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Are you sitting comfortably? Soap operas, disability and audience

Alison Wilde

(Adapted from a paper given at Dis: cover! 2: June 2007)

INTRODUCTION

Television is an especially important medium to access culture for many people, particularly to the vast amount of people with impairments who have little or no access to outside arts venues, due to poor access, low incomes or social and cultural marginalisation. This, and the impact soap operas seem to make on cultural attitudes initially led to my decision to do research upon the soap opera and how people view it, This is what I will be discussing today.

To explain a little more, in terms of social engagement, soap opera is often cited as the place where people learn most about social issues and turn to for help with their own dilemmas. This is a view which seems to held by broadcasters and viewers alike. In the recent Ofcom (2004) review of public service broadcasting, over a third of those questioned perceived soap operas to be of greater importance to society than most other television genres.

Ofcom's figures indicate that many viewers see soap operas as a primary resource in engaging with social issues, despite the soap opera's focus upon individual personalised contexts (Glaessner, 1990; Aitchison, 1994).

Bearing this in mind, I will use my work in this area to highlight issues of how and why the narrative placements of disabled and non-disabled characters tend to influence viewing experiences. Discussing narrative concerns, audience attachments and levels of engagement with stories, images and characters, I will demonstrate associations between aesthetic preferences and access to social, cultural and discursive resources. Identifying the way that different viewers chose to engage with and articulate or negotiate their identities, in terms of various ideas of selfhood I will outline a range of representational concerns. I will discuss some of the ways that different viewers chose to engage with characters according to their own social contexts, demonstrating how perceptions and performances of self occur relationally, in engagements with others. Implicit and explicit narratives of normality and abnormality in soap opera texts will be related to the expectations, understandings and identity concerns of the viewers. In doing so, I will address crucial issues of audience, aesthetics and disabling practices,

which are relevant to wider issues of disability representation.

First, I will discuss the soap opera genre in terms of stereotypes and narrative issues. Secondly, I will discuss research with a range of television viewers who took part in my project. This will be followed by a brief examination of the construction of normality and viewer identities. Finally I will bring identity and representational concerns together in a discussion of the soap operas structures. Evaluating the representation of disabled people alongside the reputation of the genre as an 'anyone- for someone' structure I will outline assumptions made of the average viewer before some brief concluding remarks about alternative representational strategies

Stereotypes

Since the 1980s a range of authors (Barnes,1992; Rieser, 1992) and organisations with the disabled peoples movement have raised issues about disabling imagery. Such work has taken the social model of disability as its starting point, where disability is defined as relations of social oppression which affect people with impairments.) Exploitative portrayals have been a central concern of

disability studies work on disabling imagery, related to similar debates with the disabled people's movement. Usually this involves calls for positive imagery, in opposition to the identification of a range of negative stereotypes (Barnes,1992: Rieser,1992).

Whilst these stereotypes clearly abound within media, the complexity of representation strategies has not been fully explored. For example, although issues of disability discrimination and critiques of disability, or more accurately impairment, have been acknowledged within the broadcasting industry, examination of broadcasters' manifestos reveals that little has changed, even though stereotype classifications (such as Barnes,1992) have been used to guide broadcasters away from discriminatory practices (Wilde,2004). However, using such frameworks as a template for re-presenting disabled people can be quite a damaging move, not least by setting up 'ideal' disabled roles, but also by limiting portrayals even further. Further, my research found that even when viewers found portrayals to be non-stereotypical, they still found them to be unappealing or demeaning (Wilde, 2004). Overall, other than the identification of character traits, there seems to be little understanding of *how* stereotypes are built or framed by the text or genre.

So, rather than focussing upon stereotypes, for me, the central question about better portrayals and the social engagement with disability issues, is about how to achieve cultural recognition on equal terms, to work towards cultural images where being depicted as good, evil, wise, ordinary, extra-ordinary or changeable, is as possible for people with impairments as it is for other people. Presently, despite contrary appearances, the roles assigned to disabled characters are limited, being much less dynamic or fluid than those given to non-disabled characters. This seems to be exacerbated by naturalised, individualistic, assumptions made about disabled people being so deeply entrenched within production values, especially within the expectations that producers and writers have of the viewer. As I have suggested, some of the answers are to be found by understanding the conventions of the genre and what viewers bring to it. In particular, I'm going to explain crucial narrative inequalities and their reception.

