half-hour sitcom at one sitting—hasn't helped soaps. While it would seem perfect for already-extant fans who can bank five hours of programming per week to devour in one sitting, it proves a mega-barrier to attracting new viewers.[67]

Binge watching, complete series viewing, and soap operas seem like they should work together nicely, but the daily release schedule and the tens of thousands of episodes in the archives that are neither possible to get nor possible to watch resist completist aspirations entirely. While this investment in completism is not universal, it—like binge watching—is built into the design of streaming platforms, serving the interests of content creators and distributors. Soap operas routinely aim to fill in the gaps for new viewers, using repetition and exposition to get them caught up on what they missed, but new viewers will never be able to see everything. Viewers could watch all of the Prospect Park episodes, for instance, but they could never watch all of *All My Children*. YouTube and curated quotations can support efforts to "catch up"—one can potentially go back and see a certain storyline or relationship develop from the beginning, but this still has temporal and logistical limitations. Both older and very new clips can be difficult to find, even more so as viewership declines and as copyright bots become more prevalent. At the same time, watching two, three, or ten years of clips, while not literally impossible, is nearly so. Even after all that, the viewer has still only seen a small fraction of an individual program.

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[67] Harrington, 589.

The other major challenges that daytime soap operas face from digital viewing is the way that this programming gets untethered from space and time—not simply in the ways that we have seen above, but by removing them from their once-normative viewing practice. What is daytime television without daytime, for instance? Can there still be a unique category that is the daytime soap opera when most fictional programming is, at this point, available to be watched anywhere at any time? And how does the aesthetic of this genre still resonate when it is untethered from that time slot? In the era of VCRs and home video recording, daytime viewing of the daytime soap opera was no longer compulsory; but with the manual effort needed to record, time shift, and curate daytime programming—alongside the continued presence of ephemera like promos and ad breaks (the content of which often looked and sounded different during different dayparts)—the daytime soap opera could never quite be divorced from its daypart. Today, while network and cable programming (including the daytime soap opera) still airs originally at a particular day and time, it is as available for viewing on platforms for which time of day is completely irrelevant. As such, it might be necessary to now think of it as something else—the daily soap opera, perhaps, shifting the emphasis from the time of day that it airs to the rate at which it is released. This is just one of the ways that the daytime soap opera as a concept becomes slightly less definable and discernable in the era of streaming media, even if the ongoing storylines and cliffhangers seem like they should be suited to digital streaming. Over and over again, there seems to be a disconnect.

TV anywhere, importantly, is not just about when we watch, but also how we watch. More and more, viewers are watching on demand and also individually. Even though the curated quotation has the potential to serve as a crash course into these texts, there still remain significant barriers to entry for the soap opera story world. This involves competencies on both a narrative and aesthetic level. For instance, in the video “Patrick and Robin Scenes 05-21-08,” intersecting

storylines bump into each other, creating an interruption from the storyline that the viewer is intending to watch.[68] The first half of this five-and-a-half minute video includes two brief scenes of Robin and Patrick discussing Michael, who is currently a patient at the hospital, and then continuing the ongoing conversation about their impending parenthood. In the second half of the video, Robin goes to visit another character, Jason, at his apartment, to discuss Michael further. Here, Robin removes herself from her normal surroundings to discuss details of a storyline in which she had not previously been involved. An expert viewer may know that, many years previous, Jason, Michael's uncle, was in a relationship with Robin at the time that Michael was born and that they were Michael's primary caretakers for a short time. For this viewer, intersecting storylines—whether they are within the normal soap opera narrative flow or within curated quotations—have the potential to be pleasurable, engaging her with a range of beloved characters and/or affirming her knowledge of the text. For a novice viewer, this interruption may pique her interest, or it may be irrelevant, boring, or confusing, introducing characters and storylines that she is unaware of or uninterested in.

