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# "I'm Not a Doctor, But I Play One on TV": Characters, Actors, and Acting in Television Soap Opera

by *Jeremy G. Butler*

When actor Don MacLaughlin, who originated the role of Chris Hughes on *As the World Turns* and played it off and on for some thirty years, died in the spring of 1986, the producers elected to have the character die also. Consequently, an episode was presented in which the news of Chris's death was announced.

At the conclusion of this episode, a framed photograph of him, placed on the Hughes family's piano, dissolved into a montage of shots from previous episodes—some of which were black and white kinescopes dating from the days when the program was broadcast live. A memorial was chromakeyed over the shot of the framed photograph: "Don MacLaughlin, 1906-1986." In this way, the death of MacLaughlin was elided with the death of the character, Chris Hughes. The photograph—set within a diegetic "frame," literally and figuratively—served to signify two complementary, almost contradictory, signifieds: the actor and the character. Was the photograph wholly within the fiction (Chris Hughes) or was it a signifier of "reality" (Don MacLaughlin)? Was it within the diegetic world or without, or could it have been somewhere in between, drawing on both reality and fiction?

To date, academic interest in the soap opera has generated narrative/thematic studies—in the work of critical theorists—and audience demographic and content analyses—in social science-based research.<sup>7</sup> This work, I would argue, is significant but incomplete. In order to understand soap opera, one must confront the ambiguities of the actor-character relationship and precipitate out the position of the performer and the significance of his/her work, performing. For it is actors who incarnate the characters in soap opera narrative structures, providing character types for content analyses; and it is actors' bodies and gestures—as much as the dialogue scripted for them or the actions plotted for them—in which viewers invest deep-seated emotions and long-standing empathies.

Several factors militate against the comprehension of the significance and signifying functions of the soap opera actor, however. Besides the genre's low status in the acting hierarchy, the genre itself has long operated to efface the presence of the performer; individual actors are practically treated as ciphers

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by the soap opera apparatus—that is, the genre’s stylistic, spectatorial, and economic structures. Further, the meanings of actors’ images and the discourse(s) of their performances are awash in the flow of contradictory meanings, the polysemy, that defines contemporary U.S. television (see Raymond Williams).’ And finally, the semiotics of performance, as it has developed in the antecedent performance media of theater and film, is still in a rather primitive state; there is no established set of analytical tools that one may merely borrow and apply unmodified to television studies.<sup>3</sup> The following thoughts on soap opera characters, actors, and acting do not pretend to resolve each of these difficulties, but they do aspire to a clearer understanding of the parameters of the issues involved, as well as to a suggestive mapping of heretofore uncharted semiotic territory relating to performance and soap opera. Further, the soap opera actor will be contextualized within more general notions of performers and performance in related genres and media such as the prime time series and the cinema.

**The Prison-house of Narrative.**“ Soap opera actors currently find themselves in a position that strongly resembles that of film actors before the institution of the “star system.”<sup>5</sup> At that time, film producers promoted a film’s story rather than its actors, many of whom were themselves embarrassed to be performing “pantomime” in silent “photoplays.” It was not until just before World War I that producers began to actively cultivate-and exploit-acting “personalities.”<sup>6</sup> Contemporary trade and popular publications began carrying advertisements for favored performers and the actor’s names were finally given credit on the screen. “Fan” magazines developed concurrently. Initially they began as summaries of plots rather than features on the performers-as is suggested by the titles *Motion Picture Story Magazine* and *Photoplay*.’ Soon, however, fan magazines turned their attention from narrative and began providing a discourse about the stars’ publicly available personal lives. The intertwining aesthetic, ideological, and economic systems of film exhibition/production and the print media thus evolved into the system of cinematic star construction.

In comparison to this cinematic model, the daytime soap opera has no true “star system.” Networks and sponsors such as Procter and Gamble seldom if ever promote specific actors, preferring instead to advertise certain storylines. Even learning the name of the actor who plays a character can be difficult for the viewer, because cast lists are run just once a week and very quickly; and casts are not provided in *TV Guide* or similar program listing services. Although there are, naturally, actors who are better known or receive more money than others, none function economically the way stars do in the cinema, where they form the economic substratum of the industry. Most major films today are based on a “package” involving at least one star to guarantee the return on the bank’s investment. Stars’ “bankability” has become one of the few semicertainties of Hollywood finance.<sup>8</sup> This bankability stems from the cinema’s reliance upon what John Ellis calls a “narrative image.”<sup>9</sup> A variety of media texts—promotion, publicity, previous films, and reviews of the films—construct a narrative image

of the star,<sup>10</sup> but that image is incomplete without the film itself. Thus, argues Ellis, media texts invite the viewer to the theater to complete/cohere the star's narrative image. Soap opera actors as **stars**, by contrast, have only a feeble support system of media texts, a circumscribed intertextuality." The soap opera viewer has comparatively little contact with actor promotion/publicity." He/she has usually not seen an actor in a role other than the present one; and even if the actor has transferred from another soap opera, the producers do little in advertising or in the storyline to exploit the actor's previous role/image. So, the idea of a "star vehicle" holds no currency in soap opera. All actors in a soap opera's ensemble cast are more or less equally prominent/obscure in the multitudinous narrative lines. Further, there are no reviews of soap opera narrative lines, individual episodes, or performances per se, though some soap opera magazines do critique the programs in general terms, with reference to characters' activities rather than actors' performances.