Narrative

In a brief explanation of narrative I will begin with concerns of viewers' engagements, in order to explain how viewers can be positioned by the text. In doing so, I am going to

refer to a narrative framework used by O'Donnell (1999) in his study of European soap operas. Briefly, he identifies three main levels of narrative within the soap opera. These are: the micro-narrative, the meta-narrative and the macro-narrative.

First, the micro-narrative. The search for sameness and normality is more sharply defined in the minutiae and side-taking processes of micro-narrative identifications, particularly in what O'Donnell (1999) refers to as the everyday 'hermeneutic enigmas' (O'Donnell, 1999) of normative relationship concerns and conflicts. The micro-narrative concerns itself with everyday relationship entanglements, with a primary focus being placed upon romantic, heterosexual relationships between core characters who are usually stereotypical caricatures of normality (Wilde, 2004b). Background personality characteristics are shaped at this level, indicating, as I just suggested, points of normality and difference. Typically, this involves things such as comments and jokes made about people's appearance, such as Pat Butcher (Eastenders) earrings.

In Coronation Street, earlier this week, for example, one of these narratives focussed upon Eileen's appearance when

she was preparing for a date. Whilst providing several opportunities for jokes, these portrayals indicated Eileen's sexuality, particularly her desires and fears about starting a new relationship, whilst depicting some of her male friends and colleagues in a (uncharacteristically) caring role.

As previously suggested, it was this level of narrative that all participants engaged with most readily as it is the most familiar. It is where the viewer begins to like or dislike characters, often according to similarities, empathy or disapproval of them. Significantly, the micro-narrative is the level which is most likely to have universal appeal and has a capacity for evoking collective identifications. This suggests a model reader (the viewer who is constructed in the perceptions of the soap opera writers and producers) who is the 'indefinite, unconcretized other' (Bakhtin, 1999, 132), an 'average', normal, unspecified person.

Interestingly, it is also at the micronarrative level that the majority of direct criticisms of impairment portrayals were made, both in terms of impairment accuracies and the absence of everyday aspects of disabled peoples' lives. For example, common observations (invariably about wheelchair users) included questions such as 'How did Chris get out of the cellar?' (*Emmerdale*). The more

obvious, if indistinct, placement of the model reader at the normative micro-narrative stratum implicitly positions the disabled character as a definite concretized (an) other. In other words, an extra-ordinary, abnormal, specific sort of person. I will return to this later.

In all forms of soap opera a specific model reader becomes more apparent at meta-narrative and macro-narrative level. The meta-narrative level, typically lasting a few weeks, is where specific storylines emerge which are often seen to reflect engagement with current social and political issues. They are topical and often controversial or very dramatic stories. Alongside disability and impairment, these have included things such as rape, drug taking, and tragic accidents, adultery, and non-heterosexual relationships. These phenomena are used as crucial diegetic aids to moral stories. Meta-narrative issues tend to be fed by discourses of difference, which ostensibly direct the reader to more 'negotiated', tolerant or political readings, where characters are likely to be viewed with equanimity. Yet, in resolution of storylines, these narratives shape and contain abnormality. For example, disability related meta-narratives often involve long term male non-disabled characters and Oedipal crises (the formulaic pattern of *bad guy- moral lesson- moral reform*

or death), where the 'descent' into 'disability' is resolved after a few weeks, by moral reform, cure, redemption of death.

The construction of both micro and meta levels of narrative are fundamental to the constitution of the macro-narrative. The macro-narrative is where the implicit values of the soap opera are to be found, primary principles including social democracy and individualism. These are rarely questioned by the audience, except in the rare, unconventional, cases of radical excess, where the taken-for-granted rules or values that are expected by the 'model reader' are transgressed. So, in the case of disability values, it is assumed that the model reader implicitly recognises that 'communicative intentions' (Kress and Leeuwen, 1999) will be constituted through a macro-narrative framework based upon a 'non-disabled gaze'¹. The (authorial) conception of the non-disabled model reader assumes a 'competency' (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983, 57) of 'normality' in their imagined viewer.

