The Colonization of Prime Time
Soaps and the Question of Pleasure

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This thesis is presented
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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any University.

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Abstract

The Colonization of Prime Time: Soaps and the Question of Pleasure analyzes the conversations of adult and teenage fans of Australian, British and American soap operas in order to understand how fans may deal with ideological constructions within their fanship networks, particularly with dominant notions of femininity and the family. Like women’s domestic labor which is invisible in economic statistics, soap opera audiences have been similarly invisible or marginalized and stigmatized in dominant discourse by virtue of the fact that they watch soap operas. These fans, however, exist as part of a secondary oral culture which exists among women. Soaps texts are highly influenced by the oral characteristics of this culture. In addition to clarifying the oral characteristics of soaps, I have theorized that when feminine subjects, in this case soap opera fans, understand their subordinate position within a society and speak to each other with this type of knowledge, they are speaking what I have called feminine discourse.

The discursive position involved establishes boundaries for women’s oral culture and legitimizes the experience of women as soap fans. In the marginalized discourse of soap opera fanship, part of the pleasure which fans experience in watching and talking about soaps is the affirmation of their subjectivity, even though their position in society is subordinate. Another aspect of pleasure in soap opera fanship is the mutual strengthening which comes from the power of talk outside of the control of dominant discourses. In addition, gossip among women has the potential for keeping women from being politically
isolated, giving them space and time to talk with each other without the constraints imposed by dominant culture. While soaps knowledge marks the boundaries of this aspect of women’s culture, laughter and irony seem to place these women in some ways outside of dominant discourse. Although feminine soap opera audiences are structured by the producers as consumers in and for the home and the patriarchal family, in these interviews they negotiate spaces for their own critical interpretations of patriarchal conventions.

The private discourse of soap opera audienceness in which these viewers of soap operas engage is further negotiated in this work with the public discourses about soap opera audiences which struggle to contain the meanings of femaleness within patriarchal culture. What I call the ideology of dependence works discursively on multiple levels to assure that women and girls conform to dominant notions of feminity in order to live comfortably in a world that is full of contradictions for women. Multiple cultural discourses reinforce the expected codes of behavior, but particular sites provide spaces where discursive containment leaks through narrative seams. This happens in soap opera texts and soap opera fandom networks partially because of the impossibility of fully containing orality. This dissertation examines both public and private, academic and less formal, written and oral discourses for evidence of discursive ruptures where meaning evades containment.
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Introduction

Questioning the Politics of Pleasure and Power