In short, the soap opera viewer is not drawn to a day's episode to complete the media text-produced, extra-diegetic, **narrative image** of star actors performing certain roles. Rather, the soap opera uses other diegesis-based mechanisms to maintain viewer interest: primarily, the never-fully-resolved narrative enigmas themselves. Typical print advertisements and broadcast promotional announcements use only the characters' names and pitch the programs in terms of narrative questions: "Will Erica marry her half brother, Mark?" (All **My Children**); "Will Eden reunite with Cruz?" (**Santa Barbara**); and so on. Thus, while the cinema sells narrative images of stars; the soap opera sells solely the characters and/as the narrative, thus de-emphasizing the importance of actors as performers of "stars."

This de-emphasis is reflected in the contracts under which soap opera actors work. Most performers on **As the World Turns**, for example, sign a three-year contract. However, the producers have the option to cancel that contract every thirteen weeks-every 26 weeks for more established players. No actor is indispensable to a soap opera. Programs have lost or fired significant "stars" without appreciable effect on their narratives or their rating share. Anthony Geary and Genie Francis (Luke and Laura, **General Hospital**) may well have been the most widely publicized actors in the history of television soap opera. The fact that Francis, as **actor** not character, has been advertised for her current program, **Days of Our Lives**, testifies to the exceptionally high level of her visibility as an individual actor.<sup>13</sup> Yet her and Geary's departure from **General Hospital** did no irreparable harm to its popularity. Clearly, any specific "star" is a rather disposable element of soap opera.

This disposability is further exemplified in the soap opera press. The elements of soap opera that it chooses to stress are emblematic of the actor's position in the genre. Similar to the early movie magazines, major soap opera publications such as **Soap Opera Digest** still devote as much space to plot summaries as to actors' "personal" lives. Further, every cover photo of **Soap Opera Digest** identifies **both** the actor and the character he/she plays. Apparently,

its editors assume no soap opera “star” is significant enough to be recognized wholly outside of the context of his/her character. In so doing, they publicize the **character** as much as the actor.

Even the profiles of actors’ personal lives stress their relationship with their characters. Characteristically, one **Soap Opera Digest** piece poses this question: “Where Does **The Young and the Restless’s** Jill Abbott (The Character) End and Brenda Dickson (The Actress) Begin? Sometimes, It’s Hard to Tell.”<sup>14</sup>

Without fail, every interviewer asks the actor how he/she compares with his/her character. Of course, this tack is frequently taken in interviews with cinema actors also, but, I would argue, the soap opera actor differs because he/she has little or no star image outside of the character he/she plays. The intertextuality of the film star-his/her appearance in promotion, publicity, previous films, previous interviews/reviews-cannot be presumed for the soap opera actor. Each magazine article, itself a small segment of the general media textuality, must first **create** a soap actor’s narrative image-his/her constructed, star image outside of the context of the character he/she plays-and, having first separated image and character, must then compare/contrast that narrative image with that character. Thus, one may still see soap opera magazines attempting the same comparisons between actor and character that are performed between star image and specific roles in the cinema, but without being able to rely upon the context of a star’s intertextuality.

This cinema star-character relationship has been summarized by Richard Dyer in terms of the ways in which the star image is used to construct characters. He believes it falls into three categories: the “perfect fit,” the “problematic fit,” and the “selective use” of the star image.<sup>15</sup> A star’s image may fit a role precisely, or it may work against type, or the role may depend on select elements of his/her star image. Even though the soap opera fan magazine cannot rely on a previously constructed star image as the cinema does, one can still find parallel examples of Dyer’s star-character categories in **Soap Opera Digest**. For example, to suggest that one cannot distinguish actor Brenda Dickson from character Jill Abbott is to posit a “perfect fit” between the two. Indeed, the soap opera has been known to narratively capitalize upon “perfect fits” between real and diegetic life: for example, when actor Jeanne Cooper had cosmetic surgery it was worked into her character’s storyline on **The Young and the Restless**; the operation itself was videotaped and used in the program. Similarly, representing Don MacLaughlin’s death as the death of **As the World Turns’s** Chris Hughes also presumes a morbid “perfect fit” between the actor and the character.<sup>16</sup>

But despite these dramatic anecdotes in which an actor is confused with his/her character, the “perfect fit” is not the most common way soap opera actors are represented in the press. Quite the contrary, the soap opera press (and the occasional piece in TV **Guide** and other more general interest publications) usually present the actor as making selective use of his/her “real life” personality or even performing in a role that is diametrically opposed to his/her off-screen image (in other words, Dyer’s “problematic fit”). Meredith

Brown, writing in *Soap Opera Digest*, describes Frank Runyeon, at the time an actor in *As the World Turns*:

In person he is different. Frank is taller, lankier, tan and dark and sensual with those puppy brown eyes and full lips. But unlike [his character] Steve, who acts before he thinks, Frank Runyeon stores, processes and dissects information. Then he makes a decision.

When first found, Frank has just come out of rehearsing a scene where Steve has been shot. He literally limps down the stairs, forgetting that he isn't acting anymore. Hours later he does the same thing and a production assistant has to remind him that it's just make-believe. "Well, I have to stay in character," Frank complains with a shy grin, only half-kidding."

This article constructs Runyeon as *both* Steve and not-Steve, or, perhaps, Steve as both Runyeon and not-Runyeon. Off screen, the actor looks different from his on screen role, Brown suggests, and behaves unlike his character, but, still, he is so fully immersed in the role that he has difficulty emerging from it. That an actor would be thus consumed with living a role plays into the discourse of the dominant (and, for the general public in Western culture, the only) system of performance, the Method. When Brown writes of Runyeon in these terms she uses the assumptions of the Method discourse to conflate character and actor—that is, that good acting = the use of selective emotional memory in order to live the part. Ambivalences arise, however, as Brown struggles in the same essay to distinguish Runyeon from his character.

