32 *Il Globo*, 17 November 1986.

33 Franco Schiavoni, 'The Theatre of Nino Randazzo,' *Meanjin*, 42, No.1 (March 1983), p.111.

34 Cavarra, p.4.

35 Peter White, 'Italians want the saints to stop marching in,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 January 1986.

36 Schiavoni, p.113.

37 Schiavoni p.117.

38 Franco Schiavoni, 'Nino Randazzo's *Villagio Paradiso*,' *Meanjin*, 43, No.3 (October 1984), pp.416-17.

39 Schiavoni, 'The Theatre of Nino Randazzo,' p.110.

40 Rando, p.163 (Author's translation).

41 Rando, p.77.

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Watching the detectives: television melodrama and its genres

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MELODRAMA IS A GENERIC category which has been used in relation to certain television programmes. In previous discussions of film and television, melodrama has tended to be identified as in some sense a 'female' category. More specifically, discussions of melodrama have tended to be located in, and isolated to, a concern with the genre of the soap opera. I want to begin by problematising the assumptions which have linked together the genre of soap opera, the category of melodrama, the format of the serial, and women. There is no necessary link between these four, and in fact the category of melodrama stretches across the spectrum of television fiction programming including, amongst others, the series format and the so-called action-adventure genre. Melodrama, founded in the articulation of excess, can be manifested in different ways, and this article will suggest that there are two basic inflections present in television melodrama which reflect the socio-cultural positioning of 'female' and 'male' in modern bourgeois patriarchal society. Finally, some of the various ideological implications of the melodramatic structure will be examined, through the ways in which that structure has been mobilised in particular television fiction programmes.

Why precisely television commentators have focussed more on soap operas than on any other aspect of television fiction programming is hard to say.[1] One reason would seem to be associated with the feminist project of recuperation and legitimation of genres commonly regarded as of female interest, and soap operas have traditionally been considered as a genre viewed primarily by women. Cantor and Pingree, for example, the most recent writers on soap operas to use the classical American empiricist orientation in so-called 'mass communications' research, believe that

The soap opera, from its origin, has been and remains women's

> fiction. Of the various forms of fiction especially for women — such as Gothic and romance novels, including the popular Harlequin books, true confessions, photonovellas, magazine serials — the soap operas have had the largest continuing audience through time.[2]

Many recent studies of soap operas, like Modleski's, have accepted this perception of the audience for soap operas, and then evolved a theoretical formulation which attempts to explain why women in our society watch soap operas, and at the same time to use the theory to develop an analysis of soap-opera content. Modleski states her position like this: 'I propose not to ignore what is "feminine" about soap operas but to focus on it, to show how they provide a unique narrative pleasure which, while it has become thoroughly adapted to the rhythms of women's lives in the home, provides an alternative to the dominant "pleasures of the text" analyzed by Roland Barthes and others.'[3] In this way soap operas, and by implication women, are retrieved from patriarchal exile as superficial and unworthy of examination. Alternatively Allen argues that soap operas should not be considered as a specifically 'female' genre, though a large proportion of their viewers are women, but simply as a specific and — in terms of hours of television programming taken up and size of audience — very important television form.[4]

Feuer has taken a rather different tack. She asserts that the soap opera may be adequately described as melodrama,[5] moves on to examine recent discussions of film and melodrama, and concludes thus:

> A few currents run consistently through the shifting theoretical points just delineated. Melodrama seemed amenable to a variety of theoretical approaches because melodramas seemed to encourage different levels of reading to a greater extent than did other 'classical narrative' films. Traditionally male-oriented genres such as the western or the gangster film did not problematise the reader in the same way as melodrama.[6]

For Feuer, then, melodrama speaks to a specifically female audience. She goes on to argue that, because of the problematisation of the reader as a product of the offering of a number of different levels of reading, melodrama 'demands reader-response based modes of analysis such as psychoanalysis.'[7] In this manner Feuer moves away from the more positivist approach of Cantor and Pingree, and to a lesser extent of Modleski also, to produce an approach to the understanding of soap operas and their reception in terms of a more subtle formulation of the category of melodrama, and of the (female) individual as a

