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one sees every day, and whose lives one wonders about in passing. Accordingly, the Golden Rule of soap opera is that the actors must remain the same; should they go on vacation, the plot must eliminate them for a few weeks because it is imperative that the faces of these faceless people be reassuringly familiar. Continuity—the rhythm of recurrence—is so essential that on Fridays, when that rhythm is about to be interrupted by the weekend break, there must be a crescendo, an especially climactic episode. That way our attention is held over until Monday. And Mondays are usually low-pressure days when minor characters have their squabbles or Friday’s events are rehashed.

Certain formulae are observed in all soap operas:

1) The scene is always a small town named Genoa City or Somerset or Henderson—a nice, neighborly, suburban idyllic town that is near (but not too near!) a Big City, usually Chicago, that heartbeat of the nation, or perhaps Detroit. Occasionally new characters (neurosurgeons overcome by remorse because they have accidentally killed their sweethearts on the operating table, amnesiac psychiatrists or runaway fathers) come to our small town from the Big City, and occasionally women, contemplating an affair with The Man from the Past, go there and are seen in some sort of Palm Court restaurant nibbling escargots and sipping martinis with the Other Man against a background of gypsy music and soft lights. Eastern cities like New York and Boston are looked upon with a mixture of distrust and awe: when the Mercers move from Boston to Somerset, everyone assumes that they must be snobs; on the other hand, when Stan Kurtz, chief of staff at Somerset Hospital, learns of Jerry Kane’s secret past
(he was a “brilliant” open-heart surgeon at “Manhattan general”), Stan wants to hire Jerry on the spot.

The beautiful irony is that although the City, with its poverty, pollution and crime, is far away, all the young men in “Somerset” and “The Young and the Restless” look like up-and-coming Madison Avenue execs, while all the homey housewives or young working girls have been carefully dressed by Dior or Halston and coiffed by Elizabeth Arden. They sport the latest fashions (although nothing “way out” is permitted) and talk the New Small Talk: currently, “I can handle it, buddy,” “Let it be,” “No way!,” “That blows my mind,” “She’s something else.” Moreover, these idyllic little towns like Somerset miraculously have cocktail lounges and restaurants with names like The Hayloft or Pierre’s, whose décor is transplanted straight from Manhattan’s East 50s. The atmosphere is quiet and refined, the waiters have French accents, the dry martinis are very dry. How marvelous life in Anytown, USA can be!

2) All the characters have neutral WASP names like Eve Lawrence, Scott McKenzie, Jill Foster, Stuart Brooks or Greg Mercer. For a long time this naming process puzzled me. Why no Italians, Irish, Greek, Poles, Jews or blacks on daytime serials? But then I remembered that this is a fantasy world. The viewer must identify with the problems a given character faces, but never quite with the character. Besides, specificity leads to nasty implications. Suppose that the rich and alcoholic Mrs. Chancellor of “The Young and the Restless” were named Mrs. O’Reilly? This could be taken as a slur on the Irish. Or suppose the owner of Paisley’s department store in Somerset, an elegant fellow with rather “loose”
morals, were named not Ned Paisley but, say, Ned Pappadapoulos? Wouldn’t the implication be that Greeks are rich and immortal to boot?

3) The professional status of soap opera people is particularly interesting. Roughly 80 percent of the men are doctors. The rest are newspaper editors, lawyers or proprietors of shops, restaurants and factories. The script writers believe that the female viewing audience is familiar with very few professions. Everyone has been to a doctor; we all read some newspaper, patronize stores and have a vague idea of what happens when a criminal is tied in court. Architects, engineers, physicists, stockbrokers—these figures are too remote, whereas auto mechanics, short-order cooks, bricklayers—such working-class types are, on the contrary, too familiar and “low.” So the doctor, preferably a brain surgeon, psychiatrist or cardiologist, reigns supreme. This fantasy figure spends most of his time in the hospital coffee shop having intense conversations about romance (his or someone else’s). Young, handsome, always being paged but never in a hurry, the soap opera doctor is indeed a dream figure. In between coffee breaks, he occasionally performs open-heart surgery in miraculously well-equipped operating rooms, even if, like “Somerset’s” Jerry Kane, he hasn’t been inside a hospital for months. TV physicians can treat anyone for anything. Someone’s girlfriend goes into labor, a relative has a nervous breakdown, a friend takes an overdose—never mind what the problem is, Snapper Foster (an intern at Genoa City Hospital in “The Young and the Restless”) is right on the spot, taking her pulse, examining her chart, or, if necessary, even operating on her! I use the female pronoun here advisedly: the patient is invariably a woman.
In the newspaper office, things are again reassuringly familiar. The only stories ever “covered” by the Register or Stuart Brooks’ paper are stories that happen to the characters we know: Heather’s wedding, the death-threat notes she receives, Leslie’s concert tour and so on. Factory owners wear elegant suits and look appropriately worn out and preoccupied when they come home at night. Lawyers like Greg Foster invariably fall in love with female victims of injustice like the call girl Gwen, whom Greg rehabilitates (she has just entered the convent!) and almost marries—almost, because he can’t quite bring himself to marry a girl with Gwen’s “past.”