The article constructs an image of Runyeon as a conservative, born-again Christian who has some indiscretions in his past. \*The character, Steve, uses some aspects of this image, but blocks others. Steve is a relatively positive character, with strong, ethnic ("Greek") values, but not without moral faults. "Steve" selects the strong, moral qualities of "Runyeon," but ignores the specific aspects of born-again Christianity. If Runyeon were a film star, the star image from which his roles select meanings would be constructed across several texts, but, in soap opera "stardom," this activity must be compressed into just a few paragraphs of a single article.

Instances in which the soap opera press reports that an actor's "life"/public image departs completely from that of the character are less common, but they do occur. Most often one reads about this sort of image/character split when actors are playing villains and do not wish to be associated with their character's actions. Susan Lucci, for example, who plays the role of Erica on *All My Children*, was represented in the press during the 1970s as a homebody who cherished her husband and children above all. Her character at the same time, however, was a mischievous troublemaker who secretly took birth control pills to avoid conception.

For film actors, the relationship or "fit" of actor to character is only one means by which they are constructed as semiotically meaningful, but for television soap opera performers it takes on predominant importance. The cinema star's intertextuality (his/her visibility in various media texts in addition to a particular

narrative and role) undergirds a broader cultural significance, but the vast majority of soap opera actors rarely establish a public image apart from their characters. All but a few are sequestered within the prison-house of narrative, their cultural circulation heavily dependent upon the uncertain tenure of a specific character. When a soap opera actor is furloughed to another genre or medium, he/she is significant, is visible, only in terms of his/her relationship to his/her character. Hence, commercials, when done by soap opera actors, rely upon the intertextuality of their **characters'** images, not their actor-star images. And those character images are manipulated in complex, sometimes odd, fashion. A shaving cream commercial featuring Laurence Lau and Kim Delaney-then performing on All **My Children** as young, mostly chaste sweethearts (Greg and Jenny)-presents the two of them as an unmarried couple bantering with one another the morning after having slept together. Following the prevalent "selective fit" discourse in the apprehension of a soap actor's image vis-à-vis his/her role, this commercial selectively uses elements of the soap characters' narrative meanings (here, the characters' unconsummated romance), ignoring any potential extratextual signifieds associated with the actors themselves.

Even more striking in its use of soap actors for their characters' narrative signification was a late 1980s advertising campaign run by Vicks cough medicine.<sup>19</sup> The potency of various soap opera actors (all men) declaring, "I'm not a doctor, but I play one on TV," lies in the overweening emphasis on character in soap opera. Even though the actors manifestly deny any medical training or expertise, the viewer is clearly meant to impute such knowledge to the authoritative voices addressing him/her. Why else should he/she trust these actors' opinions on medicine? The ideal viewer of this commercial-someone familiar with soap opera doctors- is conditioned to view the actor through the filter of the character, having little or no other context in which to place him. Still, the actor declares the "reality" of his existence as a human being who may perform in several roles. Mimi White paraphrases the commercial's message: "I'm not really a doctor, but I really am an actor; and as an actor in another television text, I really play a doctor." But this affirmation of the reality of an actor's performance submerges within the hyperreality of television texts' competing meanings: the commercial text says he is not a doctor; the soap opera text says he is. Moreover, if he did not carry the semiotic residue of his role as a doctor then he would have no significance in the context of medicinal advertising.

Because soap opera actors are so dependent upon their characters' "lives," a few comments on the precariousness of those characters' existences will further illustrate the tenuous situation of actors in soap opera, as well as suggest further problematic areas for those attempting to analyze the contribution of actor's images and performances to readings of these programs. This precariousness of soap characters is the result of the genre's unique narrative structure. Three elements of soap opera narrative are germane to this point. First, soap opera casts are much larger than those of any other TV program; thus, individual characters have less specific impact on the overall design of the narrative. No

one character's contribution is critical to the functioning of the soap opera apparatus. As Robert C. Allen has noted, "The soap opera remains a textual system dependent upon not individual characters but an entire community of characters for its aesthetic effect and popular appeal."<sup>21</sup> Second, the soap opera narrative is not structured around one core dilemma, but an overlapping chain of **successive** dilemmas and enigmas. If one dilemma—for example, the paternity of a child—is enervated by the departure of a character, then the soap opera merely moves on to another. As Charles Derry comments, "Conflicts may develop quickly, and then suddenly be suspended (in soap opera parlance, being 'put on the back burner'), characters' problems may be solved haphazardly without a climax; a character may dominate the narrative and then suddenly become irrelevant. Other times, a main character suddenly dies and the narrative simply and cruelly continues. **things just keep happening.**"<sup>22</sup> The imperative of maintaining a number of simultaneous narrative enigmas steamrollers any concern for story details. Third, the death/departure of a soap opera character is almost always open-ended. Why establish a new character to fulfill the same function as James Stenbeck (on **As the World Turns**), when the "deceased" James Stenbeck might himself return to fill it? For the prime time series (but not the prime time serials), in contrast, death is a small piece of closure within the repeated narrative dilemma. Dead characters do not reappear, or, at least not until summer reruns begin. In addition, since the past is just a hazy backdrop for the present in the prime time series, dead characters are seldom mourned or even mentioned after the actual episode of their death. Witness the death of Larry Zito in the 1986-87 **Miami Vice** season. His death was significant enough to be stretched out over two episodes, but he was seldom mentioned subsequently. In contradistinction, the soap opera period of mourning extends for weeks, as the details of the death are rehashed in the context of each character's response, and restated enough times to saturate even the inattentive viewer. Indeed, occasionally the presumed-dead character returns before the mourning period has been concluded; more than one such character has observed/interrupted his/her own funeral. Prime time serials (not **series**) such as **Dynasty** and **Dallas** occasionally resurrect "dead" characters also, though not as frequently as daytime soap opera does.<sup>23</sup>

