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Television Fictions Around the World: Melodrama and Irony in Global Perspective

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The Moment of *Dallas*

It was 1985 when my book, *Watching Dallas*, was first published in English.¹ (The original Dutch version came out a few years earlier, in 1982.) The book was a study of the discourses that surrounded the reception of the US soap opera *Dallas* (Lorimar Television/CBS, 1978-91), which was enjoying its highest level of global popularity, especially in Europe, in the early 1980s. An important empirical component of the study was an analysis of letters that (mostly women) viewers had written to me in response to a request I had put in the classified sections of a women's magazine, for people to tell me why they loved or hated the show. The letters I received were often passionate defences or attacks of the show, expressing the highly personal yet culturally inflected ways in which the letter writers engaged with, and made sense of, the show. In this way, *Watching Dallas* was an attempt to understand the popular reception of the show in terms of the discursive articulation of private pleasure and public justification, the accommodation of a new popular cultural phenomenon – a lavishly made US soap opera – within the audiovisual space of European television, which until then had, by and large, been governed by the more elevated ethos of public service broadcasting.

I knew I had written a good book, but I never expected it to become the 'classic' it is now generally recognised to be. In a way, the book has become a standard text in critical television studies, both in terms of the study of particular TV fiction genres, in this case the night-time soap opera, and in terms of audience engagements with these TV texts. But the book is almost 25 years old now, so it seems apposite to look back at the past quarter century and think about what has changed in television culture since, say, 1980 (the year when *Dallas*'s global popularity began to be noticed), especially in relation to television serial drama.

Looking back, we can affirm that *Dallas* was not just an ordinary TV show. For those readers who were too young to have seen the show when it was first screened, let me briefly outline its narrative. The story centres on the weal and woe of the extended Ewing family, who live in a sprawling ranch just out of Dallas, Texas. The family's extreme wealth and power derive from the spoils of their oil company, Ewing Oil. The multiple storylines revolve around the complicated mutual relations between the characters, and focus on emotive states of affairs and incidents that are quintessential to soap operas: the struggles between love and hate, loyalty and betrayal, greed and compassion, hope and despair. While the Ewings were larger than life in terms of their opulent lifestyle, and were the constant subject of grandiose narrative plots including murder attempts, kidnappings, dubious billion dollar business deals, political machinations, mistaken identities, and so on, the hub of the story – and the key anchor for the intense audience involvement – were the 'ordinary' human dimensions of

¹ Ien Ang, 1985, *Watching Dallas. Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, Methuen.

personal and family relationships, marked by age-old rituals such as births, marriages and deaths, the intimacies, disappointments and petty jealousies of romance and friendship, and the moral dilemmas brought about by conflicting interests and values. In short, it is at the intimate level of *feeling* that *Dallas* resonated. This has remained the key ingredient of the soap opera genre in general – an important element of its enduring global appeal, to which I shall return.

In any case, *Dallas* was so popular, both in the United States and around the world, that it went on for 13 seasons, with the last episode going out on the CBS Network in the USA in 1991. Some of the main characters, in particular J.R. Ewing (Larry Hagman), the evil, scheming and philandering oldest son who runs Ewing Oil, and his long-suffering wife, Sue Ellen (Linda Gray), became household names and still live on today in the collective cultural memory as emblems of global television history. It is safe to say that *Dallas* possesses a mythical status, not just in television culture, but also in global popular culture more generally.

