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Psychoanalytic Consideration of
IN: Indiana University Press,

46. Michael Oriard writes of the exclusion of women, even wives, from the discourse of the football player in his experience: "The sexual dimension of football is a complex subject that cannot be covered adequately in a few sentences, but the pressure on the football player to satisfy his public image as a masculine ideal and the drive to preserve the all-male nature of his experiences from feminine contamination contribute to this exclusion of women from the inner sanctum." ("Professional Football as Cultural Myth," p. 30ff.) Some women sportswriters have penetrated the locker room as well as entered the discourse on sport: Jane Gross, "A Woman Reporter in Yankee Country," *The New York Times Magazine* (October 25, 1981), pp. 32-46, 116-121.

47. David L. Altheide and Robert P. Snow, "Sports Versus the Mass Media," *Urban Life* Vol. 7 No. 2 (July 1978), pp. 189-204; quotation on p. 190.

48. Ira Horowitz, "Market Entrenchment and the Sports Broadcasting Act," *American Behavioral Scientist* Vol. 21 No. 3 (January-February 1978), pp. 415-430; quotation on p. 423ff.

49. Williams, *Television*, p. 118.

50. See William Johnson, "Towering Babble and (SOB) Heidi," *Sports Illustrated* (January 19, 1970), pp. 24-31. Part of a very informative history of sport on television in four parts beginning with the December 22, 1969 issue.

51. Altheide and Snow, p. 192.

52. Ibid., p. 204

53. Horowitz. p. 415.

54. Ibid.

55. See the analysis of advertising in print media of Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978).

The Rhythms of Reception: Daytime Television and Women's Work

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In his book *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* Raymond Williams suggests that the shifts in television programming from one type of show to another and from part of a show to a commercial should be seen not as "interruptions"—of a mood, of a story—but as parts of a whole. What at first appear to be discrete programming units in fact interrelate in profound and complex ways. Williams uses the term "flow" to describe this interaction of various programs with each other and with commercials. "The fact of flow," he says, "defines the central television experience."[1]

Here I would like to examine the flow of daytime television, particularly the way soap operas, quiz shows, and commercials interrelate. More specifically, I want to look at how the flow of these programs connects to the work of women in the home. As the ladies' magazines never tire of telling us, this work involves a variety of tasks and requires a wide range of abilities. Moreover, this work tends to be very different from men's work. As Nancy Chodorow describes it:

> Women's activities in the home involve continuous connection to and concern about children and attunement to adult masculine needs, both of which require connection to, rather than separateness from, others. The work of maintenance and reproduction is. . .repetitive and routine . . .and does not involve specified sequence or progression. By contrast, work in the labor force—"men's work"—is more likely to be contractual, to be more specifically delimited and to contain a notion of defined progression and product.[2]

Apparently, women's work itself is a kind of flow, so my task would seem to be especially pertinent.

One of the chief differences between daytime television and nighttime programming is that the former appears to be participatory in a way that the latter almost never is: it stresses, in other words, "connection to, rather than separateness from, others." This is obviously the case with quiz shows and talk shows like *Phil Donahue* and even the "Money Movie." But it is also true of soap operas. For example, 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. Despite the numerous murders, kidnappings, blackmail attempts, emergency operations, 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.

Furthermore, audiences are much more likely to become intimately involved with soap opera characters and to experience them as equals than they are with the characters on nighttime programs. A comparison with *Dallas*, the popular nighttime serial, is instructive. There the characters are highly glamorized, the difference between their world and that of the average viewer could not be greater, and the difference is continually emphasized. On soap operas, in contrast, glamor and wealth are played down. Characters are just attractive *enough* so that their looks are not distracting, well-off *enough* so that, as in a Henry James novel, they can worry about more exciting problems than inflation at the supermarket. But glamor and wealth are *not* preoccupations as they are on *Dallas*. Obviously, the soap opera world is in *reality* no more like the average spectator's than the world of *Dallas*; yet the characters and the settings all connote, to use a Barthesian neologism, "averageness." This accounts for the fans' frequent contention that soap opera characters are just like them—whereas no one is likely to make such a claim about the Ewing family. The consequent blurring of the boundaries between fantasy and life which sometimes occurs (for example, when fans write letters to the "characters," giving them advice about their problems) suggests that the psychological fusion which Chodorow says is experienced by the wife/mother applies in these instances to the *viewer's* experience of the characters.