While digital media—with their wealth of information—provide possible access points for new fans, the decline in soap opera viewership continues. This may have as much to do with the easily-dismissed aesthetics as it does with any other cultural factors. If one wants to simply acquire narrative information, there are a plethora of productive online resources created by and for the fan community with which to do so. What the anonymous internet fandom does not as readily enable is training in soap opera aesthetics to teach new viewers how to watch—and feel empowered to enjoy—the ongoing, often derided, and frequently opaque aesthetics of the daytime soap opera. Many aspects of the soap opera have been borrowed by other types of programming,

[68] Aimers943, "Patrick and Robin Scenes 05-21-08," *YouTube*, May 30, 2008. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kElNj9S7n7I.

yet the specific narrative and aesthetic conventions outlined in this dissertation are, in many ways, unique to the daytime soap opera. This distinctive aesthetic is what will be lost when soap operas finally cease production. The processes of online interaction are, even in creating online communities, often atomized and individualized. Users remain in their own spaces, on their own devices, choosing for themselves exactly what material they want to watch and when. This is distinct from an older paradigm in which viewers gathered around the same console to watch together and, as a result, were often required to watch what someone else had chosen. The result of this older mode of viewing meant that newer viewers were provided the opportunity to acquire textual information from more seasoned ones, who helped them follow extensive backstories.[69]

In addressing this, Mary Jeanne Wilson emphasizes the importance of acquiring and understanding the history and narrative for any particular soap.[70] While the almost unimaginably large amount of narrative information that has been produced by American daytime soap operas does pose a unique challenge, so too do the aesthetic practices of these programs. Not only does the aesthetic rely on the format's long and complex history, but an interest in viewing these programs also suggests the ability to recognize soap aesthetics as meaningful entertainment. A problem arises when we combine the current inclination toward individualized viewing—an inclination encouraged and afforded by a wide range of on-demand content available on a wide range of devices—and a potential disinclination toward the "bad aesthetics" of the American daytime soap opera. This puts the onus on the novice viewer to do the difficult work of making sense of it on her own. Soap opera narrative information can be easily acquired through the curated

[69] Wilson, 78.
[70] As Wilson argues, "The extremely long and sometimes almost comically complicated narrative history of any one soap opera poses a unique challenge to soap fans and fan communities when it comes to the role of historian," one that comes from "the tremendous length of a successful soap opera." The importance of this role comes in part from the difficulty and time it takes to acquire this expertise. Wilson, 79.

quotation and massive digital archives, creating the potential for new fans to find ways into the overwhelming text and for these tools to serve as a digital soap opera mentor. However, there is still something significant that is intangible and productive about communal viewing and personal (and in-person) soap opera mentorship. Part of that mentorship is passing along a tacit permission to watch, listen to, and like the soap opera text. The process of multiple generations of viewers watching television together, which was once the norm and is now more rare, allowed new viewers to sit with the soap opera's extremely slow zooms and extremely close close-ups, the too loud sound effects and the too affective score, forcing familiarity and granting unspoken permission to love what others disdain. This permission to sit with these too-everything aesthetics is a step in learning to become a soap opera viewer, and it cannot easily be taught or replaced by digital viewing on individualized devices, even with the aid of content like the curated quotation, which borrows directly from the original text.

Conclusion

Even as television viewing for many has shifted from programmed channels to streaming platforms and decades-old soap operas have the potential to get canceled, there are ways in which soap opera content has found a home online. Because of the frequent overlap in network interests and fan participation and expertise, streaming platforms make soap opera episodes readily available (for those who are willing and able to pay for access) and video sharing sites retain soap opera content long after it has initially aired. Digital platforms have become useful tools for soap opera expertise and expert knowledge as well as active engagement and production from soap opera viewers. Soap opera conventions have shifted not only to new platforms but also to other genres and televisual forms. At the same time, normative digital viewing practices encourage binge

watching and completism and often have the television viewer watching alone on their own individualized device, whatever that may be.