When I wrote *Watching Dallas*, I was especially interested in exploring fresh ways of understanding the cultural significance of popular television. At that time, the study of television was dominated by a psychological approach, often concerned with the (presumably damaging) behavioural effects of television on vulnerable viewers. The rapid ascent of television as *the* leisure medium in suburban homes in the post-war period, especially in the United States, contributed to this pathologised view of TV viewing. Television was seen as a medium that may be instrumental to social dysfunction or cultural decline, not as a cultural form whose aesthetic, narrative and generic characteristics were worth studying in their own right (for early exceptions, see Horace Newcomb²; Raymond Williams³). I attended two summer schools organised by the British Film Institute, which proved to be very formative for the development of a new field of television studies in the United Kingdom, and for my own intellectual development. The first one focused broadly on ‘Television Fictions: Institutions, Forms and Audiences’, held at the University of Lancaster in 1981, and opened up an intellectual space for the serious study of television fiction as ‘texts’. The second summer school, held in the following year at the University of Stirling and titled, ‘Who Does Television Think You Are?’ put the theoretical question of the televisual mode of address and spectatorship on the agenda. This was a time when a more humanities-based approach of ‘television studies’ began to take its paradigmatic shape, borrowing from the much more well-developed theoretical apparatus of film studies on the one hand, and the burgeoning work in cultural and media studies on the other. To this day, the critical study of television remains informed by, and derives its intellectual fertility from, this combination of formal study of television texts (genres, aesthetics, forms) and their embedding within anthropological and sociological contexts (viewer subjectivities, audiences, social and cultural formations and conditions of reception).

Watching Dallas was a particular application of these then new approaches. It was sheer coincidence that *Dallas* was at the height of its popularity in the Netherlands, where I was living then, around that time, just when I started to do my studies that eventually led to the book. At that time, I felt a sense of urgency about writing the book: I felt that it was an important cultural-political task to present a more nuanced, multi-dimensional and culturally sensitive perspective on popular television; to intervene in public discourse about it, which, at

² Horace Newcomb, 1974, *TV: The Most Popular Art*, Anchor.

³ Raymond Williams, 1974, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Routledge.

that time, in Western Europe at least, was still highly dominated by what I called the ‘ideology of mass culture’. *Dallas* was, after all, not only extremely popular – in terms of viewing figures – but was also, precisely because it was so popular, the subject of heated public debate among intellectual elites, most of whom expressed grave concern about the show’s impact and influence. It is not for nothing that the then French minister of culture, Jack Lang, called *Dallas* the ‘symbol of American imperialism’. In my view, such blanket rejection, based on the dismissal of this TV show as proof of the hegemonic cultural power of the United States, was insufficient and one-sided. As many cultural theorists have since reiterated, people are not ‘cultural dopes’: popularity always says something about real desires and aspirations amongst audiences, real senses of connection and identification that cannot simply be dismissed and argued away, for example, as ‘false consciousness’ or as a simple marketing effect (see John Fiske⁴).

One of the most frustrating things about the public intellectual debate about *Dallas* that was raging across Western Europe at that time, was how it was generally based on unsubstantiated assumptions about audiences, who were always relegated as ‘them’, not ‘us’. In the construction of this cultural divide, I suggested in my book, what tended to be snubbed was a politics of pleasure: not only were *Dallas* fans ridiculed as stupid masses; they were also, significantly, feminised. It is for this reason that so many of the viewers who admitted to enjoying watching *Dallas*, most of whom were women, felt the need to be apologetic about their own viewing pleasure: they had a strong – and uneasy – awareness that in the dominant social hierarchy of value theirs was a lowly pleasure. So an important aim of *Watching Dallas*, the book, was to critique the arrogant ideological work of distinction that propped up this social hierarchy of value.⁵ One way to subvert this ideology was emphasising the active ways in which viewers constructed meaning when watching the show, and more importantly, the multiplicity of ways in which the show was given meaning by different viewers. The idea of the ‘active audience’ was one of the most prominent concepts that the new television studies used to debunk the prevailing presumption that watching television was a simple, passive activity (see David Morley⁶).

Obviously, the notion that audiences are ‘active’ and are able to construct a variety of meanings from soap operas has since acquired the status of self-evident truth in the field of television and cultural studies, so much so that it has become a ‘banal’ statement that seems to be no longer worth asserting⁷. Nevertheless, many studies have since focused on the ways in which particular soap operas – whether it was *Neighbours* (Grundy Television, 1985–) among Punjabi youth in London⁸ or *The Young and Restless* (Bell Dramatic Serial Inc./CBS, 1973–) in Trinidad⁹ – were taken up by audiences around the world, and this approach is still, I would argue, one of the more versatile epistemological approaches for television studies today. Although the simple emphasis on active meaning production as such no longer suffices: what is more important, theoretically and empirically, is to analyse precisely *how*

⁴ John Fiske, 1987, *Television Culture*, Methuen.