The rare artists who appear on the soaps—like Maestro Fausch on “The Young and the Restless”—must have foreign accents and genteel manners. All musicians are, of course, from the Old World; they address the aspiring young concert pianist as “Lesslee, mein Liebchen. . . .” The art world is gemütlich: the maestro spends most of his time flying in ages, to be the guest artist with “the orchestra.”

4) From a sociological perspective, the women’s professions are even more interesting because lately, soap opera heroines often have jobs! What a change from the old radio days when Ma Perkins watched over her brood or Our Gal Sunday presided over Lord Henry Brinthrop’s British manor-house. In “Somerset” we have a woman newspaper publisher (Kate Cannell), a fashion-layout artist (Eve Lawrence), a secretary (Jill Grant), a psychiatrist (Dr. Terry Martin, married to Dr. Stan Kurtz) and a nurse (Heather Lawrence, newly married to Dr. Jerry Kane). In “The Young and the Restless,” Laurie Brooks is a
sometime writer of racy novels and a centerfold girl, her sister Leslie an aspiring concert pianist and owner of a café; sister Chris is on the staff of Legal Aid and works with poor people, and the youngest, Peg, is a student at “The University.”

It all sounds very liberated until we realize that all the women have jobs that entail no training and no work and whose real aim is to meet handsome, eligible men. Thus Ellen Grant (“Somerset”), a housewife recently widowed and attractively fortyish, who has presumably never worked a day in her life, suddenly decides to “get a job.” We next see her at Somerset Hospital (where else?), helping a cute boy named Skipper McKenzie, who has congenital heart disease, “adjust” to the sad fact that he can’t play ball. And guess what? Skipper, who is a perfect love and adores “Aunt Ellen,” turns out to have a father named Scott, a handsome widower and sports coach at “The University.” Next thing you know, Scott is picking up Ellen to take her to a cocktail party and it looks like quite a romance until Ellen’s daughter Jill, also newly widowed, becomes Scott’s secretary and, what with one thing and another (all those night basketball games they must both attend!), Scott and Jill fall in love. Ellen and Jill’s warm mother-daughter relationship becomes strained and tense until Ellen persuades Jill that they both find Scott attractive simply because he reminds them of Dad. This supposition is entirely plausible since all the men in Somerset are more or less interchangeable. In any case, after this shock of recognition, both Ellen and Jill get over Scott.

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That is what working means in the fantasy world of the Soaps. When cub reported Carrie Wheeler, a bright young thing from “The College” joins the Register, she gets the evil eye from Greg Mercer who works at the next typewriter. Carrie pretends she loathes Greg but we know better. One day, Carrie breaks down and weeps. Greg, who has been impervious to Carrie’s journalistic skills, is charmed by her feminine weakness and, before you know it, he’s invited her to The Hayloft for drinks. It’s a lovely world after all.

6) In recent daytime serials, premarital or extramarital sex is permitted but only when the woman is, in fact, looking for a Permanent Relationship. Thus Heather lives “up at Jerry’s place” during their courtship, but of course she knows all along that when Jerry’s secret identity is finally revealed, she’ll become “Mrs.
Jerry Kane.” Her widowed mother Eve is more sophisticated; she has a “relationship” with Ned Paisley and he’s getting close to proposing, but Eve really wants to get Julian away from Kate and marry him so she plays it cool. *Marriage* is always the object.