The only exception to this seems to be the 'postrealist' soap operas (Ang and Stratton, 1995), where radical excess challenges moral consensus. This privileging of

¹ This term is used to refer to a range of values, rather than being an essentialist construction of non-disabled people's attitudes

radical excess, in dramas such as *Twin Peaks*, is seen as a crucial factor in disrupting the reassurances sought by the 'model reader' and in facilitating representational change. This does not seem compatible with conventional British soap operas as they are. I am arguing that, not only are the notions of abnormality, normality and the disavowal of disabled people (Shakespeare, 1994) principal values within these narrative norms (*sic*) but that deviation from them would be seen to transgress the 'taken-for-granted' rules and narrative conventions of the soap opera genre**.

However, it is at the levels of the micro- and macro-normality narratives where the assumptions made about the non-disabled 'model reader' are at their least visible but most significant and pernicious. Ostensibly, the disabled viewer as model reader can be located in some of the more political meta-narrative topics, giving the appearance of progressive images if the storyline is considered outside the longer-term (hyper) narrative. So, despite superficial appearances, it seems that the model reader is the non-disabled reader, at all levels of narrative, comprising (in total) a form which confirms that the soap opera is what Darke (1998) terms, a 'normality drama',

where abnormality is used to uphold hegemonic discourses of normality.

This deliberate use of abnormality is, as previously suggested, to be found at the meta-narrative (topical) levels, inevitably restoring normality as each 'issue' is resolved. Rather than being at the centre of 'who is doing what to who', disabled characters are more likely to be absent, or on the peripheries of these 'everyday' stories within the micro-narrative. Thus, the depiction of characters with impairments, as representations of disabled people are clearly differentiated as abnormal 'others', external to that of a normality which takes non-disability as given. In sum, discourses of non-disabled normality and heteronormativity (Wilde, 2004, 2004a) are pivotal values of the macro-narrative, maintained rather than challenged by transgressions at other levels of narrative. It would be possible for any of these levels to change their content but is over the long term (what O' Donnell names the hypernarrative) that the soap opera is most clearly defined and understood. It is at this level that narrative inequalities between disabled and non-disabled characters is most plainly seen, most notably in the fluidity of roles assigned to non-disabled characters over time and

the comparatively fixed personalities of people with impairments.

The Audience

My work on audience draws on discussions, over six months, with a range of groups which were comprised of: disabled men and women attending a local day centre (The Friday Group), non-disabled men, non-disabled women, young disabled people from a segregated school, young women from an independent school, young men from a comprehensive school, and disabled and non-disabled young people from an integrationist youth club². Alongside this, a range of people, including some group participants, completed viewing diaries.

The data gathered from these groups was analysed as examples of discourses on identity and also as interactions between viewers and soap opera texts. This approach was adapted from a model of media analysis proposed by Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998), which they named the Spectacle Performance Paradigm. They argued that the world has become constructed as

²Apart from the groups which indicate 'non-disabled' or 'disabled' the majority within these groups are not disabled even though impairment status for most of these members is sometimes unclear or unmentioned. The researcher's name for *The Friday Group* is retained for easy of reading.

spectacle and that individuals have become more narcissistic, resulting in individual or 'secondary' performances of identity. I found this very apparent in many of the viewing performances. Moreover, it was particularly clear in the identifications of the soap operas' most traditional audience, female viewers. Their discussions of characters seemed to reflect performances of their collective ideal selves, predominating in their, most enthusiastic and often moralistic, conversations. This is reflected by considerably more resources being provided by the soap opera text for performances of non-disabled femininities.

In all groups there was a marked preference for talking about British soap operas. Specifically, heterosexual relationship dramas were the main focus in all except the two male groups, both of whom asserted a preference for watching sports and programmes involving more action. The young men's group commented that the regularity of violent events and accidents made *Brookside* more exciting. Conversely, the women were keen on discussing portrayals of women who they interpreted as strong and independent, such as *Dr Kerry Weaver* of *E.R.* In a similar vein the young women spent much time discussing teenage pregnancy storylines and other topics relevant to

their age range and sexual identifications. Many of these came from programmes targeted at this age group, such as drugs or addiction related storylines from *Hollyoaks*.

The group of disabled adults acquiesced to stereotyped impairment portrayals more readily than any other group but were far more interested in talking about non-disabled characters. The diaries of disabled participants revealed more personal feelings and closer identifications. Peter, wrote:

Images of disabled people in soaps invariably make me feel worse about myself because they accentuate a negative sense of difference:- the disabled person/character exists by virtue of their disability or impairment- and seems to exist for that reason alone.