psychoanalytic construct. The assumption in Feuer's argument seems to be that 'excess,' which is her defining quality of melodrama, represents an attempt to specify and overdetermine the audience of melodrama as female in the context of a dominant patriarchal socio-cultural system: 'Central to all the theoretical positions I have just enumerated is the concept of melodrama as creating an *excess*, whether that excess be defined as a split between the level of narrative and that of *Mise-en-scène* or as a form of 'hysteria,' the visually articulated return of the ideologically repressed.'[8] 'Excess' is here the key term. Excess is considered by Feuer to be both a fundamental feature of melodrama and an effect understandable from within psychoanalytic theory. She goes on to argue that the form taken by melodramatic excess needs to be examined in the context of 'television of the seventies,'[9] and this entails her analysis of *Dallas* and *Dynasty* as examples of soap operas. Feuer seems to want to argue that the attempt at overdetermination of the female audience by way of excess generates melodrama as a more complex narrative form than male-oriented genres.

There are a number of problems with Feuer's argument, not least her unproblematised assertion that soap operas are melodramas, with her equally unproblematised implication that 'male' genres are not melodramas. Thorburn, for example, has a very different assumption about what constitutes television melodrama: 'In this category [of television melodrama] I include most made-for-television movies, the soap operas and all lawyers, cowboys, cops and docs, the fugitives and adventurers, the fraternal and filial comrades who have filled the prime hours of so many American nights for the last thirty years.'[10] Like Feuer, Thorburn spends little time discussing the nature of melodrama as a television form, and it could be possible that Thorburn and Feuer are operating with different definitions of what constitutes melodrama. It is significant however that both writers refer the reader to, admittedly different, works by Peter Brooks on melodrama as a nineteenth-century literary and dramatic form.[11]

The point of Feuer's application of the category of melodrama to soap opera would seem to be to enable certain theories, most particularly psychoanalysis, to be used to analyse what she calls prime-time soap operas such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. The problem here is one of definition. Cantor and Pingree, for example, as Feuer acknowledges, specifically exclude serials such as *Dallas* from their definition of soap opera:

> Evening or prime-time television dramas (serials and series) in the United States differ from soap opera in three ways. Their production (costs and control), the number of episodes produced,

and the content all distinguish teleplays from soap operas.[12]

Modleski, similarly, excludes these prime-time shows:

> A comparison with *Dallas*, the popular night-time serial, is instructive. There, the characters are highly glamorised, the difference between their world and that of the average viewer could not be greater, and the difference is continually emphasized. On soap operas, by contrast, glamour and wealth are played down.[13]

Modleski indeed states that one of the defining features of the soap-opera genre is its depiction of what she calls the 'average' in life. This is an important point because it forces us to pay more attention to precisely how excess might be usefully defined in relation, first of all to the category of melodrama, and secondly to the genre of the soap opera. Serials such as *Dallas*, as Feuer points out, objectify excess in a portrayal of the morally-loose very rich. Modleski however believes that such excess denies the possibility of identification on the part of the bulk of female viewers, an identification which she considers to be fundamental to the soap-opera genre.

Feuer includes serials like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* as soap operas even though, as she writes, 'Both [day time and prime-time serials] concentrate on the domestic sphere, although the prime-time serials also encompass the world of business and power (designed to appeal to the greater number of males in the evening viewing audience).'[14] Here Feuer's argument would seem to have shifted; melodrama is no longer limited to a female audience because of its quality of excess, but it can also be directed at a male audience through a shift in the narrative content. What then, we are forced to ask, distinguishes 'male-oriented genres such as the western or the gangster film' from female-oriented genres? The answer to this, for Feuer, would seem to be very little in terms of melodrama itself as defined by excess; but rather the orientation of the narrative content. We are returned to the definition of soap opera as serials primarily focussed on the domestic sphere. Feuer's formulation of excess as a specifically 'female' factor is thus fraught with problems. It may be more useful to see excess as an element of melodrama which may be articulated in two different ways: on the one hand as internalised, emotional excess; and on the other as externalised, visible and often action-based excess. In this way, through understanding melodrama as a dominant dramatic form in modern society, we can identify the two ideal-typical inflections of excess as socio-cultural products relating respectively to 'female' and 'male' positions within the social order.

The overwhelming critical association of soap opera as a genre

with women has tended to extend to a distinction between the serial form, which lacks absolute closure, and the series form, composed of episodes, in which (virtually) every episode ends in a formal clotural completion. An association has thus started to be made between serial form, melodrama and 'women's fiction'; the implied obverse being episodic form, realism and 'male fiction.'