It is evident, then, that the soap opera actor's presence is largely "invisible," repressed by a variety of ideological, economic, and aesthetic factors. However, if he/she does become "visible" outside of the context of his/her program then he/she is slotted into "star" patterns inherited from the cinema (Dyer's "fits" of star to character). The repression of the actor's presence within a program is never complete, however. Indeed, in certain circumstances a soap opera program cannot help but foreground the actor's presence as **actor**.<sup>24</sup> This is particularly evident in the phenomenon of recasting, which within the context of film and television is virtually unique to the daytime soap opera. Suddenly, and usually without warning for most viewers, a new face speaks the dialogue of a familiar character, a new set of performance signs supplants the old one. By examining



these performance signs in the flux of recasting we may best understand their significance to the soap opera text.

**Soap Opera Recasting: “A Body Too Much”?** While commenting on Pierre Renoir’s performance as Louis XVI in *La Marseillaise*, Jean-Louis Comolli observes: “If the imaginary person [i.e., a character], even in a historical fiction, has no other body than that of the actor playing him, the historical character, filmed, has at least two bodies, that of the imagery [constructed in previous films and paintings] and that of the actor who represents him for us. There are at least two bodies in competition, one body too much.”<sup>25</sup> Most films, Comolli contends, attribute imaginary characters to actors’ real bodies: one character to one body, with the extremely rare exception of a film such as Luis Buñuel’s *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977). Historical fiction, however, finds two or more bodies (the actor and the historical figure) competing, as it were, for one character: a body too much.

Soap opera, also, occasionally has a body too much. In the recasting process an actor may be hired to play a character who possesses a personal history as well as a previous “body”/actor, much as in the historical film. Characters in historical fiction, according to Comolli, “presuppose a referential model”: “These characters have a past, they have a history before the film began and without needing it: other scriptwriters, the historians, have dealt with them.”<sup>26</sup> Parallels with soap opera may be drawn: (1) in soap opera recastings, there is a “referential model”-the previous actor who embodied the character-to whom the new actor is inevitably compared; (2) the character has a clearly defined past; and (3) other scriptwriters (quite literally) have dealt with the character. Comolli argues that this excess of bodies generates significant, but ambiguous pleasure in *La Marseillaise*: “The more he [Pierre Renoir] is him [Louis XVI], the more difficult it is to believe it: the more we believe in it, the more we know all the same that he is not him, and the more we believe in it all the same. The pleasure here is not without its unease, it derives from the unease that reignites it.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, the “role” of Louis XVI was “recast” in just the same fashion as the role of, say, Nina (All *My Children*) was recast in the 1980s. The recasting of Pierre Renoir as Louis XVI activates the distinctions between his (Renoir’s) image and performance, and the real Louis XVI’s historical image and his “performance” within the narrative that constitutes historical textuality. These distinctions may provoke a certain semiotic distress, according to Comolli, but yet they still “ignite” narrative pleasure. Could soap opera recasting also be a source of spectator pleasure, of *jouissance* based on the foregrounding of actors *performing* characters? Let us examine the issue in a specific instance of recasting.

In 1984 Meg Ryan elected to leave the role of Betsy Stewart Andropolous on *As the World Turns*. Ryan had not originated the role and, indeed, had played it just two years, but had quickly become a popular, central character.” As always in the case of a departing integral actor, the producers/writers were

left with two options: recast the role, or discontinue the role through either the character's death or his/her departure. According to *As the World Turns* producer, Michael Laibson, the decision was made to recast the role, because the producers/writers felt it would annoy the audience to have Betsy discontinued so soon after her long-delayed marriage to Steve.<sup>29</sup> One might also surmise that the recasting was done to keep the still popular character/actor of her husband on the narrative "front burner." To eliminate Betsy would have necessitated diminishing the role of her husband. In soap opera, once the decision to recast has been made, the producers/writers may elect either to provide a diegetic motivation for the change in appearance and voice, or, more commonly, they may simply insert the new body into the old role. In Betsy's case, the change in appearance was diegetically motivated: she was in a car accident and had plastic surgery. Ryan performed as Betsy in the car wreck, but when Betsy reappeared, her face covered in bandages, she was being played by a new actor. Indeed, as Laibson explained, because they were having trouble recasting Betsy, two women-whose faces were never seen under the bandages-played the role before the permanent replacement, Lindsay Frost, was located.<sup>30</sup>

Recasting illustrates the overwhelming pulsion of the soap opera narrative, which foregrounds character at the expense of performer. Meg Ryan may leave, but Betsy's story continues. Her disappearance causes little more than a ripple on the surface of the text because another body may fill her same function within the network of familial and romantic relationships. As Robert Allen emphasizes, soap opera viewing pleasure stems as much from the relationships among the characters as it does from the characters as individuals.<sup>31</sup> Recasting allows those relationships to be continued with little alteration, while the force of powerful, long-established narrative enigmas works to submerge (new) actors and their performance styles once again. After the accident, the amnesiac Betsy/**Frost** was separated from Steve-mistakenly transported to a hospital in Vermont. Before the accident, Betsy/Ryan was also separated from Steve, due to a variety of misunderstandings. In each case, she functioned similarly in the narrative pattern -still another link in the hermeneutic chain based on the enigma: will Betsy reunite with Steve?