In the all male group, the participants tended to situate themselves as 'professional men' or 'providers' in relation to impairment and soap opera viewing, an identification which was much less apparent in the diary entries of both disabled and non-disabled men (Wilde , 2004). One member of The Men's group, for example, explained his viewing of a plane crash storyline (*Emmerdale*) in terms of

his professional (medical) interest in information on post-traumatic stress disorder:

Tim- But I wasn't interested in the plane crash, but I watched it for two or three weeks afterwards because professionally I wanted to see how it dealt with the post-traumatic stress.

In the young women's discussions of teenage pregnancy, there was a considerably larger degree of identification with the conventionally pretty character of *Sarah Louise* (*Coronation Street*) than *Sonia* (*Eastenders*), a much less normative character. Stronger group identifications were made by all members of the focus group with the *Sarah Louise*, yet they all discussed *Sonia* as a more reassuring and likeable character, in their viewing diaries.

Although many of these attitudes seem to contradict one another, it is clear that different identifications are made according to the viewers' imagined audience. For all group members, viewing performances correlated closely to identifications with those characters who exhibited the best (normative) body and gender performances within the soap opera.

This was especially apparent in the mixed group of disabled and non-disabled young people. Not only did members of this group need to reflect on their own identifications in front of their peers, they had an 'audience' of 'others' which did not lend easily to the construction of a 'collective self', being divided by both sex and body identifications. Unsurprisingly, the greatest division seemed to be drawn according to impairment status. This group negotiated less radical discussions of disability than the school group of disabled students and there were obvious tensions and conflicts between the views of the disabled and non-disabled members, demonstrated in heated discussions such as debates on the employment of disabled performers.

Significantly, narcissistic performances were less obvious in the case of the disabled adult group members, *The Friday Group*, who are offered few points of identification on a 'just like me' (Sancho,2003) basis. Conversely, the most obvious examples of the spectacle/narcissism relationship were most evident in the performance of 'normalities' within this group. Although they rarely commented on soap operas, their few direct discussions of soap opera content were anchored within narratives which they deemed to be (non-disabled) forms of

abnormality, usually focusing on sexuality. This seemed to provide a referent of 'difference' and narcissistic counter-identifications (McNay, 2000) for them.

Similarly, on closer inspection I found that all the other groups demonstrated a range of over-evaluations of their own 'normalities' in their treatment of specific topics. So, in addition to the comparatively obvious identifications founded upon 'recognition and consent'³ (McNay,2000, 103), and the counter-identifications of 'refusal and rebellion'⁴(McNay,2000, 103), it also seemed that the 'negative contents of identity' (Craib,1994) had an important part to play in viewers' engagements.

Discussing a *Brookside* storyline which featured *Shelley*, a lesbian character, Betty made the following remarks (within *The Friday Group's* discussion):

Betty- It's disgusting and I don't want to see it.

Alison- Why?

Betty- Well, it's just not normal is it?

³ That is, the pleasures and interest expressed in characters who seemed to approximate to their ideal collective selves by the women and young women.

⁴ For example, the reversals and criticisms of most young people's groups (see Wilde, 2004).

In Betty's statement, her perception of lesbian sexuality simultaneously allows her to become an active, moral judge of 'others' whose 'minor differences' become amplified (Ignatieff, 1996) while locating herself as a self-constituting subject of 'normal' sexual desire. There was also a propensity for the younger groups to ridicule older characters and a tendency for the men to criticise female characters and genres as less exciting and dynamic. The most significant deviations from these tendencies were to be found in the viewing diaries where abnormality and more personal disclosures were to be found. Notably, disabled women diarists were the only viewers who expressed interest in viewing impairment and disability related storylines, turning to soap operas as a source of 'education and entertainment', being more attracted to disability portrayals as a source of information and reassurance, if often thwarted in doing so (Wilde, 2004).

Overall however, there is evidence from all groups that their favoured viewing practices are almost exclusively centred on what are perceived to be the 'normal' characters and macro-narratives of normality, a propensity which seems to increase with viewers' greater distance

from the position of 'model viewer'⁵. This privileging of the 'normal' in its various forms usually focused upon narratives of heterosexual desire involving characters who fit conventional standards of (usually white) attractiveness and normative, if exaggerated, gender roles.

An ethic of normality?