While these practices seem to support the structure of the soap opera narrative, they are actually often at odds with it, creating divergences between the form and the mode of distribution. These platforms create less and less need for communal viewing with friends or other members of the household. And this, more than anything else, may be the most devastating loss for the American daytime soap opera. This inability to be trained not only in storyline and characters, but also in viewing practices themselves may be the real reason that—despite the work of producers and networks and despite the information other fans try to pass along—the daytime soap opera as we know it is "doomed to oblivion."

Conclusion

The obvious thing to do at this point would be to make predictions about the future of the daytime soap opera. I could say that it will die soon—or perhaps that it already has. I could underscore the challenges that are presented by the affordances of digital viewing, weaving together a narrative about the American daytime soap opera that looks tragic and desperate. The logics of binge watching and completism seem to be at odds with the logics of daytime soap operas, streaming and video sharing sites do not provide the necessary skills to create sufficient new interest to sustain the genre, soap opera viewership remains low, the threat of cancelation is always in the air, and the future of the U.S. daytime soap opera as we know is as precarious as ever. But this would be only part of the story. In truth, I don't have this answer, and my research certainly has not made it self-evident. Just like radio soap operas eventually failed in the face of television, so too may television soap operas fail in the face of digital viewing—but daytime soap operas surpassed everyone's possible imagination then, and they may yet do so now.

Instead, I want to suggest where daytime soap operas might go from here and explain why identifying the everyday implausible—as I have done throughout this project—might be useful. In doing so, we may be able to see the ways that the soap opera has succeeded in the face of transition, whatever the near- or long-term future may bring—even if that success is difficult to identify. By defining the everyday implausible, I have asserted that value and success can come from exactly the contradiction that makes it difficult to identify in the first place. The contradictory and simultaneous features of the everyday implausible function as both comfortable and unsettling and radical and reactionary. This term provides a way into the narrative and formal aspects of the daytime soap opera that have received so much and yet so little attention over the last ninety years.

We are told they are unquestionably bad, yet questioning this reveals how complex they really are. They require detailed analysis, yet so few have given them this attention. In this dissertation, I have provided and analyzed specific examples of these narrative and aesthetic practices explicitly because there is so much left to say about the ways in which they are often both repetitive and predictable. I have done so as well to look at them over their entire history at once.

These practices play out over ninety years and multiple media transitions and must be observed within the expansiveness of that time frame. In doing so, I have identified significant changes (for instance, in narrational practices) while acknowledging ways in which this aesthetic has remained significantly the same (for instance, in address). By giving a name to this aesthetic, I have mapped this programming onto its audience and the everyday negotiations of femininity and marginality. Soap operas reframe the possibilities and potential of women's everyday lives while simultaneously positioning the viewers back within a normative, patriarchal structure. Giving the everyday implausible a name allows us to better see the way that the value—maybe even the quality—of this content comes from its contradiction and its ability to value and provide value to its intended audience. By acknowledging this, this dissertation has continued in a tradition of work that has grappled with the patriarchal ideologies embedded in our tastes and critiques.

Beginning in the 1930s, this dissertation explored specific examples from radio, television, and streaming iterations of daytime soap operas to trace this everyday implausible style. On radio, the soap opera relied heavily on the domestic settings and the male narrator to bring the listener into the spaces and emotions of these characters. I contend that setting the content in domestic spaces and focusing on emotions and interpersonal relationships allowed the programs to reflect and refract the everyday experiences of their listeners. At the same time, having the male narrator speak both to and for the listeners created a sense of intimacy and participation that was just as