This last observation would seem to lend support to Luce Irigaray's thesis that identification is an inadequate term for describing women's pleasure. As film critics have recently been pointing out: "Cinematic identification presupposes the security of the modality 'as if.' "[3] Soap operas tend, more than any other form, to break down the distance required for the proper working of identification. But rather than seeing these cases as pathological instances of *over*-identification (as in the case of the boy who stabbed a woman in the shower after seeing *Psycho*[4]), I would argue that they point to a different *kind* of relationship between spectator and characters, one which can be described in the words of Irigaray as "nearness"—"a nearness so close that any identification of one or the other is impossible."[5] The viewer does not *become* the characters (like the boy in the *Psycho* case), but rather relates to them as intimates, as extensions of her world. Speaking of woman's rediscovery of herself, Irigaray writes, "It is a sort of universe in expansion for which no limits could be fixed and which, for all that, would not be incoherent."[6] I need not belabor the similarities between this description and soap opera as a form. But I mention it because I believe it is crucial to understand how women's popular culture speaks to women's pleasure at the same time that it puts it in the service of patriarchy, keeps it working for the good of the family.

Television also plays on women's fears that they are not near enough to those around them. Consider the happy ending of a well-known television commercial: Wife: "Why didn't you *tell* me you like Stove-Top Stuffing with chicken?" Husband: "You never asked me." So, it seems, women must play guessing games, be mind readers. Is it then merely accidental that several popular television quiz shows emphasize mind reading over the possession of correct answers? I am referring to programs which have contestants guess the responses of a studio audience or a poll of people, programs like *The Match Game*, *Card Sharks* and *Family Feud*. In a perceptive article in *Screen Education*, John Tulloch argues that quiz shows on British television present a reified view of knowledge which is current in the culture at large.[7] Increasingly, daytime quiz shows on American television relate not so much to any particular view of knowledge as to a desire to overcome one's *exclusion* from knowledge, from the thoughts and feelings of others. Answers are no longer right or wrong in any "objective" sense; contestants are rewarded when they correctly guess what *other people* think.

Questions about what is on other people's minds provide many of the enigmas of soap operas as well as of other popular feminine narratives. In gothic romances, for example, the solution to the mystery lies less in the intellectual process of detection—following external clues to determine who provided the corpse, how, and with what motive—than guessing what the aloof, attractive, enigmatic male is thinking and feeling. In soap operas, characters spend an inordinate amount of time trying to find out what is "bothering" another character. Soap operas may be excessively wordy, as Horace Newcomb has pointed out, but this wordiness is built around deep silences.[8] Characters talk, speculate endlessly about why other characters are *not* talking.

Furthermore, not only are the characters on soap operas impelled to fathom the secrets of other people's minds; the constant, even claustrophobic use of close-up shots stimulates the audience to do likewise. Often *only* the audience is privileged to witness characters' expressions, which are complex and intricately coded, signifying triumph, bitterness, despair, confusion—the

entire emotional register, in fact. Soap operas contrast sharply with other popular forms aimed at masculine visual pleasure, which is often centered on the fragmentation and fetishization of the female body. In the most popular feminine visual art, it is easy to forget that characters even have bodies, so insistently are close-ups of faces employed. One critic significantly remarks, "A face in close-up is what before the age of film only a lover or a mother ever saw."[9] Soap operas appear to be the one visual art which activates the gaze of the mother—but in order to provoke anxiety (an anxiety never allayed by narrative closure) about the welfare of others. Close-ups provide the spectator with training in "reading" other people, in being sensitive to their (unspoken) feelings at any given moment.

This openness to the needs and desires of others is, of course, one of the primary functions of the woman in the home. The wife and mother, who is excluded from participation in the larger world in which her husband and children move, must nevertheless be attuned to the effects of this world upon her family. Moreover, although her family cannot be bothered with the details of *her* world, with making such "trivial" decisions as whether to have stuffing or potatoes with dinner, such decisions nevertheless affect her family's attitudes and moods, and it is well for her to be able to anticipate desires which remain unuttered, perhaps even unthought. Thus, the enigmas of a significant number of commercials, as in the one quoted above, center around the wife's anxiety about what her husband or children will think of one of her little changes in the menu or the running of the household. She waits in suspense as her husband takes the first forkful of his meal, or breathlessly looks on as he selects a clean shirt, wondering if he will notice just how clean and fresh it is. Of course, he *does* notice, as she ecstatically exclaims. This last example seems to come very close to subverting its own project—the project of many commercials—of showing the immense rewards involved in being a housewife. To me, it announces a little too clearly how extraordinary it is when family members pay the least attention to all the work the woman in the home does for them. It is worth noting that in the many commercials in which a male tests a female (for example, gives her a new medicine to reduce tension) there is never any anxiety involved. He is absolutely certain what brand will please her. Men, it appears, don't have to try to "read" women; they already know them and fully understand their needs.

