

How soap opera was designed to undercut America's morality

by Christina Nelson Huth, Features Editor

“One of the regrets I hear often expressed among my college students concerns facing up to the pursuit of employment. It's equated with a time that will interfere with their soap viewing. They hate the thought of having to wean themselves away from the soaps.”

This report, which comes from a professor at a small East Coast college, should send chills down the spine of any American who is concerned about the future of his country. More so, because it is precisely accurate: A substantial portion of America's housewives, a growing number of female adolescents, and even working fathers, are today addicted to soap-opera viewing. A just-released study by the Pennsylvania-based Annenberg School of Communications shows up this trend as an inverse relationship between teenage drug abuse and soap-opera viewing. “Some kids turn to drugs to escape,” said a researcher of the study's findings. “Others turn to soaps, which serve the same narcotic function.”

The average American family member watches television six hours a day, and, in 1982, the majority of programming that he is offered consists of soap operas (see box). Based on the principles of mass brainwashing and social control developed at the London Tavistock Institute branch of British intelligence during the 1930s, the modern television soap opera is a powerful weapon in the hands of those forces who would seek to destroy the United States by degenerating and destroying this nation's culture. Fed to audiences intellectually and morally weakened by the stream of violence, banality, and vulgarity that is the rest of television programming, the soap opera is designed to draw viewers into the encapsulated universe of the private lives of its leading characters, affirming for viewers with the transmission of each daily episode that no world exists outside of the individual's own inner psychological needs.

As one of the architects of this entertainment genre will tell us in his own words, the isolated fantasy world of soap opera was created to destroy the last shreds of America's traditional republican value that this nation has a moral purpose in the world. Its orientation to world history and events gone, the U.S. population would be rendered a passive, docile collection of sheep in the face of whatever economic or foreign policy atrocities are imposed by the European oligarchy, which uses the Tavistock Institute and similar think tanks as its psychological warfare divisions. Not by accident,

one of the most popular radio soap operas of the 1930s *Our Gal Sunday* was about an uneducated American girl from a Colorado mining town who marries England's wealthiest, most handsome titled lord.

Tavistock's soap-opera format had saturated U.S. radio programming by no later than the mid-1930s, deluging a Depression-wracked U.S. population with spoken pulp fiction. By the early part of the next decade, with America's entry into World War II, attention shifted to the problem of applying the same principles which had made radio soap-opera programming so successful a means of social control, to the emerging mass medium of television. In this process, Theodor Adorno, the Frankfurt School for Social Research-trained social-control expert who relocated to the United States during the Nazi period, played the leading role, along with his collaborators at the Columbia University Radio Research Project under Paul Lazarsfeld.

Adorno's association with the Frankfurt School, which was founded in the early part of this century by several of Germany's oldest oligarchical families, provided him with a broad base of operations for his early-career studies of how populations are manipulated through the mass media's control of culture. One of Adorno's enthusiasms in the 1930s was Josef Goebbels, overseer of the Nazi mass propaganda machine during the Third Reich: Adorno was a promoter of Goebbels's magazine *Das Reich*.

During the late 1930s and 1940s, relocated first to England and then to the United States, Adorno studied and directed the destruction of western musical culture through the promotion of atonal music, and the popular music forms which led to today's punk and acid rock. He was the major promoter of Schönberg's 12-tone system of musical composition, which he introduced during his wartime stay in California into the Hollywood circles that to this day compose the music for the U.S. movie industry.

Adorno's writing on the subject of popular music was his most prolific. His first piece written in America after his arrival here in 1937, titled “The Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Hearing,” examined how new forms of popular music, such as the jazz and Depression “swing era” output of Tommy Dorsey and Benny Goodman, degraded the cultural powers of the listening audience. Subjection to these inferior forms of music, said Adorno, forced the

mass audience to regress in its psychological—and even its physiological—capacity to hear and enjoy actual music. Jazz and swing produced an infantile state in the listener, who, like a child demanding only food which it had enjoyed in the past, was rendered increasingly passive, docile, and afraid of anything new. Thus reduced in cultural capacities, said Adorno, the mass audience will fetishize the style and coloristic effects of popular musical forms, and forget about content. It will demand repeat performance after repeat performance, preferably by a media staff it has also come to fetishize.