often an illusion. Television brought new possibilities and limitations to the daytime soap opera. I have traced the central role Irna Phillips played in planning and developing the changes wrought by this transition, embedding her own personal and professional negotiations within the text. At the same time, I argue that the ambivalence that the soap opera audience had to negotiate was increasingly visualized through realism that was focused on emotions and the idea that viewers had the ability to read emotions. Contemporary daytime soap operas rely on many of the visual and aural conventions established in the 1950s and 1960s. In cataloguing the repetitive aesthetics of the contemporary television soap opera, I show that the narration, visual conventions, and sound welcome interpretation but resist closure. In doing so, there is an emphasis on subjective experience and emotional intelligence and a resistance to a singular interpretation of reality. As such, soap operas reflect and emphasize the complex and often confounding experience of women in patriarchy and the hesitation toward a fixed understanding of reality this evokes. I have asserted that the use of contradiction, negotiation, and subjectivity within the soap opera aesthetic is both complex and realist. This realism is in many ways derived from the soap opera's absurdity and repetition, not despite it.

As I have laid out in these chapters, the everyday implausible is an aesthetic that is repetitive, contradictory, participatory, realist, open, excessive, fantastic, visible, and invisible. It provokes processes of identification and transformation. For the soap opera's discursive viewer, this space of empowerment, in which there is no such thing as too much emotion, is significant. It values fragmentation and disunity, emotion and excess. The everyday implausible is an escape from the negotiation and hesitation implicit in the everyday lived experiences of woman within patriarchy. It is, simultaneously, the aestheticization of that negotiation and hesitation that capitalist patriarchy demands. Like emancipated womanhood, the everyday implausible is a

contradiction in terms; it is never unencumbered. It is limited, but it is also subversive—and it is not without expansive potential.

As I have explored throughout this work, there are important ways that the everyday implausible challenges normativity, even if it resolves within patriarchy and even if there is still more work to do. In Chapter 3, I address the paternity plot and the ongoing temporality that prevents family ties (alongside everything else) from being firmly fixed. Laura Mumford expresses concern with this preoccupation with paternity and nuclear family, but I outline how this always-open family structure also creates space for non-normative family groupings.[1] While the soap opera is often imagined in terms of its commitment to romantic, heteronormative relationships, it also encourages and showcases single-parent and multi-generational family units, extended family, adoptive family, and chosen family. Ongoing questions of paternity actually serve to complicate the investment in biological parenthood, not by making it unimportant, but by presenting it as one of many ways to form interpersonal and familial bonds. Often, women are working together with friends, family, and partners to co-parent, extending and expanding definitions of family rather than limiting them. In this way, the everyday implausible challenges dominant ideology.

It also does so by challenging scholarly and critical definitions of "quality." As others have done before me, I continue to push at definitions of taste and question the categories of "good" and "bad." What the everyday implausible suggests is that the disdain and disregard for "bad" aesthetics, like those embodied by the daytime soap opera, are situated in the inability to recognize what marginality looks and feels like. Despite the imagined excess of soap operas, the sense that they are ridiculous and overblown, there are real feelings and real experiences embedded in the visual and aural conventions of the everyday implausible. The dismissal of the soap opera aesthetic

[1] Laura Stempel Mumford, *Love and Ideology in the Afternoon: Soap Opera, Women, and Television Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 4.

is based in inability to see and fully understand the expertise and competencies that it requires. The disconnect and awkwardness in this aesthetic is the same disconnect that has determined that household management, emotional labor, and maintaining interpersonal relationships are all intuitive tasks that women will silently perform rather than expert skills that ought to be valued and awarded. To value the soap opera aesthetic would require valuing the unpaid and often unseen labor on which capitalism relies.

