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Sun, Sea, Sex, Sand and Conservatism in the Australian Television Soap Opera

In this issue, Mike Dee expands on his earlier piece about soap operas. A recent issue of Young People Now (November 1995) mentioned the new (UK) television soap opera Hollyoaks by Phil Redmond, which raises the issue of the role of ‘soap operas’ (hereafter referred to as soaps) in the daily lives of young people. The term ‘soap’ originates with the sponsorship of radio and television programmes by companies such as Proctor and Gamble who in America in 1932 used a daytime radio domestic comedy, The Puddle Family to advertise Oxydol, a washing powder. The first British television soap was The Grove Family (BBC 1954-7) was followed by Emergency Ward Ten (ATV 1957-67), Coronation Street (Granada Television 1960-present) and Eastenders (BBC 1985-present).

Australian soaps are especially popular in Britain as the following roll of honour details (Selby and Cowdery 1995:47):

1975 The Young Doctors
1976 The Sullivans
1979 Prisoner Cell Block H
1981 Sons and Daughters
1981 A Country Practice
1985 Neighbours
1987 The Flying Doctors
1988 Home and Away

Australian soaps are highly popular in Britain and of potential interest to those who work with young people, because they have a high proportion of youthful looking actors and actresses and frequently depict scenes involving young people and apparent ‘real’ teenage dilemmas. On one level it may be commendable that actors who are young(ish) somewhere between the ages of 14 and 25 play roles that are ostensibly about young people and their alleged problems. However, the casting of young, largely unknown, actors reflects more the political economy of soaps in their relative cheapness and dispensability, rather than any genuine attempt to create an oppositional text for, about and by young people (Paterson 1986).

The ‘star system’ of Hollywood encapsulated in the large fees paid to the casts of Dallas and also Dynasty is avoided in Australian soaps, where contracts are short and salaries are modest and few actors are permitted to become stars who can transcend the limitations of their scripted role and establish an acting career away from soaps.

An example of the difference between American and Australian soaps is the star treatment of Larry Hagman (J.R. Ewing). Following the ‘who shot J.R.?’ storyline, Hagman was able to negotiate a substantial salary increase and a share in the profits of the show (Selby and Cowdery 1995). On the other hand, Ian Smith (Harold Bishop) of Neighbours considered his fee to be inadequate and having argued for an increase was written out of the programme.
Like so many narrative closure devices deployed in Australian soaps, a sudden but not entirely certain death was conjured up and Harold ‘lost at sea’ (without his body being found) leaving behind a grieving (but still employed) Madge (Selby and Cowdery 1995).

Reg Watson created Neighbours for the Grundy organisation in 1984 after successfully creating in 1964 in Britain, Crossroads. The focus of Neighbours first seen in Australia in 1985, was to be ordinary and everyday ‘domestic’ situations rather than difficult and controversial social issues (cited in Selby and Cowdery 1995):

I wanted to show three families living in a small street in a Melbourne suburb, who are friends. Humour was to play a big part in it and the important thing was to show young people communicating with older people. The characters will make mistakes. Quite often people do silly things and make stupid mistakes in their lives (p.159).

Dropped by Australian television Channel 7 now on Channel 10, Neighbours has varied its place in the all important early evening time slot, so central to the capture of audience share and advertising revenue. At its current time of 6.30pm Neighbours gives way to The Simpsons. The Grundy organisation as the production company of Neighbours has a worldwide niche in the television production market, producing in the course of thirty years:

‘…more than eighty quiz/game shows and twenty two drama drama series-more hours of TV than any other independent television company in the world. By 1990 an average of seventeen hours per week of British air time was given to Grundy programmes, the majority of which were soaps (Selby and Cowdery 1995:57).

Neighbours first broadcast in Britain in October 1986, gained an audience of 6 million for its 1.30pm time slot. The BBC brought the programme to Britain because:

‘…it would appeal to women because it is a classless society. Living standards in Australia are high, and it’s good to see ordinary people like Max the plumber or Des Clarke the young banker, living well without money problems’ (Selby and Cowdery 1995:124).

The attraction of Neighbours lay also in its relative cheapness to produce as a commodity. In 1988 five twenty-three minute episodes cost 27,000 pounds (to make) while the BBC’s own Eastenders cost around 40,000 each episode (Selby and Cowdery 1995).

Television is a medium distinct as a ‘text’ from the novel or cinema. It secures a level of assumed ‘naturalness’ and intimacy greater than that of cinema, over and above the obvious differences between the forms, with the cinema audience consuming a specific screen product, in the dark, with (mainly) unknown others. Television becomes ‘stitched’ into the home and family scenario with the screen image being smaller than the viewer (the reverse of the cinematic image) while the practice of watching it is one where the set can be switched on without an attentive viewing audience while a multitude of other activities takes place. The reading/viewing of a text can be understood as the interaction of numerous ideological systems in the codes and ideas that form the raw material of the work, and the cultural experience, desires, and ideologies of the subject who in consuming the text ‘decodes’ the systems of meaning constructed therein (Ellis 1982).