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, 1984, *Distinction* [trans. Richard Nice], Harvard University Press.

⁶ David Morley, 1992, *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies*, Routledge.

⁷ Meaghan Morris, 1990, ‘Banality in Cultural Studies’, in Patricia Mellencamp, (ed.), *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Indiana University Press, pp. 14-43.

⁸ Marie Gillespie, 1995, *Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change*, Routledge.

⁹ Daniel Miller, 1992, ‘*The Young and the Restless* in Trinidad: A Case of the Local and the Global in Mass Consumption’, in Eric Hirsch and Roger Silverstone, eds, *Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Spaces*, Routledge, pp. 163-82.

audiences make sense of the soap operas they watch, in which contexts, and with what kinds of social and cultural implications. That is, in my view questions about television and its audiences are of continuing interest as a way of understanding contemporary culture, because of what they can say about our current global condition in all its varieties and differentiations. Before I go further into this, however, let me first go back to *Dallas* and the way it was received in the early 1980s.

The Rise of Irony

In *Watching Dallas* I described two major ways of enjoying the show. Most female fans loved the show through identification with its melodramatic imagination, that is, by adopting a viewing position that affirms the emotional realism of a ‘tragic structure of feeling’ represented by the soap opera: these viewers enjoyed being ‘swept away’ by the heightened, if not exaggerated, emotional highs and lows of the narrative. What others may dismiss as overdone sentimentality was what attracted these viewers and was precisely why they were hooked to the show. Many letter writers who wrote to me expressed this mode of melodramatic pleasure in *Dallas*: they enjoyed crying, desiring, laughing or feeling fearful or angry with the characters as the story moved along. Essential to this experience of pleasure, then, was an emotional engagement with the show: ‘I love watching *Dallas* because I like being swept away by the emotions.’ For these viewers, issues of aesthetic judgement are redundant: they do not care whether *Dallas* is a ‘quality’ text or not, as TV critics might consider.

This affective mode of pleasure, which is based on taking melodrama seriously, can be contrasted by a very different mode of enjoyment; what I called ironic pleasure. This is a mode of viewing that is informed by a more intellectually distancing, superior subject position which could afford having pleasure in the show while simultaneously expressing a confident knowingness about its supposedly ‘low’ quality. Irony, then, was a way of relating to *Dallas* by cunningly having its cake and eating it too: ‘I love watching it *because* it is so bad . . .’ The ironic viewing position is a socially and culturally powerful stance; one that pokes fun at, and consequently neutralises, the melodramatic imagination which was precisely the source of viewing pleasure for so many serious *Dallas* fans. The latter, I argued, found pleasure through absorbing emotional identification with the narrative excesses of the text, not by taking ironic distance from it. Irony, in short, is a form of cultural capital that empowers those who possess it to construct a relativist relationship to television; it is appreciative of its pleasures but not fully succumbed to it; ‘in the know’ about its textual tricks and therefore able to good humouredly play with them.

What we have seen in the past few decades is that this ironic viewing attitude has become an increasingly prevalent way of relating to popular television, especially among younger audiences. As the pervasiveness of television culture has become an entirely naturalised feature of everyday life, and as audiences have become more skilful in reading television and the peculiarities of its generic conventions, they also tend to take it less seriously, have a more sceptical stance towards it, and are more willing and capable of mocking its perceived artificiality and disingenuousness.

What I would argue, then, is that from the 1980s onwards a mainstreaming of postmodern irony has taken place in popular television culture. We can see this spreading out of postmodern irony across the cultural field reflected in the narrative strategies of some of the most memorable TV fictions in the years after *Dallas*. Let me illuminate this by contrasting