Articulated as baldly as this it is clear that a distinction along these lines is not useful. If melodrama extends beyond 'women's fiction,' then equally realism — however we may want to define it — is not a prerogative of the series format. As Jordan has written in the context of *Coronation Street*:

> From a fusion of [Social Realism and soap-opera narrative requirements] there emerges a specific television form which one may think of as Soap-Opera Realism. ...other examples of the genre are to be seen in programmes like *The Liver Birds* (admittedly a series rather than a serial, and not classified by the programmers as drama), which share many of these conventions.[15]

More profoundly Peter Brooks, discussing the nature of melodrama in relation to nineteenth-century writing, suggests that 'We are near the beginning of a modern aesthetic in which Balzac and James will fully participate: the effort to make the "real" and the "ordinary" and the "private lives" interesting through heightened dramatic utterance and gesture that lays bare the true stakes.'[16] Brooks's argument harnesses together the realist concern with social form and the melodramatic concern with excess. The categories of realism and melodrama need each other, the one to provide the site of the 'interesting,' as Brooks, following Diderot, calls it; the other to articulate by way of excess the meaning which exists in that repression which lies at the heart of the 'interesting' and makes it significant. In this binary formulation we can appreciate how both melodrama and realism are historically-specific, modern genres. At this point we need to remember that both the ordinary and the excessive are manifested through the same conventions, and that these have the effect of naturalising the portrayal.

From this perspective the distinction between realist and melodramatic forms becomes itself a formal one; determined by some conventions but overdetermined by those others which allow all cultural products adhering to a specific mode of discourse to be experienced as 'realistic' from the point of view of the conventional audience relation to those products. Without pursuing this line of argument we can recognise that the naturalising movement of bourgeois fiction realises it as a combination of the ordinary and the excessive, the literal and the

articulation of the repressed. We need to recognise that *all* 'realistic' bourgeois fiction operates as a combination of the ordinary and the excessive, whilst in addition recognising that there is a specific genre form which has been designated as 'realism' because its attention to referential detail asserts the ordinary and, in the process, appears to deny the existence of the excessive.

Melodrama, then, has the quality of the realistic in that it is naturalised by the audience. In terms of audience experience we cannot oppose the realism of the ordinary with the melodrama of the excessive because both genre forms are experienced as 'realistic.' The formal classifications of realism and melodrama represent two ends of a single experiential continuum. As a consequence melodrama, like realism, has no inevitable political effect on the audience. Elsaesser has perceptively noted that: 'melodrama would appear to function either subversively or as escapism — categories which are always relative to the given historical and social context.'[17] More generally speaking it is not the articulation of excess *per se* which makes melodrama a distinctively 'female' form, rather certain modes of constructing excess may relate more closely than others to the 'female' experience in our society.

Modleski's argument about the female quality of soap operas, as I have already implied, is not associated with any notion of melodrama or excess, rather it is primarily an argument about identification and the satisfaction of needs. It is in this context that Modleski posits that the most important feature of the soap opera is its focus on the average family: 'The family is, for many women, their only support, and soap operas offer the assurance of its immortality. They present the viewer with a picture of a family which, though breaking down, stays together no matter how intolerable the situation may get.'[18] Modleski is right to focus on the averageness of the family in the day-time soap opera, but she does so at the expense of the excess which Feuer finds in both those day-time and prime-time serials which she classifies as soap opera. In the core soap opera, the day-time programme, the excess exists, but it is internalised within the families involved. The averageness disguises the excess which is located at the heart of the family. Excess here is principally expressed through dialogue and emotion. In the shift to those prime-time serials which Feuer designates as soap operas the excess becomes more externalised. It is present, as Feuer notes, in the very portrayal of extremely wealthy families, it is also more narratively present in plots of action and change.

'Female' melodrama, reflecting women's position in our society, tends towards internalisation, whilst 'male' melodrama, reflecting the dominant, active position of males in our society, tends towards

externalisation. If we understand melodrama in this way we can move towards a definition of soap opera which links together the melodramatic category of excess with a particular articulation of that excess. In addition it would be possible to specify the genre further by defining it in terms of a specific orientation of content; the domestic sphere. Finally it could be argued that the serial format is necessary to the definition of the true soap opera, however we are now in a position to recognise that 'female' melodrama can be produced in other formats such as the series, just as 'male' melodrama can be produced in the serial format.