The production context or political economy of soaps is as important as the text itself because the creative process is driven by factors of competition with other soaps, time slots profitability and the capture and retention of advertising revenue. Australian soaps function more as structural frameworks for advertising revenue than as vital or autonomous
contemporary texts. This is the world that Redmond’s *Hollyoaks* must negotiate successfully, to rise above much of the current teen soap material on offer.

According to the article in *Young People Now* (November 1995) the blurb from Channel 4 indicates that *Hollyoaks* (a particularly naff name?) ‘will have the same concerns as teenagers today-girlfriends, boyfriends, fashion, music, mobile phones and computers!’ Young people and youth workers might balk at this bland shopping list of teenage consumerist concerns which sounds more like a promotion for a light hearted offering on children’s television than a cutting edge youth soap of the 1990s. Despite the celebrated consumer spending power of 12-16 year olds in the UK, it can be asked if *Hollyoaks* ‘an irreverent look at life in the ‘90s’ will actually find room for the complex and grim reality of young people’s concerns over homelessness, unemployment, HIV/AIDS etc.

Reactions to soaps vary from the view that they are ‘meaningless and empty’, to the perception that all those who watch them are stupid, as Buckingham 1987 suggests:

> The view of soap operas as a form of escapist fantasy for the intellectually inadequate has continued to set the agenda for academic research, and remains one of the commonsense ‘truths’ about television which permeate public debate. The television critic’s characteristic ridiculing of the genre is matched by their barely concealed contempt for the idiots who enjoy it. The ‘typical’ soap opera viewer is often seen as the person who writes in for a job at the Crossroads motel, or sends Michelle Fowler a wedding present-in other words, someone who is incapable of distinguishing between fiction and reality (p.146).

It can be posed that within the Australian soaps and their breezy patina of ‘sun, sea, sand and sex’ lies a deeply ideological and conservative discourse full of moral injunctions about the ‘proper’ role of young people in contemporary Australian society. As Belsey (1980) notes:

> Ideology obscures the real conditions of existence by presenting partial truths. It is a set of omissions, gaps rather than lies, smoothing over contradictions, appearing to provide answers to questions which in reality it evades, and masquerading as coherence in the interests of the social relations generated by and necessary to the reproduction of the existing mode of production (p.28).

In the Australian soap much is signified by the exclusion of ‘significant others’ in the form of thy disabled or Black and Indigenous people and also gay men and women, or indeed, any character that does not reflect a relatively simple and compliant profile of conspicuous consumption. In the hermetically sealed narrative system of the soap there is seemingly no tolerance for complex and richly hewn black or gay roles. If they occur, they usually come to grief quite quickly. The overwhelming discourse is of white, healthy, able-bodied and decidedly heterosexual consumers in an avariciously consuming society. Situated in the middle of some of the gravest refugee and human rights crises of modern times, none of the Australian soaps deviates from this closed and largely mythical world of relentless consumption.

While the apparent ‘liberal’ possibility of heterosexual and short lived extra marital relationships is permitted, the soaps give the impression that Rwanda with all its death and horror (and subsequent atrocities worldwide) never happened, and all that matters is the accumulation of wealth and property, standing as a preferred reality of everyday existence.
Common thematic sequences in Neighbours and other soaps are the conflicts between order and disorder, where reality is untidy and full of problems; between community and the individual, where the individual is bound by the rules of the local community; between maturity and youth, where children and young people must learn to accept the values and wisdom of the adult community; and between cooperation and competition, where ruthless individualism and selfishness while admirable components of commercial success, fail to lead to happiness. Young people are usually positioned as the binary opposite of ‘good’ and the moral conservatism of the text is thereby reinforced and reproduced.

While youth workers (and other figures of influence in the lives of young people) may dismiss soaps as ‘empty’ they are instead full of thematic and ideological material worthy of analysis and should not be allowed to slip past our critical attention. Productive work can be done with young people to unravel, decode and challenge the formulaic properties of the text of soaps, excavating and exposing their sub-structures of narrow (economically written) characterisations, gender stereotyping and racial and other social exclusions.

For a considerable number of British young people watching Neighbours, Heartbreak High and Home and Away, these texts, particularly in the European winter time seem to stand as the authoritative referent for everyday Australian life, in the form of sunshine, barbecues and ‘healthy living’. More complex and contradictory representations of living day to day in Australia rarely surface within such texts and it is to be hoped that Phil Redmond, as both writer and executive producer of Hollyoaks, will be able to resist the commercial imperatives of the advertising industry to feature images of children and young people that suit the advertising industry, as vehicles for branded products.

If Redmond can also avoid the creation of narrow and bland characterisations as well as tokenistic, one dimensional tilts at ‘real’ social issues, in favour of complex and credible representations of some young people in Chester, then Hollyoaks may begin to address and reflect the lived experiences of many young people in contemporary Britain. For this possibility alone, Hollyoaks might (just) be worth watching and talking about.

**References**


Young People Now, November 1995.