With the exception of the men's groups, the data gathered from the research participants in this project suggested a strong engagement at the micro-narrative level (O'Donnell, 1999). In terms of body and feminine gender performances these played a significant part in processes of identity articulation, especially when counterpoised with referential discussions of their own lives.

When participants focused upon characters with impairments the discussions became more involved with the meta-narrative (O'Donnell, 1999). At this level, soap operas are often judged to be progressive and could, ostensibly, promote the views of the disabled people's movement, particularly when they are used to highlight the disabling effects of prejudice. However, there is a much

⁵ The groups who showed the greatest enthusiasm for discussing 'abnormal' characters were The Women and young women, exhibiting an ethic of care, reflecting the assumed *Ideal Mother*, (Modleski, 1979) model reader of the soap opera.

weaker engagement with such issues, in both this project and in similar studies (Gavin, 2000).

As suggested previously, O'Donnell (1999) argued that the macro-narrative level is the most crucial, carrying substantive social and political values, promoting individualism, solidarity and co-operation and 'bestowing' moral protagonism. However, when examining discourses of disability this conclusion seems to be at odds with the individualistic discourses that soap operas carry, particularly those designating normality.

In practice, it is hard to separate the narrative levels so easily. As Barker's (1999) work demonstrates, much of viewers' 'soap talk' is concerned with moral protagonism, particularly at the level of (micro-narrative) relationships. In this project, for instance, the women suggested that moral stories involving disabled men often helped in re-asserting 'normal' masculinities. Although 'normality' seems to be the most crucial macro-narrative of the soap opera, particularly in discourses of disability, gender and sexuality, the data suggests that they are virtually invisible to the viewer, as few participants questioned the macro-narrative or its values.

Indeed, Darke (1999) suggests that impairment images are archetypal rather than stereotypical, and therefore less amenable to change. In other words, stereotypes can often be seen as such, so, given alternative representational strategies, they can be more easily challenged than archetypes which have a mythical, 'natural' status. As Darke has argued, disability and abnormality are usually viewed as axiomatic. Disability, or impairments, and normality (on soap opera terms) are rarely, if ever, seen together. This is demonstrated most explicitly in portrayals of impairment which are issue based, invariably returning the viewer to normality. In the absence of other depictions of impairment, it is understandable that viewers chose to discuss the more obvious disability meta-narratives, leaving micro- and macro-narratives discourses relatively unchallenged.

Narrative and self

For groups such as the women, the primary enjoyment to be gained from soap opera is normatively based, particularly as the soap opera, as a 'for-anyone -as-someone' (Scannell, 2000) structure, has the capacity to re-affirm more socially orientated, caring, aspects of the self. In other words, the for anyone as someone structure

is something that has universal appeal which people can recognise themselves in and empathise with others. It is thought to privilegethe connections between the 'theyself' and the 'myself' (Heidegger,1962). Indeed, such strong collective engagements with narratives founded upon 'werness' (Scannell, 2000,9) are indicative of the soap opera's reputation to link the 'general and the particular'. In turn, appealing to and re-creating the 'our world' (Scannell, 2000, 21-22) of normality relies upon the ongoing re-constitution (and ostensible negotiation) of morality based discourses.

In these instances the soap opera, as a 'for-anyone-as-someone' structure can be seen to connect 'the anonymous givenness of existence' with 'our personal experience of existence' (Scannell, 2000,12) in the negotiation of moral dialogues. Certainly, for the non-disabled women in this project, critical analysis of impairment representations were in keeping with the 'ownself' enabling articulations of (normal) collective selves and re-constitutive of an ethic of care.

However, for many other participants, opportunities for such negotiations of impairment and disability portrayals were rare, as these invariably static images of 'others'

discounted acknowledgement of an impaired or disabled 'ownself'. Unlike the comparatively common world that was created by other narratives, the viewers' interpretations of disability depictions unambiguously demonstrates that these images were not considered to be 'for me'.

Moreover, the 'dailiness' of viewing processes simultaneously naturalises impairment based representations and gendered articulations of being. So, presented as common sense, exploitative portrayals are rendered as forgettable 'seen but unnoticed' phenomena, resulting in the endless postponement of impairment and disability concerns as 'adventitious happenings' (Giddens, 1991, 128) detached from the ontological, if melodramatic, security, of the 'our world' of soap opera life.