Not only is it the responsibility of the woman in the home to be sensitive to the feelings of her family, her job is further complicated by the fact that she must often deal with several people who have different, perhaps conflicting moods; and further, she must be prepared to drop what she is doing in order to cope with various conflicts and problems the moment they arise. Unlike most workers in the labor force, the housewife must beware of concentrating her energies exclusively on one task—otherwise the dinner could burn, or the baby could crack its skull (as happened once on a soap opera when a villainess became so absorbed in a love encounter that she forgot to keep an eye on her child). The housewife functions, as many creative women have sadly realized, by distraction. Tillie Olsen writes in *Silences*:

> More than in any other human relationship, overwhelmingly more, motherhood means being instantly interruptable, responsive, responsible. . . . It is distraction, not meditation, that becomes habitual; interruption, not continuity; spasmodic, not constant toil.[10]

Daytime television plays a part in habituating women to interruption, distraction, and spasmodic toil. Here I must take issue with Raymond Williams, who rejects the notion that television programs and commercials may be seen as interruptions. Indeed, I would argue that the flow of daytime television reinforces the very principle of interruptability crucial to the proper functioning of women in the home. In other words, what Williams calls "the central television experience" is a profoundly de-centering experience.

"The art of being off center," wrote Walter Benjamin in an essay on Baudelaire, "in which the little man could acquire training in places like the Fun Fair, flourished concomitantly with unemployment."[11] Daytime television programs, most obviously soap operas, also provide training in "the art of being off center" (and we should note in passing that it is probably no accident that the nighttime soap opera *Dallas* and its offshoots and imitators are flourishing in a period of economic crisis and rising unemployment). The housewife, of course, is, in one sense, like the little man at the fun fair, unemployed, but in another sense she is perpetually employed—her work, like a soap opera, is never done. Moreover, as I have said, her duties are split among a variety of domestic and familial tasks, and her television programs keep her from desiring a focused existence by involving her in the pleasures of a fragmented life.

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. Commercials, of course, present the housewife with mini-problems and their resolutions, so after witnessing all the agonizingly hopeless dilemmas presented on soap operas, the spectator has the satisfaction of seeing *something* cleaned up, if only a stained shirt or a dirty floor.

Although daytime commercials and soap operas are set overwhelmingly within the home, the two views of the home seem antithetical, for the chief concerns of commercials are precisely the ones soap operas censor out. The soggy diapers, yellow wax buildup and carpet smells constituting the world of daytime television ads are rejected by soap operas in favor of Another World,

as the very title of one soap opera announces, a world in which characters deal only with the "large" problems of human existence: crime, love, death and dying. But this antithesis embodies a deep truth about the way women function in (or, more accurately, around) culture: as both moral and spiritual guides and household drudges—now one, now the other, moving back and forth between the extremes, but obviously finding them difficult to reconcile.

Similarly, the violent mood swings the spectator undergoes in switching from quiz shows to soap operas also constitute a kind of interruption, just as the housewife is required not only to endure monotonous, repetitive work but also to be able to switch instantly and on demand from her role as a kind of bedmaking, dishwashing automaton to a large sympathizing consciousness. It must be stressed that while nighttime television certainly offers shifts in mood, notably from comedy to drama, these shifts are not nearly as extreme as in daytime programming. Quiz shows present the spectator with the same game, played and replayed frenetically day after day, with each game a self-contained unit, crowned by climactic success or failure. Soap operas, by contrast, endlessly defer resolutions and climaxes and undercut the very notion of success by continually demonstrating that happiness for all is an unattainable goal: one person's triumph is another person's bitter disappointment.

Not only this, but the pacing of these two types of programs are at opposite extremes. On quiz shows contestants invariably operate under severe time pressure. If the answer is not given in 30 seconds, a most unpleasant-sounding buzzer, rather like an alarm clock or an oven timer, forces the issue: "Time is up, your answer please." Whereas quiz shows operate on the speed-up principle, compressing time into tight limits, soap operas slow down the action and expand time to an extent never seen on nighttime television (not even on shows like *Dallas*). Soap opera time coincides with or is actually slower than "real" time, and, moreover, throughout the years, the lengths of the programs themselves have been expanding. If the two kinds of time embodied by these two types of programs reflect the fact that the housewife must both race *against* time (in completing her daily chores) and *make* time (to be receptive to the demands on her attention made by her family), on a deeper level they are not as divergent as they appear. Speaking of games of chance, in which "starting all over again is the regulative idea," Benjamin related the gambler's psychological experience of time to that of the man who works for wages. For both, it is "time in hell, the province of those who are not allowed to complete anything they have started."[12] The desire for instant gratification, says Benjamin, is the result of modern man's having been cheated out of his experience. But gratification instantaneously awarded (as in games of chance), or gratification infinitely postponed (as in soap operas) both suggest the deprivation of experience, a deprivation suffered not only by those who work for wages, but obviously also pertaining to those who work at repetitive tasks for *no* tangible rewards, but rather for the gratification of others.