Dallas with its main contemporary rival, *Dynasty* (Richard & Esther Shapiro Productions/ABC, 1981–89). *Dallas* and *Dynasty* are often mentioned in the same breath by commentators to refer to the infamous genre of opulent primetime soap opera that both epitomised, but to me it is the subtle but significant difference between the two that is worth noting. While *Dallas*'s melodramatic conventions still remained on *this* side of emotional realism and believability, drawing viewers compellingly towards a stance of sentimental involvement, the primetime soap *Dynasty*, which was hugely popular around the same time, drew viewers in through a more ironic, self-mocking sensibility: it exhibited elements of tongue-in-cheek self-parody in its deliberate use of outlandish hyperbole and outrageous overstatement, not least in the classy, superbitch character of Alexis Colby played by Joan Collins. Much more than *Dallas* then, *Dynasty* was a self-reflexive postmodern text that preposterously attracted attention to itself as artful cunning and trickery rather than serious melodrama. It is telling that *TV Guide* declared not *Dallas* but *Dynasty* the best primetime soap of the 1980s, asserting that its 'campy opulence gave it a superb, ironic quality – in other words, it was great trash'¹⁰. It was also *Dynasty*, not *Dallas*, that became a fetishised object of queer culture at that time. As Jane Feuer observed, '*Dallas* . . . lacked the camp undercurrent that propelled *Dynasty* to the center of gay male culture during the mid-1980s'¹¹. Yet, as Feuer goes on, it is these same camp qualities that made *Dynasty* a hit in mainstream women's culture as well, which was becoming increasingly susceptible to the ironic viewing attitude that a show such as *Dynasty* invited to adopt. In short, by the 1990s 'straight' melodrama had become unfashionable, while irony had become trendy and cool.

We can see this in the ascent of internationally successful, female-oriented Hollywood TV drama series from the mid to late 1980s onwards, such as *Moonlighting* (ABC Circle Films/ABC, 1985–89), *Melrose Place* (Spelling Television/Fox Network, 1992–99) and *Ally McBeal* (David E. Kelley Productions/ Fox Network, 1997–2002), all of which deftly combined the appeals of sentimental melodramatic feeling and ironic playfulness – a generic mutation that has come to be called 'dramedy', the self-conscious, bitter-sweet blending of drama and comedy. More recent, fabulously successful series such as *Sex and the City* (Sex and the City Productions/HBO, 1998–2004) and *Desperate Housewives* (Cherry Productions/ABC, 2004–) continue this new emphasis on treating the trials and tribulations of women's (and men's) modern lives with teasing pathos and a light-hearted penchant for the absurd. Irony has become integral to the structure of feeling articulated in these shows, in a way that was not at all the case in *Dallas*, a show that derived its compelling appeal – for a great majority of viewers at least – precisely by keeping irony delicately at bay. This current dominance of knowing irony has been associated with the rise of a postfeminist sensibility, where irony is used 'as a way of establishing a safe distance between oneself and particular sentiments of beliefs, at a time when being passionate about anything or appearing to care too much seems to be "uncool"'¹².

In retrospect, then, I can see how the moment of *Dallas* – around 1980 – was really a turning point in the history of global television fiction. A show like *Dallas* would never have been able to become the global hit that it could be then, not least because it would have looked datedly 'uncool' now, no longer in touch with the current, more explicitly ironic structure of feeling that has come to dominate Hollywood television drama – and postmodern and

¹⁰ 'The Best Prime-Time Soaps', 1993, *TV Guide*, 17 April.

¹¹ Jane Feuer, 1995, *Seeing Through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism*, bfi Publishing, p. 132.

¹² Rosalind Gill, 2007, 'Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(2): 159.

postfeminist Western culture more generally – today, what Kim Akass and Janet McCabe, in their edited collection on *Sex and the City*, call the ‘age of un-innocence’¹³. An interesting illustration of this great shift in *zeitgeist* is the fact that the present remake of *Dallas* as a feature film is being prepared by Gurinder Chadha, the British-Asian director of sweet ironic postcolonial films such as *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) and *Bride and Prejudice* (2004). Chadha’s description of the changes in her early twenty-first century version of *Dallas*, in comparison with the 1980s TV original, illuminates precisely the subtle transition from sentimental melodrama to ironic excess. Chadha’s version of *Dallas* may look more like *Dynasty*, at least in terms of its camp sensibility:

It’s the *Dallas* we know, but it’s gone global. I think of it as high trash with a political edge. The joy of it is that you can take it in crazy directions and it’s still believable. There are references to Enron, and where before JR [Ewing] would have had bent senators on his payroll, now it goes right to the top of the White House and he’s orchestrating a coup in a Third World country to get their oil¹⁴.