Does this mean, however, that recasting generates no change in the soap opera text's production of meaning? Is a soap opera recasting the equivalent of soap opera's seamless use of a double in a twins story or the cinema's use of a stunt performer or a nude-scene stand-in? In those instances, as John O. Thompson notes, the doubles "supply presences to the screen which have to seem indistinguishable from those of the actor or actress who is being stood in for: here much trouble is taken to ensure that the actual substitution of one body for another makes no difference to the text."<sup>32</sup> Does the soap opera substitute, or **commute**, one body for another with no appreciable difference to the text? The answers may reside in the semiotician's "commutation test" as applied to the case of soap opera recasting.

**Soap Opera Performance and the Commutation Test.** In 1978 John O. Thompson suggested that the commutation test might well be imported from the writings of Roland Barthes to a discourse on film performance.<sup>33</sup> The basic principle of the commutation test, in this instance, is that one could hypothetically substitute one actor for another, contrast the performance text of each, and precipitate the semiotics of performance in the differences between the two. In sum, the “meaning” of each performance could be articulated in terms of their differences -much as structural linguists do with meaning production in language. It could, in theory, be a more rigorous version of the parlor game film critics sometimes play in which they imagine the results of different casting decisions: “Suppose Cary Grant had been the detective [in *Vertigo*], then vertigo would become an annoying weakness “I should **really** get over” and not the abyss at James Stewart’s feet. Grant is too secure to be quite the victim made of Stewart. But play Grant as the photographer in ***Rear Window***, and the nocturnal spying becomes more cold-blooded, more the sport of curiosity cut off from compassion.”<sup>34</sup> David Thomson here playfully exemplifies the premise of the commutation test, but John O. Thompson had hoped to extend it into a full theory of screen acting.

Seven years later, Thompson dismissed the commutation test as “unworkable-with” -in an article titled, “Beyond Commutation” (1985).<sup>35</sup> This piece criticizes his early approach as sterile and unable to cope with several analytical problems. First, the paradigmatic substitution of alternative actors is infinitely open-ended. One may hypothetically exchange thousands upon thousands of actors in one specific role. The task could be endless. Second, the meaning generated by the difference of performance must be **intuited** by the critic. Individual intuitions may vary considerably. Clearly this is no “science” of meaning-production, as linguistics is. Third, the later Thompson objects to the commutation test’s reliance on difference to generate meaning. He maintains in the 1985 piece that a theory of performance must account for the “positivities” of each character-that is, “that which is what it is independently of the network of difference, of any relation to what-is-not.”<sup>36</sup>

The interpretation of acting may well always be retarded by the intuitive nature of the interpretive act and the reliance upon difference can limit analysis, but I feel Thompson was premature in rejecting the commutation test entirely. For the soap opera commonly provides an instance in which the substitution of alternative actors is finite and quite tangible. Indeed, in the remarkably commonplace phenomenon of recastings, it provides specific examples of two actors playing the same role. Because recastings are so rare in nighttime television series and the cinema, it would be misleading to develop a global theory of the significance of the actor, of his/her position in cultural and ideological production, from the daytime soap opera; but recastings do facilitate examination of one element of all actors’ work -the semiotics of performance-in the comparison and contrast of two actors performing the same role. Moreover, the commutation test also defines the limits of the soap opera actor’s significance, suggesting how

his/her work as a performer may occasionally, rarely, become evident and perhaps annoying or distressing to the viewer.

To begin our commutation of performance we must first specify the signs of performance—those elements that comprise the performance text. In soap opera, as in the cinema, these signs may be grouped in four categories, as has been outlined by both Dyer and Barry King (the exact terms are King's): the facial; the gestural; the corporeal (or postural); and the vocal.<sup>37</sup> A performance text is constructed out of this material. Certain elements, or "features" (Thompson)<sup>38</sup> of a performance will construct meaning when contrasted with similar, but different, features in a second performance. These features, Thompson argues in his 1978 piece, are "thematized"; they create meaning through difference. Other, "unthematized" features lack this ability: "Unthematized features could be altered or redistributed without any change in the meaning of the film resulting."<sup>39</sup> A commutation of soap opera performance may best be understood by returning again to a specific example: Betsy in *As the World Turns*. To test this procedure I have analyzed two scenes chosen largely at random: in one, Meg Ryan performs as Betsy and in the other, Lindsay Frost fills the role.<sup>40</sup> In the former, newlywed Betsy/Ryan and her husband Steve/Frank Runyeon discuss the mystery of Steve's paternity and then engage in some casual romantic horseplay. In the latter, Betsy/Frost and Steve/Runyeon prepare for his departure to Greece. It should be noted at the outset that this is no true commutation test, because Ryan and Frost do not perform precisely the same scene. In a recasting situation an actor rarely speaks exactly the same lines another actor has already spoken. The story must move forward even if there is a large quotient of conventional narrative redundancy. Still, two distinctly different performances in a role that the *As the World Turns* text labels "Betsy" can illuminate the significance of performance in soap opera.

Vocal performance in soap opera is at once the most significant and the most difficult performance sign to interpret without falling to the microscopic level of phonetic analysis. This arena of signification dominates soap opera because of television's reliance on sound and the genre's heavy emphasis on dialogue.<sup>41</sup> In recasting, producers attempt to minimize the signifying difference in the written dialogue in order best to smooth over the transition. The dialogue style remains constant because the script is still being created by the same writers who, especially at the beginning, cannot design dialogue unique to the new actor. His/her acting strengths and viewer appeal are at first mostly unknown quantities. Still, although the scripted dialogue style remains the same, the performance style shifts and thematized features may be affected. Frost's voice is deeper than Ryan's, for example. The deepening of Betsy's voice may be interpreted as signifying more sophisticated, less childlike speech—if we presume a culturally coded semiotics of vocal expression that puts Marlene Dietrich at one end off the scale and Shirley Temple at the other. This signified—"more sophisticated"—is not as strongly connected with its signifier—deeper pitch—as one would prefer for the clarity of interpretation. Additional signifieds crowd

in around the signifier of deeper pitch: masculinity, a persistent cold, a tough sexiness. All are equally valid; the commutation test provides no way to curtail the range of interpretation. Here we may see the limitations of the commutation test: its reliance upon critical intuition to determine cultural meaning(s) and its inability to specify how performance signs will be read by individual viewers.