The formal properties of daytime television thus accord closely with the rhythms of women's work in the home. Individual programs like soap operas as well as the flow of various programs and commercials tend to make repetition, interruption and distraction pleasurable. But we can go even further and note that for women viewers reception itself often takes place in a state of distraction. According to Benjamin, "reception in a state of distraction . . . finds in the film its true means of exercise."[13] But now that we have television we can see that it goes beyond film in this respect, or at least the daytime programs do. For the consumption of most films as well as nighttime programs in some ways recapitulates the work situation in the factory or office: the viewer is physically passive, immobilized, and all his or her attention is focused on the screen. Even the most allegedly "mindless" program requires a fairly strong degree of concentration if its plot is to make sense. But since the housewife's "leisure" time is not so strongly demarcated, her entertainment must often be consumed on the job. As the authors of *The Complete Soap Opera Book* tell us:

> The typical fan was assumed to be trotting about her daily chores with her mop in one hand, duster in the other, cooking, tending babies, answering telephones. Thus occupied, she might not be able to bring her full powers of concentration to bear on *Backstage Wife*.[14]

This accounts, in part, for the "realistic" feel of soap operas. The script writers, anticipating the housewife's distracted state, are careful to repeat important elements of the story several times. Thus, if two characters are involved in a confrontation which is supposed to mark a final break in their relationship, that same confrontation must be repeated, with minor variations, a few times in order to make sure the viewer gets the point. "Clean breaks"—surely a supreme fiction—are impossible on soap operas. Quiz shows, too, are obviously aimed at the distracted viewer, who, if she misses one game because she is cleaning out the bathroom sink, can easily pick up on the next one ten minutes later.

Benjamin, writing of film, invoked architecture as the traditional art most closely resembling the new one in the kinds of response they elicit. Both are mastered to some extent in a state of distraction; that is, both are appropriated "not so much by attention as by habit."[15] It is interesting to recall in this connection the Dadaist Eric Satie's concept of furniture music, which would be absorbed while people went about their business or chatted with each other. Television is the literalization of the metaphor of furniture art, but it must be stressed that this art is more than simply background noise in the way, for example, that muzak is; daytime programs, especially soap operas, are intensely meaningful to many women, as a conversation with any fan will immediately confirm. Moreover, as I have tried to show, their

rhythms interact in complex ways with the rhythms of women's life and work in the home.

Ironically, critics of television untiringly accuse its viewers of indulging in escapism. In other words, both high art critics and politically oriented critics, though motivated by vastly different concerns, unite in condemning daytime television for *distracting* the housewife from her real situation. My point is that a distracted or distractable frame of mind is crucial to the housewife's efficient functioning *in* her real situation, and at *this* level television and its so-called distractions, along with the particular forms they take, are intimately bound up with women's work.

NOTES

1. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), p. 95.
2. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978) p. 179.
3. Mary Ann Doane, "Misrecognition and Identity," *Ciné-Tracts* Vol. 3 No. 3 (Fall 1980), p. 25.
4. Doane refers to James Naremore's discussion of this incident in *Film Guide to Psycho* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 72.
5. Luce Irigaray, "When the goods get together" (from *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* [Paris: Minuit, 1977]), in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), pp. 104-105.
6. Ibid., p. 104.
7. John Tulloch, "Gradgrind's Heirs: The Quiz and the Presentation of 'Knowledge' by British Television," *Screen Education* No. 19 (Summer 1976), pp. 3-13.
8. Horace Newcomb, *TV: The Most Popular Art* (New York: Doubleday/Anchor Books, 1974), pp. 168-169.
9. Dennis Porter, "Soap Time: Thoughts on a Commodity Art Form," *College English* Vol. 38 No. 8 (April 1977), p. 786.
10. Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1979), pp. 18-19.
11. Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 176.
12. Ibid., p. 179.
13. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, p. 240.
14. Madeleine Edmondson and David Rounds, *From Mary Noble to Mary Hartman: The Complete Soap Opera Book* (New York: Stein and Day, 1976), pp. 46-47.
15. Benjamin, "The Work of Art." pp. 239-240.