Chadha’s comments also point to a crucial, more encompassing cultural transformation since 1980: the acceleration of what we have come to call ‘globalisation’. It is hardly imaginable that the term globalisation was not generally known 25 years ago, given today’s common sense understanding that we live in ‘a globalised world’. And this brings me to the broader historical context of change in television culture around the world since *Dallas*: a global culture that is now radically different from what it looked like around 1980. So what happened?

Going Global

Dallas has played a pivotal role in the dissemination of the Hollywood soap opera form in television culture around the world. But while in the 1980s all the talk was of American cultural imperialism, associated with fears of a wholesale colonisation of local and national television cultures by the US product, today we know that what actually happened was much more complex and contradictory. To put it simply, US popular TV became both more powerful and less hegemonic, both more influential and less popular. The conceptual shift from ‘cultural imperialism’ to ‘globalisation’ serves to capture this contradictory complexity. While the former – cultural imperialism – implies a mechanistic, one-way process of homogenisation and absorption of the culture of the colonised into the culture of the all-powerful coloniser, the latter, globalisation, as many authors have pointed out, refers to a much more incoherent and multilateral transnational process, the cultural outcomes and impacts of which have been far more unpredictable¹⁵. The result, as Arjun Appadurai remarks, is a ‘new global cultural economy . . . which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models but must be comprehended through the more fluid model of global cultural flow, in which the United States is no longer the puppeteer of a world system of images but is only one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes’¹⁶.

¹³ Janet McCabe with Kim Akass, 2004, ‘Introduction: Welcome to the Age of Un-Innocence’, in Akass and McCabe, (eds), *Reading Sex and the City: Critical Approaches*, I.B. Tauris, p. 1.

¹⁴ Geraldine Bedell, 2006, ‘Gurinder Chadha: the Interview’, *Observer*, 16 July, pp. 10–1.

¹⁵ Arjun Appadurai, 1996, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press; John Tomlinson, 1999, *Globalization and Culture*, Polity.

¹⁶ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, pp. 31–2.

Appadurai's observation here may be somewhat overstated: the United States has not been reduced to just 'one node' in the complex transnational image landscape; it still commands enormous power in the global cultural economy, as the outflow of US film and television to other corners of the world continues to far outstrip the inflow of cultural product from elsewhere onto American screens (which, as we know, is extremely minimal). Nevertheless, his overall description of a more polycentric, if not decentralised, transnational image space is a useful starting point for understanding the state of affairs in global television culture today. This global TV culture has vastly expanded since the 1980s, both in the West and in the non-West – a development that is part and parcel of the rapid globalisation of neo-liberal, capitalist modernity in the past few decades¹⁷. But while this global capitalist modernity represents an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, it has also spawned the proliferation of new versions of modern culture – including television culture – that stress the significance of particular identities and their difference from hegemonic Americanism. In short, this global culture is characterised by simultaneous homogenisation and heterogenisation, sameness and difference.

To put it more concretely, let us return once again to *Dallas*. *Dallas*'s global success in the 1980s was also, ironically, a harbinger of the partial deconstruction of global American hegemony on primetime television. An often mentioned post-*Dallas* development in Western Europe, for example, was the adoption of the melodramatic soap opera format by national television industries, which gave rise to national versions of *Dallas* that proved to be much more popular among local audiences than imported, mostly American programmes¹⁸. This is a process that has been called 'glocalization'¹⁹, referring to the indigenisation of imported conventions and genres to suit the cultural tastes, knowledges and concerns of the local. Interestingly, then, in global terms TV drama since *Dallas* has not, despite former French Minister of Culture Jack Lang's fears, become more uniformly Americanised. Instead, the success of *Dallas* itself has led to the 'glocalization' of the soap opera genre: there has been a standardisation of format and formula (of the multi-episode TV narrative focusing on everyday dilemmas of modern living), but narrative content tends to be locally inflected and locally produced, using local actors, local idioms, local stories.