If soap opera sound is structured around dialogue, the image is predicated upon the importance of the close-up, arrayed in conventional shot-reverse shot patterns. Obviously, the preponderance of close-ups privileges facial signs of performance. However, the semiotics of film and television is still lacking a mechanism for “reading” the minutiae of facial expression- though viewers comprehend easily a certain range of meaning in the smallest facial movements. Nonetheless, a few comments may be made. As is common in soap opera recasting, Frost was chosen largely for her facial resemblance to the departing Ryan. Reportedly, this resemblance was commented on even before Frost auditioned for the role.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, one can observe innate similarities of facial structure, eye color, and hair color that would approach zero difference and thus zero meaning. These similarities were heightened through hair styling; Frost’s hair was cut to resemble Ryan’s coiffure.<sup>43</sup> Hair style can be a major source of signification within our culture. Coiffure can signify a person’s politics, musical preference, sexual orientation, moral perspective, and so on. Ryan’s hairstyle was moderately short and tousled. Indeed, it was so casually styled that occasional letters to *Soap Opera Digest’s* “Sounding Board” complained about it. Why couldn’t a woman like Betsy- the daughter of a wealthy family-get her hair “properly” styled?, they queried. Ryan’s hair style thus signified a carefree, maybe even impudent, attitude toward social convention for many viewers. For them the **difference** between Ryan and soap opera’s more elaborately coiffured women generated meaning. The early similarity of Frost’s and Ryan’s hair style created inappreciable difference/meaning when Frost first assumed the role. Since that time, Frost’s hair has been allowed to grow out. Comparing Frost in 1986 with Ryan in 1984, I would suggest that Frost’s hair has become increasingly conventional-increasingly similar to the “average” soap opera hairstyle and increasingly dissimilar to that of Ryan (with whom she is no longer compared by the press).

In corporeal terms the major difference between the two women is that Frost is two or three inches taller than Ryan. This would tend to give her a more imposing presence in a scene. It is offset, however, by Frost’s gestural style. In comparison to Ryan, Frost gestures less actively and mostly **in response** to other actors’ movements. She seldom makes initiating gestures. Ryan, in contrast, gesticulates in a sometimes unexpected fashion. Her quirkiness is confirmed in publicly available comments about her behavior. In one interview, Runyeon comments: “ ‘She doesn’t always play a scene the way I think she’s going to, which can be difficult. She has a unique personality. But it would be wrong for me to say that whenever we work together it’s just wonderful.’ ”<sup>44</sup> As well as a certain eccentricity, her performance contains an “excessiveness”

of gestures. In the scene used for the present study, she overextends her arms when initiating an embrace with Steve and waving good-bye to a departing friend (a gesture so broad that it violates the edges of the frame); she also frequently pats Steve's back without narrative motivation. This sort of movement draws the viewer's attention and creates a stronger visual presence-suggesting, perhaps, strength of character. Further, the "quirkiness" of Ryan's movements-e.g., kissing her upside-down husband-serves to confirm the sprite-like "un-conventionality" of her character. Consequently, though Frost is the taller woman, I would suggest that her presence is not as strong as Ryan's.

Whether it is Ryan or Frost playing Betsy Andropolous, the overall significance of her performance is largely determined by her relationship with Runyeon (Steve Andropolous). The constancy of the actor playing Steve provides a benchmark to which Ryan and Frost may be compared. As has been noted above, most of Betsy's significance in the overall narrative system of *As the World Turns* is in relationship to Steve. Potentially, the change in Betsys could modify her relationship with Steve and thus threaten her position in that system. Runyeon himself has commented on the impact of performance on character in the context of Steve and Betsy's relationship: "I always thought of Meg as a fragile bird. She has the beautiful blue eyes and the sweet, perky blonde hair. And Lindsay I always think of more as a lioness. And it's like two lions and just a completely different story as a result. A good story, but the contrast between Lindsay and myself is not nearly as dramatic. We were partners. Where I was this black leopard, if you will, and she was the lioness."<sup>45</sup> As Runyeon suggests, narrative is affected by contrasting performances. Or, in other terms, **thematized differences** between Frost and Ryan become particularly evident when we contrast the Runyeon/Frost performance with the Runyeon/Ryan performance. Here Frost's additional height and deeper voice become significant, lending the character a certain strength and sophistication. Frost's gestures, however, either mirror or are sympathetic to Runyeon's, unlike Ryan's, which tend to contrast with his movements. Frost's less active gestural performance, in conjunction with elements such as her more conventional hair style (in 1986) make her a less distinctive, less eccentric figure-one who more closely resembles the codified norm of gesture and hair style of Runyeon and the other actors on *As the World Turns*. In sum, Betsy/Frost's relationship with Steve has been, as Runyeon suggests, less contrasting than Betsy/Ryan's was.