Significantly where disabled people within discussion groups did engage with this spurious 'we world', it was either on the basis of heterosexual identifications with non-disabled characters or in strong counter-identification or disidentifications (McNay, 2000) towards images of impairment. Thus the 'ownself' of existence is implicitly positioned as non-disabled, a latent yet fundamental structuring feature of the soap opera which is borne out by

the more personal attachments expressed by the research participants. Thus, rather than being acknowledged as 'the normal condition of humanity' (Sutherland,1981) impairment is firmly pushed out into the margins, as abnormality, rather than an equal form of difference, as the more private engagements indicate. In particular, there was strong link between emotional or more intimate attachments to characters and more private anxieties of abnormality within the research data.

Impairment and disability images which were designated as good might be expected to speak more directly to the 'ownself' (Heidegger,1962) of disabled viewers as individuals who are 'someone'. This was clearly not the case, particularly as these representations were portrayed in such an individualistic, personalised, manner, even where discourses of disability (as social oppression) were conveyed. Instead, with few exceptions, emotional attachments to impairment images, on this more personal level, highlighted unambiguous fears of self-mismanagement and feelings of abnormality.

As such the emotional attachments are likely to remain at the level of 'tragic structure' (Ang,1997) quelling anger and stifling consciousness, which might otherwise emerge over a period of time (Crossley,1998, 23).

Whereas it is true that there are many voices speaking throughout the soap opera text as theorists such as Brunsdon (1997) suggest, the level of engagement with different characters demonstrates that these voices are far from equal. Disability issues, such as prejudice against people with HIV, are invariably tackled at the meta-narrative level, and seem to be superseded by attention given to the detail of the micronarratives and undermined by the macronarratives of normality, generating little interest for these viewers. Indeed, surveys have found that meta-narrative topics are often disregarded with viewers tending to disengage from 'the message' (Gavin, 2000). Rather than pleasure being afforded through identification with characters in similar social situations, the discussions of most of the disabled participants in this project indicate far greater identifications with non-disabled characters.

It seems that gaining pleasure from soap opera texts is incompatible with impairment and disability identifications. (Just as Mulvey's (1981) theorising of feminine viewing positions with central female protagonists implied a contradictory and impossible 'phantasy of masculinisation' for female viewers, images of disabled characters return

disabled viewers to an unachievable phantasy of (non-disabled) normalisation).

So, despite its ostensibly political character and the frequent use of impairment or illness related storylines, the genre seems to be almost exclusively at odds with an inclusive aesthetic. Indeed, I am arguing that its narrative structure and mode of communicative address (Scannell,2000) excludes disabled people, simultaneously constructing pathological depictions as 'common sense' images of impairment and disability. Far from opening new 'hermeneutic horizons' (Iwakuma,2002) for newly disabled people, these images are as likely to encourage a position emphasising 'adjustment to reality' (Barnes,1990), premised on naturalised non-disabled assumptions of the life-world and the subordinate roles of disabled people within it.

Nonetheless, despite any contradictory dispositions, engagements with soap operas seem to have played an unduly important role in the lives of most disabled people who participated in this project. Understandably, a preference for watching soap operas coupled with weak engagements and a corresponding lack of aesthetic distance (Bourdieu, 1984) was most notable amongst

those who spent disproportionately large amounts of time at home. Predominantly older disabled women, these participants tended to have fewer material and social resources to improve their access to alternative forms of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu,1984).

So, portrayals of impairment only seem to have had viewing value as a 'personal' resource for the participants, of this project, at best. That is, they seem to have a somewhat limited use as a personal identity resource to older disabled female viewers primarily in exploring issues of pain (Seiter,2000) and in providing information, seen in their preference for medically based dramas. As such, at best, soap operas appear to provide a form of 'personal capital'. However, these personal resources are used primarily to strengthen identifications with normality and to provide more private reassurances against worries of abnormality, rather than increasing social understanding. Although this may be a redeeming feature for many, providing 'relief' 'escape' and 'solace'(Seiter, 2000,192) in arduous times, the forms that such representations take are likely to contribute to 'devaluing and delegitimizing their already meagre forms of capital, putting further blocks on tradability, denying any conversion into symbolic capital' (Skeggs,1997, 11).

Overall, opportunities for such negotiations of impairment and disability portrayals were rare, as these invariably static images of 'others' discounted acknowledgement of an impaired or disabled 'ownself'. Unlike the comparatively common world that was created by other narratives, the viewers' interpretations demonstrate, unambiguously, that these images were not considered to be 'for me'.