A good example of a series which clearly articulates the distinction between the two melodramatic inflections, possibly because it may have been deliberately aimed to straddle an implicit market divide, is *Scarecrow and Mrs King*. In this series Mrs King is an 'average' — that is to say in television terms middle-class — housewife with a small child, except that she is, one is led to believe, divorced. She works at home as a typist for a top-secret American counter-espionage agency. In each episode she somehow gets involved in an operation run by the agency. She then spends the episode leading a double life, on the one hand helping the agency, on the other attempting to lead an 'average' life and stopping her family and friends, in particular her mother, finding out about her secret life.[19] This series appears to have few of the characteristics of a soap opera primarily because it has an episodically-structured format of narrative action. However it does have one fundamental soap-opera requirement; the focus of interest is the female and her family, and indeed, the mother's concern that the family should not be disturbed. It also has an underlying romantic involvement in the ambiguous relationship of Mrs King and Scarecrow. The dominant site of the excess, however, is external and is to be found in the spies who in one way or another form a threat to the family and, of course, by analogy and sometimes literally, to the (American) society of which the family is an iconic and metonymic formulation. Whilst Mrs King and her family form the narrative site of the series, the site of excess is constructed outside of the family. We should not, then, talk of the serial *per se* as being a female form — or, equally, the series *per se* as a male form — as is implied in the distinction between soap operas and westerns and the like. Rather we need to ask whether the serial format is better suited to the specific requirements of 'female' melodrama in our society and, similarly, whether the series is a format better suited to 'male' melodrama.

The soap opera, then, may well have as aspects of its definition both the serial form and the melodramatic quality of excess, but we should not see these aspects as limited in any way only to this genre. As

we shall see, the so-called 'male' genres also mobilise the melodramatic quality of excess. In addition, we must distinguish clearly between the range of televisual programme forms, such as the serial and the series, and the contents which may be placed in those forms. It may be the case, as many writers have argued, [20] that one of the defining qualities of soap operas is precisely the lack or impossibility of closure which is associated with the 'limitless' quality of the serial; however we need to ask whether it is possible for other genres which use the serial form to be constructed with a similar narrative openness.

First we need to clarify what precisely we mean by openness. Ellis, following Williams's description of broadcast television as 'flowing,'[21] has argued that this flow needs to be understood in terms of a breakdown into segments:

> The segment as the basic unit according to a short burst of attention is matched by the serial and series form. These provide a particular kind of repetition and novelty that differs markedly from that found in the narrational patterns of classic cinema.[22]

Ellis goes on to state that 'The series and serial both provide a means of generating any segments from basic narrative and expository techniques, and from basic thematic material.'[23] It may well be the case, as the writers on soap operas argue, that in that particular genre its use of the serial form is marked, not only by a lack of closure of each segment or episode, but by a specific and often contextual *resistance* to closure. Modleski declares categorically that: 'It is not only that successful soap operas do not end, it is also that they cannot end.' She argues that this is because of structural reasons embedded in a conflict between the demands of melodrama and the demands of the genre:

> ...I believe that it would have been impossible [Modleski is referring to the finishing of a specific soap opera] to resolve the contradiction between the imperatives of melodrama — the good must be rewarded and the wicked punished — and the latent message of soap operas — everyone cannot be happy at the same time, no matter how deserving they are.[24]

Translated into the lived awareness of the audience, this means that if a person who is knowledgeable in the conventions of soap opera sees a classical narrative closure such as a marriage s/he 'knows' (even if s/he does not know why) that, inasmuch as there will be another segment/episode, the marriage is doomed by the overdetermining openness of the text. However, the episodes of series are also marked by a form of openness.

In a series, whether it be a situation comedy or a detective series,

certain forms of closure are absolutely forbidden by the overdetermining conventions. For example no main character is allowed to be killed if s/he is to appear in a subsequent episode and, in the conventional series, the same main characters always do reappear. The closure articulated in the episode of a series is, conventionally, a narrative closure which ends the melodramatic power of excess. It is in this sense that such a closure provides a resolution. Accepting Modleski's argument but reconstituting her terms, we can say that the impossibility of closure in soap operas is a function of the internalisation of excess. Excess thus becomes not an alien threat to the 'ordinary' average family, as in *Scarecrow and Mrs King*, but rather an integral part of that family. In this case a resistance to closure is something rather different than the simple lack of closure offered by the serial format, and one can conceive of episodic series in which narrative resolution becomes impossible because excess is articulated as immanent to the community out of which any narrative is generated, as a consequence keeping narrative and community combined.