Unless, of course, a woman is *already* married. Then there are other problems. In “The Young and the Restless,” Jen Brooks has been a wonderful mother to her four daughters and a perfect wife to Stuart (who “lives for the newspaper”), but now that the girls are grown up and “on their own,” she is restless. We see her putting away the Christmas ornaments and wondering what to do with her life now. Stuart and the girls suggest a vacation. Someone even suggests a volunteer job. But Jen knows what she wants. It’s Bruce Henderson, Stuart’s best friend, a cardiologist (based in Chicago, of course!), whom Jen loved some 30 years ago before she married Stuart. And so Jen and Bruce get together for an idyllic weekend in Key Biscayne. They dance on a moonlit terrace and he whispers in her ear: “Jen, we’ve brought up our families. Now we owe it to ourselves to have a little.” Jen smiles in wan but happy acquiescence. Bruce adds in what is one of my favorite TV lines: “I could practice cardiology in Key Biscayne.” Jen smiles again and they kiss. But then, back home in Genoa City, poor old Stuart, who has been realizing that he has “neglected Jen for the paper,” has a heart attack. It’s just a lucky break that his son-in-law Brad Elliot, who works for him, is really an ex-neurosurgeon in disguise because of course Brad saves his life. And now Jen must decide between duty and love. Stuart, who has *no idea* she had planned to divorce him and marry Bruce, asks to have his best friend at his bedside.
What will Jen do? What shall we ever do? At this writing I don’t yet know the outcome. It all boils down to a simple principle: a woman’s role in life is to attract *her man and get him*. But the obstacles in her path are formidable, for who can control disease, sudden death or just plain circumstance? And these conflicts continue to disarm us because, in contrast to the Loud story, everything “real” is kept at bay. Telephones never ring unless a love or confidante is calling; milkmen, laundrymen and exterminators never intrude into the immaculate living rooms of the Brookses or Grants or Chancellors—living rooms that consist of nothing but stuffed sofas and lamp tables. There are never any bills to pay or groceries to be bought; money, for that matter, is virtually an unmentionable although some characters are “rich” like the Chancellors and others “poor” like the fatherless Fosters. In Somerset and Genoa City, no one ever has to go to the cleaners or have their car inspected or take out the trash. There is only one fact of life—*romance*—eternally exciting and eternally thwarted. After 25 minutes of watching “Somerset,” I return to my scholarly work thoroughly refreshed. My mind feels like a clean slate. And I can hardly wait until tomorrow to find out whether Jen Brooks will tell Stuart about her affair with Bruce Henderson. Handsome, devoted Bruce, that Chicago cosmopolite who can “always practice cardiology in Key Biscayne.”
system that institutionalizes checks and balances within the Executive. But our system did fail terribly and once the shock, and the lessons, of Vietnam and Watergate have worn off, it could happen again. Since the Constitution, amended or not, is no protection if we allow those in power to circumvent it, the only protection is an electorate that demands a higher standard of political conduct. If we start insisting that the candidates for next year meet the kind of standards Weisband and Franck suggest, we'll get a better President than we've had for a long time.

Richard J. Walton

Richard J. Walton is author of The Remnants of Power (Coward, McCann & Geoghegan) and Cold War and Counterrevolution (Viking).

Marjorie Perloff
on television

Soap Bubbles

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The Vietnam Summing Up

The New Republic of May 3, 1975, with its starkly evocative cover of Goya on "the disasters of war," brought together the reflections of the wisest critics of the Vietnam adventure.


These final essays are in themselves significant postscripts to history. If you would like copies of this special May 3 issue for yourself or a friend, for a child, or a student, please send in the coupon below. You will value this issue as long as we have reason to remember the past.

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Daniel Robbins on art

Biennials

Early in February the Whitney Museum in New York opened its 1975 Biennial Exhibition, another attempt to exhibit the current condition of American art. Late in the same month, Washington's Corcoran Gallery of Art unveiled its 34th Biennial. The two exhibitions produced totally different effects: the Whitney show was boring; the Corcoran's exhilarating. The reason is deceptively simple: the quality of the works. Curiously this difference is not necessarily caused by opposing concepts of quality but by the organizing principles employed by each museum, factors extraneous to the art itself. These reflect a variety of issues: purpose, location, knowledge, financing, group cooperation. Some are theoretical, others highly practical, but all intrude on the work of art and its effect. The Whitney show contained the work of almost 150 little known and, for the most part, young artists. The Corcoran concentrated on 50, among whom are some of the most famous and distinguished painters working today. The work of only one artist appears in both biennials.

These survey biennials are in the tradition of the salons of the past whose purpose was to exhibit the best of what is happening in art and to permit the public to compare current work with that of the recent past, especially to compare the work of ambitious newcomers with the accomplishments of well-established artists. This opportunity is intentionally absent from the Whitney biennial, an omission that makes the Whitney effort as daring as it was dreary. Five Whitney curators were sent to scour the country for new talent. Perhaps they assumed that their public was so knowing and sophisticated that it would forgive the exclusion of well known painters and sculptors. Perhaps motivated by the best democratic instincts of America (and supported by the National Endowment) and responding to years of peppy criticism from enthusiasts of regionalism such as Katherine Kuh, they rejected the standard of prior acknowledgement as a context for judging the unknown.

Marjorie Perloff, professor of English at the University of Maryland, is married to, yes, a cardiologist who practices in Philadelphia.

The New Republic