And even if the everyday implausible as I have defined it may be at risk, soap opera structures and formal aesthetics are still very much in circulation. Whatever may happen to the daytime soap operas that remain, they have already made their impact. In many ways, soap operas—as a broad category, rather than the specific one I have used throughout this project—are now everywhere. Not only are the archives of images and information maintained, but many of the aesthetic features are also. Intertwining narratives, cliffhangers, seriality, and narratives that emphasize interpersonal relationships and conversation are present in a range of programming distributed by broadcast networks, cable channels, subscription services, and independent creators. Aymar Christian writes, "Companies introduced various forms of experimentation they associated with the advantages of digital technologies, but they also maintained continuity with television's practices. This dialectic between old and new, continuity and change, insiders and outsiders, reflected the instability of television as a concept and the promise of the web as an alternative."[2] The instability of television as a concept works in tandem with the maintenance of its logics within the spaces of digital technologies. And, in the face of digital viewing, there are logics of the soap opera that continue, even if the programs themselves dwindle or disappear. If we no longer think about the daytime soap operas genre specifically, and instead include nighttime programming, teen

[2] Aymar Christian, "The Web as Television Reimagined? Online Networks and the Pursuit of Legacy Media," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 36, no. 4 (2012): 341.

television, and serial content on social media and videosharing sites that are structured by the formal and aesthetic practices of soap opera, we see the many ways in which soap opera lives on, altered though it may be.

Still, the distinct daily and never-ending narratives of the daytime soap opera remain at risk. While I cannot determine whether the genre will survive, we can perhaps find some hope in the paradigm-shifting events the COVID-19 pandemic. In Chapter 4, I asserted that communal viewing is essential to the transmission of soap opera expertise from one viewer to the next, and that the weakening of this process may be especially devasting for soap operas. Unless we can find a way to bring back communal viewing practices, in which multiple generations of viewers gather around the some console for the purposes of viewing, it is hard to know how new viewers will be taught to gain pleasure and power from, rather than shy away from, the aesthetics of American daytime soap operas. Between Wikipedia, various fan wikis, and videosharing, ever more narrative information is easily accessible, but learning how to watch soap operas doesn't seem to be. With families, friends, and roommates at home together, especially during the long months of lockdown, viewing habits and practices shifted. At the same time, daytime soap opera productions were some of the first to reopen in the summer of 2020. It is certainly possible that, with changes in viewing, there has been greater opportunity to transmit soap opera knowledge as generations and cohorts watched together.

This project has considered what specifically we may lose with the loss of the American daytime soap opera. Even as other types of programming borrow almost indiscriminately from soap operas, often integrating the structural elements of soap opera into "quality television," all the while continuing to dismiss anything that is that feminized as "soapy," the too-everything aesthetic that is unique to soap operas remains reasonably stable. Those aesthetic aspects that have

not been picked up by other programming and have continued to be dismissed out of hand actually prove to be a complex and complicated set of aesthetic features that are able to uniquely serve its discursive audience. The U.S. daytime soap opera aesthetic makes the impossible possible and the familiar unfamiliar, empowering the experienced viewer to make sense of this disconcerting, contradictory space—one that reflects a disconcerting, contradictory world around her. By looking at this genre longitudinally, I assert that, for the soap opera's discursive viewer, the everyday implausible becomes a mode through which to resist the patriarchy, creating a space of comfort, escape, and empowerment.

The everyday implausible is not exclusive to white womanhood, but in its contradiction between radical and reactionary, it aestheticizes the privilege to code shift between marginal and mainstream that white women are afforded. On the other hand, there may be change on the horizon. While the inclusion of people of color and queer storylines is not new to daytime soap opera, the rise in Black characters, queer characters, and trans characters since the 2020 uprising has been marked. If the daytime soap opera is able to maintain its place in the post-broadcast television schedules, there is room for this contradictory aesthetic to become more inclusive, and there is room in the everyday implausible to represent and aestheticize the excess and emotion of intersectional womanhood in culturally specific and subversive ways. This still does not provide an escape from the commercial structures of soap opera—as long as capitalism exist so will the fragmentation and contradiction of the everyday implausible—but it can perhaps provide a momentary escape from the everyday microaggressions of marginality. Perhaps the soap opera and the everyday implausible can provide that escape, where BIPOC women and trans women and queer women can see themselves in the close-ups and the repetition and the emotions and know that, in this imagined reality, they are never too much.

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