**The Atypicality of Meg Ryan.** Ryan's career since *As the World Turns* has been quite atypical, when compared to most soap opera alumni. A quick overview of it brings the position of the soap opera actor and the significance of soap opera performance into sharp relief. In 1982 when the unknown actor Ryan assumed the role of Betsy from Lisa Denton she was initially defined in terms of her difference from Denton and the other actors who played the role. During the course of her time on *As the World Turns* she was defined in terms of her difference from the actors she played opposite (especially Runyeon) and the

characters to which Betsy was counterposed (especially her husband, Steve). When Frost became Betsy in spring 1984, the *image* of Ryan was retroactively defined in terms of her difference to Frost. This could have marked the final significance of Ryan to the media textuality-as it has many actors who have left soap opera, seeking more prestigious work, only to disappear from television and film entirely. However, Ryan's departure from soap opera turned out to be the beginning of her construction of a true, though still nascent, star image. As a soap opera actor, she was defined solely in terms of the character and she had little intertextual significance. But since leaving soap opera, she has begun to construct an *intertextual* identity by entering new media arenas: theatrical films (notably, *When Harry Met Sally*. . [1989]), magazines aside from the soap opera press, television talk shows (promoting her films), MTV (a nonsinging, guest appearance), and so on. Her individual roles are now defined in terms of her star image and her other media appearances-in addition to the juxtaposition with other actors in a specific film or TV program. Upon her newfound intertextuality will be constructed a star image.

Because they have virtually no intertextual potential, most soap opera actors do not ever attain the traditional star status toward which Ryan is moving. Their actor images remain imprisoned within their narrative personae, unable to be exploited in other media or to establish images independent of their roles. This does not mean, however, that the soap opera press does not treat these actors like "stars," but only as "stars" in relation to a specific character role. Indeed, as I have argued, articles on soap opera actors have inherited the cinema's assumptions of the actor-character relationship. These articles, most of which appear in the media ghetto of the soap opera press, are generally the sole source of soap opera "star/image making," in contrast to film actors and other celebrities who become constructed as stars intertextually, in several media through many different means. Film star and soap opera actor are united, just the same, in the construction of a performance text through the signs of the human body/voice and its movement/speech. The commutation test, when applied to soap opera recasting, illustrates how difference of performance style generates meaning that contravenes the "invisibility" of the soap opera actor, marking his/her work as (briefly) noticeable and semiotically significant.

Through a close reading of performance texts such as the work of Ryan, Frost, and Runyeon in *As the World Turns*, one can perceive a faint, indistinct imprint of the functioning of performance signs, of the semiotics of acting. But at this stage in the analysis of film/TV performance, our understanding of the significance and signifying function of soap opera actors continues to be obscured by several factors:

- (1) *Aesthetic*. The soap opera actor's low standing in a hierarchy of "good," acceptable acting styles diverts attention from analysis of *how* performance constructs meaning. The discourse of acting aesthetics would itself be worthy of semiotic analysis-particularly in terms of its rather obvious interface

with twentieth-century intellectual currents (for example, the Method and Freud).

- (2) **Ideological.** This acting hierarchy resonates with class prejudice, where the taste in acting of the working class and women working within the home (the audience of soap opera) is subordinated to that of the bourgeois theatergoer or viewer of, for example, Meryl Streep films. To better illuminate this connection of taste and class, Pierre Bourdieu's "social critique of the judgment of taste" might well be applied to the evaluation of acting.<sup>46</sup>
- (3) **Semiotic.** By applying the commutation test to television recasting we can identify the raw material of signification in TV acting (the signs of performance) and we can observe how paradigmatic differences pattern these signs into meanings that go beyond simply the "emotions" of the character. But the ideologically determined codes structuring those meanings are so amorphous that the range of paradigmatic associations is difficult to limit. Meaning remains allusive and intuitive, even for the scholarly analyst.
- (4) **Spectatorial.** By stressing textual analysis, this essay has relied on a rather unreconstructed model of the television subject/viewer. Further work needs to be done on the relationship between TV actor/character and viewer, addressing the psycho-social dynamics of that interaction and the connection between the discourse of the performance and the discourses of the viewers.<sup>47</sup>

The significance of the actor within film studies was neutralized decades ago with Lev Kuleshov's often-cited (and unseen) experiment: a seemingly expressionless actor does "nothing" while meaning is created for him by the intercutting of various semiotically potent images. But, as I have argued and as seems quite obvious, actors do embody meaning within our culture and performance does generate meaning within a narrative text such as a television program. The emergent field of television criticism needs, therefore, to grapple with performance semiotics in order to come to a more global understanding of the televisual text.

## Notes

1. Tania Modleski inaugurated the current critical interest in soap opera. See Modleski, ***Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*** (New York: Methuen, 1982), 85-199. The chapter on soap opera enlarges an article originally published in 1979. Social science-based research on soap opera is illustrated by Mary Cassata and Thomas Skill, eds., ***Life on Daytime Television: Tuning-in American Serial Drama*** (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1983) which includes an annotated bibliography.
2. Raymond Williams, ***Television: Technology and Cultural Form*** (New York: Schocken, 1974).
3. See, for example, Keir Elam, ***The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*** (New York: Methuen, 1980).
4. With apologies to Fredric Jameson.
5. See Richard DeCordova, "The Emergence of the Star System in America," ***Wide Angle*** 6, no. 4 (1985): 4-13; Janet Staiger, "Seeing Stars," ***The Velvet Light Trap*** 20 (Summer 1983): 10-14.