Put simply, we can say that programmes using the serial form can mobilise certain forms of narrative closure just as it is possible for programmes using the episodic series form to refuse narrative conventions of closure, thus generating ambiguity, or 'leaving the story hanging.' In fact, such avant-garde practices have been uncommon, though some series, like *The Prisoner*, have moved in this direction by leaving a certain degree of narrative openness. Such series may be acknowledged as moving away from melodrama in its formulation in the episodic series where excess is both embodied and limited in the episodic narrative. This point should become clearer when I discuss the nature of the backgrounded community in the series and its relationship to the melodramatic narrative.

In arguing for the distinctiveness of soap opera as a women's genre, Modleski emphasises the importance of openness.[25] 'Male' narrative texts, she declares, are those which move by way of action towards an inevitable closure, in the process evidencing a telos which the reader accepts as an articulation of the power of the male in patriarchal society. By way of contrast the openness of the serial soap opera speaks to a very different context. To quote Allen's summation of Modleski's argument: 'Although denied ultimate knowledge which comes with resolution, the mother/reader is endowed with greater knowledge at any given moment than any of her 'children' in the soap opera world.'[26] Modleski equates the openness of the text with the powerlessness, constituted here in terms of relative lack of knowledge, of the female audience. It is particularly important, in relation to Modleski's

argument, to note the conflation of narrative form and generic content. In addition to openness the soap opera/serial is here, as in other arguments, constituted in dialogue as opposed to action, and in the family as opposed to the individual. One would be justified in asking if it is not possible to have a serial based in the 'male' paradigm of action, and if so what effect this might have on the positioning of the reader in relation to the text. In fact, as Feuer indicates, there has been a striking development in just this direction. Serials such as *Falcon Crest* and *Dallas*, whilst retaining the family motif which dominates the soap opera, operate more as a vehicle for action than dialogue. Indeed more recent serials, such as *Hotel*, have even started to move away from the family motif, experimenting with other ways of locating and patterning multiple characters. Such a movement away from the family as the site giving structure to the soap opera/serial may well be related to the movement from the internalised excess of dialogue and emotion to the externalised excess of action.

At this point we need to go back to Peter Brooks's study of melodrama. In his discussion of Balzac's novel *La Peau de Chagrin* he writes:

> Use of the word *drama* is authorized here precisely by the kind of pressure which the narrator has exerted on the surface of things. We have in fact been witnesses to the creation of drama — an exciting, excessive, parabolic story — from the banal stuff of reality. States of being beyond the immediate context of the narrative, and in excess of it, have been brought to bear on it, to charge it with intenser significances.[27]

I have earlier remarked, following Brooks, that melodrama requires a conception of realism located in an image of life as 'ordinary' and 'interesting'. In the episodic series the narrative of the plot defines the Other of both the characters and the viewers as the 'ordinary' everyday life which exists outside of the plot. In this way the episodic series is an inversion of 'life.'

The narrative plot of the series episode builds out of the 'everyday life' of a policeman or woman, a detective, a group of freedom fighters in space or such like. In any episode two entries are effected by the viewer. The first is into the Other world of the fiction of that particular series. The second is into the Other world, constituted within the episode itself, of the narrative. The first entry is into a world of stability, order, community, stasis and the 'ordinary.' The second is into a narrative of disorder, development, individuality and excess. By way of this double entry the viewer is given markers which distinguish an

implied 'everyday' life of the main characters from the life which they lead within the narrative itself.

Allen has described the soap opera community thus:

> The soap opera community is a self-perpetuating, self-preserving system little affected by the turbulence experienced by its individual members or the fate of any one character. The naive viewer might attend only to the constant state of crisis experienced by individual characters, but the experienced viewer is watchful for the paradigmatic strands that bind the community of characters together and the sometimes glacially slow but far more significant alterations in this network.[28]

One aspect of the true serial form, including soap opera, is the immersion of the narrative-carrying characters within the community of the programme; ideal-typically they *are* the community. Such an immersion parallels the immersion of excess in the form of emotion within the family. If the conventionally-constructed narrative moves from order to disorder and back again[29] then one must be able to measure the disorder of the narrated plot against an understanding of what constitutes order. This, in fact, is one of the tensions linking realism with melodrama. It is this problem which lies at the heart of Allen's discussion of community in soap operas. The double narrative of the serial revolves around overt narrational production of rapid, and often apparently fundamental change, placed in the context of a real fundamental continuity of characters and of moral premises. The further one moves from the way the serial form is conventionally used the more divided these two narrative forms and their corresponding images become.

