

Media Archives and Feminized Popular Culture: Soap Opera Historiography

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As someone who has been working on a book-length history of the American daytime television soap opera for about a decade, I have had innumerable experiences with the potentials and limitations of media archives for a cultural form that has been delegitimized across its history, surely due largely to its associations with the commercial and the feminine. All popular media are at risk of insufficient archiving—they are created via technologies that will inevitably become obsolete, many are produced as commodities and thus are subject market vagaries (if it can't be monetized, why keep it?), and most are simply not considered significant enough to the history of human civilization to warrant preservation. We can bemoan this situation to no end and can advocate for more rigorous archival practices for our objects of study—a clearly worthwhile endeavor. Today I am more interested in discussing a more applied set of questions about how to use a partial archive (as all archives are) to make a valuable scholarly contribution.

I began my research project on the history of the daytime TV soap opera out of a sense of obstinacy, a refusal to accept that such a project was not possible because of either the poor accessibility of archival material or the vastness of that material. In so doing, I held fast to theories of partial history, of the assertion that no history is a “total” history, that any such claim is more a grab for authority than a truly complete knowledge. This is a freeing perspective, but it is one that butts up against any historian's impulses, in that we inevitably strive to absorb as much as possible about the worlds we examine. We secretly think we can know it all. In this respect, the limitations of the archive (any archive, but especially that of popular media and perhaps delegitimated forms of popular media in particular) is actually helpful, for it helps us to understand what we don't know, what we can't know, and to work to ask questions of our archives that can be answered through those archives.

For example, as I'd expected, I could not watch any substantial number of episodes, especially continuing ones, of daytime TV soaps that aired before the 1960s. Such programs were broadcast live and any kinescopes that were made for cross-time zone airing were not preserved. This was of course typical of most 1950s American television although some more legitimated programming did get more kinescope preservation than did soaps. But there was SOME preservation of the soaps of this period. I found these to watch in three main places: 1) the UCLA Film and TV archive; 2) the New York City Paley Center for Media; and 3) YouTube. The number of episodes available to watch is small enough that seeing them all was entirely manageable, which I've done, absent the unexpected find that pops up online! But I also had a number of other archival materials available to me to help me understand the soaps of this era. I had correspondence and story documents and scripts from a number of creators whose

papers have been preserved. I had trade and popular press coverage of the development of daytime TV. I had corporate documents from networks and sponsors and trade associations. I had a lot. The question was what kind of questions I might ask of this archive in order to generate new, albeit partial, knowledge of this period in the genre's history on television.

I ended up asking two sets of questions: one about the transition to TV from radio and the ways that was negotiated as a business practice and a creative one and another about the discourses of gender identity and psychological health in soap storytelling. The episodes I was able to view helped me to understand the ways that soap production practices and aesthetics changed over their first decade on television as I saw different kinds of sets, different degrees of camera movement, different uses of music in different programs. I could not have drawn these conclusions from what I watched alone, but I don't think of media history as something to be written only by viewing media texts. Any historian will insist that the best archive is a wide-ranging one—not a complete one—but one that includes enough viewpoints and traces of different aspects of a phenomenon that we can piece together a supportable argument about the questions we are asking. My point here is that we should not despair over what has *not* been archived and instead should work on telling the stories we can construct through the archives available to us.