It seems that the connections between the 'they world' and the 'own world' are severed in the case of impairment and disability, particularly for men (Wilde, 2004). It is this play between the anyone (they) and someone (me) which seems to lie at the heart of ambivalences structuring the soap opera's dilemmas, emphasising its use as a moral resource for renegotiations and articulations of the 'myself', particularly in positioning the viewer as a constituent part of 'us'. In contrast, non-disabled experience (ontology) is left as an unchallenged organising principle of the 'anonymous givenness of existence' (Scannell, 2000,16). As such there is no textual mediation between the 'they world' and personal experiences of existence of impairment in depictions of impairment and disability.

Due to this communicative structure, the soap opera effectively screens out and enfreaks many aspects of the 'ownself' which are experienced in terms of impairment, impairment effects or disability. Moreover, non-disabled viewers' viewing interpretations of the images suggest similar emotional dissonance. Anxiety and discomfort are reported as the feelings most closely associated with watching these portrayals. Generally, then, disability images are seen as an unwelcome departure from, and yet reconstitutive of, the life-world that is otherwise posited by the soap opera's form and content.

In more specific terms, any potential consciousness of disability is stifled and disabling practices are re-normalised, particularly by the narrative privileges inscribed within more hegemonic forms of 'non-disabled' masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, the depiction of impairments occurs on a disproportionately emotional plane, typically on the most melodramatic level of the meta-narrative. This exacerbates the individualist, pathological foci of impairment representations, whilst simultaneously obscuring the 'constitutive role' (Crossley, 1998, 17) that emotions and 'the private' play in social life and the 'rational subjective order' (Crossley, 1998, 19). And yet, as Tester (1998)

suggests, these images appear in 'an aesthetic milieu within which emotional issues are likely to be only contingently present', having the somewhat paradoxical effect of de-sensitising the audience to pain and suffering (1998,88)

The presence of disabled people within the soap opera are contingent upon discourses of normality which are presented as rational and natural. Disabled characters are invariably utilised as 'the message', as emotional ciphers who can be, and often are, dispensed with in comparative indifference or disdain, discouraging long term emotional attachments or identifications. This is not an equal 'contest of discourses'(Murdock,1999). Soap operas, do not have an 'anyone for someone' (Scannell,2000) structure, having disproportionate values 'for me and anyone'. Disabled people are positioned as the Other to someone and anyone who is conceptualised as a 'non-disabled model reader'. The disabled 'someone' is excluded.

Diversity, disunity and disability- ways forward?

Speaking of the increased diversity of soap opera populations since the 1980's Geraghty asserted that the emphasis is 'not so much with what holds a community

together but with what threatens to splinter or disrupt it' (1995,67). Here, disability has a leading role to play.

Ang and Stratton (1995) characterise a more radical approach as 'that which disturbs or disrupts the naturalised moral order on which the genre's realist claims are based'(1995,128). Such transgressions can be achieved more easily in more discontinuous media forms, such as photography and even cinema. Destabilising approaches are far less likely to work in the cyclical structure of soap opera, given the characteristic genre device of partial closure (Wilde 2004c).

Fundamentally, for soap opera, the question of progressive images seems to that of preserving a sense of unity without the construction and amplification of biosocial differences. If identifications with normality are to be sought, they could also be achieved on the basis of commonality rather than encouraging counter-identifications and difference which signifies abnormality. One of the easiest ways to achieve this is in the redistribution of moral protagonism and ever-shifting stereotypes through inclusion at all levels of narrative. Normality, whatever it is, may then take on the appearance of fluidity and choice, entertaining a dialogue

between similarity and difference rather than wrong and right.

In accordance with the imperatives of social realism and the satisfactions of viewer curiosity (Makas, 1993), the casting of a heterogeneous range of disabled performers and roles is a necessary step in the denaturalisation of current archetypes. To these ends, the model reader needs to be reconceptualised by producers and writers. Alongside greater inclusion of disabled people within the production process, changes in content are imperative, necessitating deliberate strategies to reconceptualise disabled people, normality, and ideas of the average viewer. In turn, qualitative changes in content are likely to increase audience 'reach', (Liddiment, 2004) pleasure, and cultural recognition, providing more encouragement to potential, disabled newcomers to the arts and media industries.

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