The community in a series remains fundamentally static. Each episode of a series is defined in relation to an ordinary life the signs of which provide a continuity for the series. Fiske and Hartley have described the opening credits of the episodes of series — they were specifically discussing *The Sweeney* — as being anamnesic:

> ...the opening credits are not only a boundary ritual they are also 'anamnesic' — they perform the function of 'bringing to mind' what the audience already knows about *The Sweeney* in particular, and the paradigm of the police series in general. In fact a boundary ritual must not be thought of as separating discrete programmes so much as connecting them.[31]

In addition, between the credits and the plot, a further establishing scene is conventionally constituted which divides the plot from the

'everyday life' constituted by the series. For example the detective goes to meet a new client or, in a situation comedy, an unexpected visitor comes to stay. Hence, in the same way that the series operates with two clearly-distinguished time systems, so entry into the episode is a double process which, in turn, replicates the shift from the 'ordinary' to the excessive, from realism to melodrama.

Earlier I suggested, following Brooks's line of argument, that as genres realism and melodrama, in their guises as the ordinary and excess, were two sides of the same coin. Brooks argues that melodrama is a historically specific genre (as, of course, is realism).[31] He traces the development of the genre to late eighteenth-century revolutionary France and writes that:

> Melodrama does not simply represent a 'fall' from tragedy, but a response to the loss of the tragic vision. It comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political concern.[32]

The implication of this position, which Brooks himself slides away from, is that in its own time the melodramatic vision occupies just as important a position as a fictional genre as the tragic vision did in an earlier period. Brooks's book is concerned with a specific relationship; the development in France of a theatre of melodrama around the revolutionary period and the impact of melodramatic concerns on Balzac and, later, James — writers whose works are usually examined for their realist qualities. However we can generalise his argument and suggest that the gradual loss of a moral and ethical ontology, which corresponds with the loss of a Christian telos and materially relates to the rise and establishment of the bourgeoisie, is synchronous with the gradual replacement of tragic elements which rely on the belief in a teleological ontology by melodramatic elements which attempt to reconstitute such an ontology as a function of human society as embodied in the state. Melodrama, and realism, need to be recognised as specifically bourgeois genres.

To say that the fundamental feature of melodrama is excess is to recognise the significance of overdetermination as a constituting element of the form. Melodrama is constituted in excess because excess is the realisation, the articulation of the ongoing attempt to instantiate the humanly-constituted state with transcendental values. From this point of view the melodramatic excessiveness of television serials and series may be understood as a strategy to overdetermine the programme-as-sign in

order to constitute and legitimate the programme as meaningful in a lived world which is no longer based on ontologically fixed values. The definition which we give to excess must thus be a structural one. Excess is not constituted in either dialogue nor action as such, but in a narrative project which generates plot as 'extraordinary' to the 'ordinary' life out of which the plot develops. Windschuttle, in comparing the soap-opera serial with what he calls the 'social explorer' series in which, as he puts it, 'one, occasionally two, central characters ... in each episode go out into society to investigate and solve problems' suggests that, in the social explorer series

> We are led to see major disasters and conflicts all around us but to seek outside help to rescue us. Thus we are presented with a world in which social collapse is always pending but which is prevented by super-brave and super-talented authority figures who are specially set apart by society for this purpose.[33]

Certainly this would seem to be the formal narrative formulation which predominates in the modern 'action' television series. All series types, however, not just the 'social explorer' type, such as situation comedies (*Rhoda*, *Benson*, *Robin's Nest*) and light romance (*Love Boat*), operating with very different formal generic formulations and narrative themes, mobilise the same structural tension between local disorder and general order. All of them develop plots which can be defined as excessive because they not only disrupt the harmonious patterning of 'ordinary' life, but do so in ways which threaten to spill over from the situations themselves to produce a more general disorder within the backgrounded world of 'ordinary' life.[34]