In one of his most cynical comments on the degraded American musical culture of the late 1940s, Adorno noted that the American youth of the time had adopted the name “jitterbug” for their popular dance form. Enraged at their impotence to control their future and their culture, he said, they had turned themselves into jitterbuggers—“become transformed into insects”—like Franz Kafka’s unfortunate who woke up one morning and discovered that he was no longer a man, but a cockroach. It was into this degraded popular culture that the U.S. GIs who had seen the world and committed themselves to a national moral purpose during World War II, were encouraged to immerse themselves upon returning home.

Adorno at the Radio Research Project

Adorno’s collaboration with the Rockefeller Foundation-funded Radio Research Project, which extended from 1938 to 1941, included extensive profiling and analysis of how radio broadcasting could be used to further degenerate popular musical taste. Adorno concluded that the radio medium would hasten the breakdown of a shared popular appreciation of the great classical masters, since audiences would no longer gather together to hear concerts of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, but would be atomized at home next to their radio sets. Additionally, he stressed that cults of personality had great power to distract listeners from the content of music, and could as easily be created around conductors and performers of classical music as around pop musicians. NBC radio network used this insight to create the first national personality cult of a classical musician around Arturo Toscanini, who was contracted to conduct NBC’s Symphony Orchestra in 1938. The experiment was repeated with the 1954-58 classical music series conducted by up-and-coming media star Leonard Bernstein on CBS-TV.

Several things should be said about Adorno’s collaborators at the Radio Research Project. Paul Lazarsfeld worked with a group of sociologists led by Robert Merton to develop statistical profiles of virtually every single hour of commercial radio programming broadcast in the United States during the 1930s and early 1940s. Lazarsfeld and his crew may be most well known for their profiling of the October 1938 “War of the Worlds” panic, the famous incident in which radio star Orson Wells, playing the role of a news broadcaster, threw dozens of American towns and cities into mass hysteria by announcing the landing of an invasionary force from the

planet Mars in New York City. When their studies of this hoax were completed, the sociologists at the Radio Research Project had vastly sharpened their understanding of how and to what extent radio could be used for mass manipulation of the U.S. population.

Lazarsfeld’s other projects included the first systematic studies of the effects of the mass media on voting patterns, and the training of a cadre force of media experts that was put to work for UNESCO, the U.S. Information Agency, and the U.S. State Department in spreading the Cold War through the developing sector and Western Europe. In the early 1950s, in fact, Adorno’s Frankfurt School was collaborating with Lazarsfeld-trained U.S. Information Agency personnel in studies to assess the effectiveness of Voice of America propaganda broadcasts in occupied Germany.

Frank Stanton, who also made a name for himself profiling media-consumer response at the Radio Research Project, went on to become programming czar and then president of the CBS television network. Under Stanton, CBS was the pioneer of daytime soap-opera programming in the early 1950s, and became the pioneer of night-time soap operas with the premiere of *Dallas* in 1978.

Television: the ultimate control

Adorno’s post-war career was devoted to exploring the potentials of television to further erode popular culture, and to shape mass social movements through television programming of populations.

In the early 1950s, by then back at the Frankfurt Institute, Adorno spent much of his time on studies of television, which he characterized as “a medium of undreamed-of psychological control.” To this effort Adorno applied his experience in directing the destruction of musical culture, describing his studies as a systematic investigation of the “socio-psychological stimuli typical of televised material on both the descriptive and psychodynamic levels, to analyze their presuppositions, as well as their total pattern, and to evaluate the effect they are likely to produce.” This Adorno hoped, would “ultimately bring forth a number of recommendations on how to deal with these stimuli to produce the most desirable effect.”

By the mid-1950s, Adorno had determined to his satisfaction that properly programmed television could be used to produce social reactions on a mass scale. In fact, as early as 1956 Adorno predicted the mass social movements which shattered the American political system more than a decade later, and specified that the upsurge of political action at the grass-roots level during the 1960s would be followed by the social withdrawal and passivity that now characterizes the average American soap-opera fare.