6. Staiger, 14.
7. Noted by Janet Staiger; see *Ibid.*, 13.
8. Other financial semicertainties include the sequel and the remake. Note: Friday the Thirteenth, ad infinitum; and *D.O.A.* (1949), remade as *Color Me Dead* (1969) and *D.O.A.* (1988).
9. John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema:Television:Video* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 126.
10. These terms come from Richard Dyer. According to his sense of them, "promotion" refers to studio-agent-distributor-exhibitor produced publicity. "Publicity" proper refers to news about the stars *presumably* not under their control. See Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI, 1979), 60.
11. For a substantive consideration of the importance of intertextuality to TV's flow of heterogeneous texts, see Mimi White, "Crossing Wavelengths: The Diegetic and Referential Imaginary of American Commercial Television," *Journal 25*, no. 2 (Winter 1986): 51-64; and the section on "Intertextuality" in John Fiske's *Television Culture* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 108-27.
12. During the 1980s soap actors have become slightly more visible in the general print media, as the recently begun "Soaps" section of *TV Guide's* "Insider" feature illustrates. Still, in this and other instances, soap actors news is segregated from the news about "normal" TV actors-functionally "ghettoizing" the soap opera performer and limiting his/her intertextuality.
13. See the advertisement in *TV Guide*, 5 May 1987, A-99 (Northern Alabama edition).
14. Michael Logan, "Where Does *The Young and the Restless's* Jill Abbott (The Character) End and Brenda Dickson (The Actress) Begin? Sometimes, It's Hard to Tell," *Soap Opera Digest* 5 May 1987, 124-28.
15. Dyer, *Stars*, 142-49. Ellis pursues a similar concept. See Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, 102-4.
16. This somewhat macabre congruence of real and diegetic death is seldom equaled in the cinema-occurring only in rare instances such as John Wayne, himself infected with cancer, playing a character dying from the disease in *The Shootist*. See also James Naremore's discussion of the ailing Nicholas Ray's performance in Wim Wenders' *Lightning Over Water* in Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 19-21.
17. Meredith Brown, "Frank Runyeon: Beyond the Heat," *Soap Opera Digest*, 13 September 1983, 9.
18. Runyeon has also lectured publicly on behalf of his faith.
19. Soap opera actor Peter Bergman (Dr. Cliff Warner, *All My Children*) and others were used.
20. Mimi White, "Ideological Analysis and Television," in *Channels of Discourse*, ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 136. White's argument pursues a slightly different tack to the present one.
21. Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 57.
22. Charles Derry, "Television Soap Opera: 'Incest, Bigamy, and Fatal Disease,'" *Journal of the University Film and Video Association* 35, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 5-6.
23. This could be observed recently in the bizarre narrative twists of Pam Ewing's "dream" of Bobby's death (Dallas)-which was initially presented as diegetic reality. (When Bobby's death was revealed to be a dream it contradicted narrative information about it on *Dallas's* spin-off show, *Knot's Landing*.)
24. See also the foregrounding of the celebrity as celebrity when well-known, intertextual figures make guest appearances on soap operas: Whitney Houston on *As the World Turns*, Elizabeth Taylor on *General Hospital*, Carol Burnett on *All My Children*, and so on.

25. Jean-Louis Comolli, "Historical Fiction-A Body Too Much," Screen 19 no. 2 (Summer 1978): 44.
26. *Ibid.*, 43.
27. *Ibid.*, 48.
28. Patricia **McGuinness** (1971), Suzanne Davidson (1972-80), and Lisa **Denton** (1981-82) had previously played the part. Source: Christopher Schemering, *The Soap Opera Encyclopedia* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985), 34.
29. Author's interview with producer Michael Laibson.
30. Frost began the role in the episode broadcast 24 July 1984.
31. See Allen, ***Speaking*, 61-95.**
32. John O. Thompson, "Screen Acting and the Commutation Test," Screen 19, no. 2 (Summer 1978): 58.
33. *Ibid.*, 55-69.
34. David Thomson, "The Look on an Actor's Face," ***Sight and Sound***, Autumn 1977, 244.
35. John O. Thompson, "Beyond Commutation," Screen 26, no. 5 (September-October 1985): 64.
36. *Ibid.*, 64-65.
37. Barry King, quoted in Andrew Higson, "Film Acting and Independent Cinema," Screen 27, nos. 3-4 (May-August 1986): 112; see also Dyer, ***Stars*, 151.**
38. Thompson, "Screen Acting," 59.
39. *Ibid.*, 60.
40. Ryan's scene was broadcast 6 June 1984; Frost's 18 December 1986.
41. Regarding sound in soap opera, see Jeremy G. Butler, "Notes on the Soap Opera Apparatus: Televisual Style and 'As the World Turns,'" ***Cinema Journal* 25**, no. 3 (Spring 1986): 64-66; and in television in general, see Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow, "Television: A World in Action," Screen 18, no. 2 (Summer 1977): 7-59.
42. Marianne Goldstein interviewed Frost for Soap Opera ***Digest***: "Lindsay remembered a friend of hers once mentioned that 'I looked something like this woman on this soap. I watched the show once last winter, and I didn't think we looked so much alike. But that's all I've been hearing for a while.'" Marianne Goldstein, "Meet the Brand New Nina, Betsy and **Blaine**," Soap ***Opera Digest***, 18 December 1984, 131.
43. Laibson reported that Frost's hair was cut just before Betsy's head-covering bandages were removed. The cast and crew, he said, were startled by her resemblance to Ryan.
44. Brown, "Frank Runyeon," 15.
45. Robert Rorke, "Frank Runyeon: A Fond Farewell," ***Soap Opera Digest***, 16 December 1986, 93.
46. Pierre Bourdieu, ***Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste***, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).
47. The analysis of viewer positioning before the television actor/character has already begun. See Sandy Flitterman, "Thighs and Whiskers: The Fascination of **Magnum, P.I.**," Screen 26, no. 2 (March-April 1985): 42-58. For discourse analysis, see the work of Stuart Hall and others of the University of Birmingham (England) Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Summarized in John Fiske, "British Cultural Studies and Television," in Allen, ed., ***Channels of Discourse*, 254-89.**