In melodrama the ordinary (realist) world of everyday life, no matter how it is constituted, presents a moral universe which is threatened with a general disruption. Another way of expressing this, in the context of what I have argued above about time systems, is to say that in the melodramatic series the developmental time system of the narrative plot threatens to overwhelm the underpinning time system of stasis on which the series format is based. Conversely, in the melodramatic serial where the acceptance of ongoing narrative development is coupled with a lack of final closure, the image of a static moral universe of 'ordinary' life is much less clearly defined and the threat to it more amorphous, because it is precisely the permanent characters who constitute the basis of the serial who also appear to present a threat to the world of the serial. From this perspective the viewer is drawn into a greater complicity with the serial where s/he is required to bring to bear a greater implicit knowledge of a moral universe — usually, for ease of understanding, one in which the co-

ordinates are isomorphic between that of the serial and of the culture which produced the serial. As a consequence of this isomorphism melodrama tends to replicate the dominant, naturalised bourgeois values. By contrast, in the episode of a series the very force of the telos generated through narrative excess makes more overt, and therefore potentially open to question, the values of the threatened backgrounded community.

In both serials and series the image constituted in the underlying slow-moving or static time system is of a fundamentally stable moral universe. This is most obvious in the underlying stasis of the series. Brooks has argued that: 'We may legitimately claim that melodrama becomes the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era.'[35] In the series the image of a static moral universe provides the basis for the assumption that the moral universe embodies absolute values. The striving of good and evil, order and disorder, which forms the basis of the narrative pattern of the episodic series is articulated as excessive precisely as a part of an ongoing attempt to deny the fundamental relativity of these terms in a world which has lost belief in an ontological telos and the transcendental values associated with such a telos. The representation of 'ordinary' life in the backgrounded community as being static enables that world to be invested with stable, and by implication, apparently absolute moral values. It is within this seeming absoluteness that the narrative of disorder, and potentially absolute disruption, takes place. It is therefore no wonder that the majority of series operate with an image of the underlying moral universe as positive and 'good.' No wonder also that so many series revolve around police personnel, private detectives and the like, who more or less, depending on the particular inflection, embody the protection of the values of the community which, in turn, asserts itself as an image of a 'given' social order as acknowledged in the articulation of the state. Nevertheless what exactly is constituted within the image, that is to say what the values of the community actually are, can vary enormously in spite of the illusion of absolute moral stability which the viewer, relating to the structure and the effects of the narrative telos, carries over intertextually from one series to another (or, indeed, from one episode to another).

Whilst the structural formulation remains the same, particular topoi may take on distinctly different inflections in different series. We can, for example, trace a change in attitude towards the Vietnam War between *Magnum P.I.* and *The A-Team*. In the former, and earlier, series the war is downplayed. It is an image related to disruption in its own right — it is, after all, the precipitant cause, the viewer presumes,of the

relocation of Magnum and his two friends from mainland America to the 'exotic' (and in itself therefore excessive) location of Hawaii. The war is legitimated in so far as it gave Magnum the abilities which he uses to protect the property he is employed to guard and to go about his work as a private investigator. It is nevertheless portrayed as having been a traumatic experience. In *The A-Team* the war, again, provided the training for the major protagonists. However in this series 'Hannibal' Smith and his team have been forced to escape from army custody after being wrongfully convicted of an unspecified crime, as we are told every week in a scene-setting voice-over. For those old enough to remember, the unspecified crime suggests My Lai; more generally it connotes the American trauma over the legitimacy of the Vietnam War.[36] Here the war is reinstated as legitimate; the conviction is portrayed as wrongful and it is the people, embodied in the government, who have been mistaken. The A-Team are thus constructed as outsiders to the community who, with the skills they learnt in Vietnam, wage war once again, this time on American soil; and in a celebration of the relationship between war and capitalism, as contract labour, as vigilantes outside the (mistaken) law. (If, though, they consider the task they are asked to do worthwhile enough, they are prepared to waive their fee.) The A-Team see their job as protecting individuals and small groups of individuals from enemies whom the community at large will not accept exist. Hence the cautious instatement of the Vietnam War as a problematic, but in the long run positive, event in *Magnum P.I.* becomes, in *The A-Team*, a celebration of the war and a critique of a liberal establishment which questioned its morality.