In a 1956 essay published in the *Quarterly of Film, Radio, and Television* under the headline “Television and Patterns of Mass Culture,” Adorno asserted that the 1960s would be gripped by women’s rights, environmentalist, and gay rights movements—all of which he said were to be rooted in the

television programming of the children of the 1950s. Situation comedies that ridiculed a strong role for the father in family life, like *My Little Margie*, Adorno elaborated, would give rise to the feminist and lesbian rights movement. Situation comedies designed to emphasize "quality of life" over material and scientific progress—such as the *Our Miss Brooks* show that pitted an underpaid but cheerful and witty teacher in a never-ending struggle with her boss for the weekly paycheck—would result in a popularly-based environmentalist movement.

The romance drama, Adorno's catch-all term for soap operas and related television formats, was to serve as the keystone to this brainwashing-by-media plan. Even an audience which possesses a fundamental morality which recog-

nizes personal and national moral purpose—called "inner-directed" in Adorno's doublespeak—could, under saturation-level influence of soap opera, be conditioned into passive acceptance of destructive and genocidal oligarchical policies in the real world which it has rejected. Thus, Adorno predicted that the post-war "baby boom" generation, reared on television, and maturing in the mid-to-late 1960s, would contain a higher percentage of "other-directed personalities," who answered first not to an internal standard established in reference to a universal moral truth, but "to outside stimuli, such as the opinions of the other kids in school, or on the block." The "others" directing the new "other-directed personality," Adorno noted, would also be guided by television.

The soaps take over U.S. television programming

The soap opera has been a mainstay of entertainment industry programming policy since the 1930s, when "family dramas" saturated morning, afternoon, and evening radio listening hours. Four soap operas that were premiered during the early 1950s are still running today, up to 31 years later: CBS's *Search for Tomorrow*, which premiered in 1951; CBS's *As the World Turns*, which premiered in 1956, and CBS's *Edge of Night*, which premiered in 1956.

A 1976 survey by a Cornell University English and communications professor showed that of the 90 major network daytime viewing hours between 11 a.m. and 5 p.m. on weekdays, 42.4 percent were booked with soap operas. By early 1982, this proportion has risen from 47 percent to just over 61 percent. There is *nothing else but* soap opera on ABC, CBS, and NBC between 12:30 and 4 p.m. every weekday. The few hours not occupied with soaps are taken up by game shows and reruns of sitcoms recently retired from evening prime-time viewing hours. These sitcoms, the largest number of which were produced by the Detroit-mafia-linked Norman Lear, peddle the same mindless hedonism as the soaps.

Another trend is clearly visible: the move of the soap-opera format into evening prime-time viewing hours. The trend-setter here, as was the case with daytime soap programming, is Radio Research Project-trained Frank Stanton's CBS. CBS premiered the prime-time soap opera *Dallas* in 1978, and it soon hit the top of the ratings charts. *Dallas*, now syndicated in 85 foreign countries, was followed by the CBS spinoff *Knot's Landing* and this past

fall season CBS also premiered *Falcon Crest*, the saga of a California family squabbling over vineyard real estate starring Ronald Reagan's former wife Jane Wyman. The other two networks have aped this successful CBS format with hour-long evening soaps of their own. A full five of the 10 hours of weekday evening programming time between 9 p.m. and 11 p.m., considered by the networks to be the most prime adult viewing hours, are currently occupied by soap operas.

Daytime or night, the content of soap operas is the same. Since the 1950s and 1960s, divorce, unemployment, terminal illness, adultery—that is, every trial and tribulation that might befall a favorite soap-opera character in his or her own private world—have been standard soap opera fare. With the rise of the counterculture in the post-Watergate era, soap-opera themes have become increasingly degraded. Now, homosexuality, incest, child prostitution, abortion, unwed motherhood, cohabitation, rape, and drug addiction have been added to the soap-opera copywriter's lexicon.

At the same time, the positive side of family life represented by the nuclear family, functioning to prepare children for a positive role in the outside world, has been expunged from soap opera. One recent survey of the soaps counted 127 adult speaking roles—and less than half a dozen children who ever uttered a word. When children are introduced into the plots, they are invariably the occasion for some disaster befalling their parents: death of the mother in childbirth, saddling the family with an expensive childhood disease; trouble for a shaky marriage, etc. Marriage itself is disappearing, in favor of cohabitation, adultery, and homosexual relationships.

In the 1975 soap-opera season, 9 out of 10 pregnancies ended in abortion or still birth. The children who made it into the world—of which only one was born to its married, natural, mother and father, who were pleased to welcome it—brought unhappiness with them.