Fiske and Hartley argue cogently that the detective series *A Man Called Ironside* 'is a conscious enactment of the values of an ordered, stable, liberal-conservative society.'[37] Conscious or not, *A Man Called Ironside* and other early 1970s series such as *Harry O*, *Quincy* and *Lou Grant* were all liberal in their connotations, emphasising social problems and providing community-based, left-of-centre solutions. In *Quincy*, for example, Quincy is a benign state-employed medical examiner who spends much of his time fighting such problems as pollution. The trajectory from these series to those of the early 1980s such *Knight Rider* and *The A-Team* represents a movement from the pluralist 'acceptable' left of the political spectrum to the right. In these shows the power of the state appears unable to protect the community. Instead, benevolent corporations (as in *Knight Rider*), or freelance ex-army personnel (as in *The A-Team*), operate as legitimated vigilantes. In these 1980s series crime is not a social-based problem but an individual problem, a product of individual motivation to be dealt with by force rather than by reason. Nevertheless all these melodramatic series operate within the

same structural parameters, those which I have outlined above.

It is a function of the melodramatic structure that it can provide an ideological relocation for events in the articulation as absolute of distinct moral positions. In this way melodrama, as a structural effect of excess, is able to endow various political positions with the appearance of absolute validity. Melodrama, then, is not the property of specific genres, such as the soap opera, nor of specific formats such as the serial. Nor is melodrama as such more meaningful to either women or men. Melodrama is the product of a specific socio-cultural moment in which, in a society lacking transcendental values, the strategy of excess operates to assert — and naturalise — certain values by placing them under threat.

NOTES

1 Among recent works concerned with soap opera are Robert Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1985); Muriel Cantor and Suzanne Pingree, *The Soap Opera* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983); Richard Dyer et al., *Coronation Street* (London: BFI, 1981); Jane Feuer, 'Melodrama, Serial Form and Television Today,' *Screen*, 25, No. 1 (1984), pp. 4–16; Lesley Stern, 'The Australian Cereal: Home Grown Television,' in *Nellie Melba, Ginger Meggs and Friends*, eds. Susan Dermody, John Docker and Drusilla Modjeska (Malmsbury: Kibble, 1982); Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (Connecticut: Archon, 1982).

2 Cantor and Pingree, p. 28.

3 Modleski, p. 87.

4 Allen, Chapter 6.

5 Feuer, p. 4.

6 Feuer, p. 7.

7 Feuer, p. 8.

8 Feuer, p. 8.

9 Feuer, p. 8.

10 David Thorburn, 'Television Melodrama,' in Richard Adler, *Understanding Television: Essays on Television as a Social and Cultural Force* (New York: Praeger, 1981), p. 76.

11 Thorburn refers to Brooks's article 'The Melodramatic Imagination' in *Romanticism: Vistas, Instances, Continuities*, eds. David Thorburn and Geoffrey Hartman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973). Feuer refers to the book which contains a revised version of the article; Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

12 Cantor and Pingree, p. 26.

13 Modleski, p. 99.

14 Feuer, p. 4.

15 Marion Jordan, 'Realism and Convention,' in Dyer et al., pp. 28–29.

16 Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 14.

17 Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on Family Melodrama,' *Monogram*, 4 (1973), p. 4.

18 Modleski, p. 90.

19 The double life is a characteristic narrative device to articulate the tension between the 'ordinary' and the 'excessive.' The most well-known example is the Clark Kent/ Superman double; but, as would be expected given my previous argument, it is a pervasive formulation in modern society.

20 See e.g. Christine Geraghty, 'The Continuous Serial — A Definition,' in Dyer et al., pp. 9–26.

21 Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974), p. 93.

22 John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 116.

23 Ellis, p. 123.

24 Modleski, p. 90.

25 Modleski, p. 90.

26 Allen, p. 92.

27 Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 2.

28 Allen, p. 70.

29 Tzvetan Todorov, 'Structural Analysis of Narrative,' *Novel*, 3, No. 1 (1969), p. 75 discusses the 'minimal complete plot' in terms of a movement between two moments of equilibrium separated by a moment of imbalance. I am reinterpreting this idea here.

30 John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (London: Methuen, 1978), pp. 168–169.

31 See for example Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957).

32 Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 15.

33 Keith Windschuttle, *The Media* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1984), p. 188.

34 Had I more space it would be possible to explore the implications of this

argument for the genre of realism.

35 Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 15.

36 In fact we discover in one episode that the 'unknown' crime consisted in attempting to rob the bank of Hanoi.

37 Fiske and Hartley, p. 171.