These developments have major implications for critical television studies. In an important way, some of the most interesting contributions to the field now come from anthropologists, who typically focus on ethnographic studies in particular locales. For example, Lisa B. Rofel studied the enormously popular Chinese soap opera *Yearnings* (CCTV, 1991) in the early 1990s,²⁰ Lila Abu-Lughod looked at the significance of melodramatic soap operas in Egypt²¹ and Purnima Mankekar has done an acclaimed study of popular television in India²². Taken together, such studies demonstrate how the most popular soap operas have become crucial

¹⁷ Chris Barker, 1997, *Global Television*, Blackwell.

¹⁸ Alessandro Silj, 1988, *East of Dallas: The European Challenge to American Television*, bfi Publishing.

¹⁹ Roland Robertson, 1995, *Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity*, Sage.

²⁰ Lisa B. Rofel, 1994, 'Yearnings: Televisual Love and Melodramatic Politics in Contemporary China', *American Ethnologist*, 21(4): 700–22.

²¹ Lila Abu-Lughod, 1995, 'The Objects of Soap Opera: Egyptian Television and the Cultural Politics of Modernity', in Daniel Miller, (ed.), *Worlds Apart: Modernity Through the Prism of the Local*, Routledge, pp. 190–210.

²² Purnima Mankekar, 2000, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: Television, Womanhood and Nation in Modern India*, Oxford University Press.

sites for the articulation of local cultures worldwide, resonating with the lifeworlds of national audiences as they struggle to come to terms with the cultural challenges of a globalised capitalist modernity.

At the conceptual level, then, critical television studies as a field has had to come to terms with two interrelated principles when studying the flow of global television culture today: *proliferation* and *diversity*. It is interesting to note, for example, that not a single US soap opera since *Dallas* has managed to attain a similarly mythical global status and following around the world. An important reason for this, I would suggest, is that US television no longer attracts the almost universal fascination it could command in an earlier period, when American cultural hegemony was still less actively contested. In many parts of the world that cultural hegemony has been on the wane precisely because of the emergence of local or regional alternatives. One implication of this is the need to ask questions about the *cultural specificity* of particular, especially non-Western television cultures, and to be careful of not imposing Eurocentric assumptions on our understandings of such cultural formations. This also necessitates a self-reflexive interrogation of the specificity – that is, non-universality – of Western ways of engaging with television. In this way, analysing global television culture may also be a way of enhancing cross-cultural understanding, by highlighting the subtly different meaning structures that people in other parts of the world inhabit as TV viewers. Television drama, and especially soap opera, is a particularly valuable means into this, because it deals so prominently with the cultural intimacies of feeling.

An important example is the affective structure of postmodern irony that I discussed earlier. We might wonder whether this particular structure of feeling, which has become so prevalent in contemporary popular culture in the Anglophone West – and which, as I remarked, has found expression in the relative decline of sentimental melodrama and the ascendancy of the so-called ‘dramedy’ – is a peculiarity of contemporary Western culture that may not have the same salience in other parts of the world? While such a question would merit thorough empirical research that I cannot provide here, it is intriguing enough to speculate on some of its ramifications, which I will do through a brief discussion of recent East Asian TV drama.

East Asian TV Drama

During the 1990s the East Asian television landscape was swept by the huge popularity of so-called Japanese ‘trendy dramas’. These stylish, gorgeous-looking, youth-oriented mini-series generally tell stories of romantic relationships among young professionals in contemporary urban settings. The most famous of these was *Tokyo Love Story* (Fuji Television Network), which first aired in Japan in 1991. The story features the heroine Rika Akana (Honami Suzuki), a strong and independent woman who takes the initiative in both career and relationships. She is in love with her old workmate Kanchi Nagao (Yuji Oda), a good but rather indecisive weak man. He is attracted to another woman, Satomi Sekiguchi (Narumi Arimori), who is much more traditional and passive than Rika. At first Satomi was in a relationship with Kanchi’s best friend, Kenichi Mikami (Yosuke Eguchi), but when it broke up, she and Kanchi got together and married. Rika maintained her interest in Kanchi until the end, and moved to the United States for work. The drama ends with their unexpected reunion in Tokyo years later, when Rika showed no regrets. A DramaWiki entry gives the following synopsis for the drama series:

When Kanchi . . . first came to Tokyo to work, he is full of uncertainties. He is ‘lost’ in his work and his love relationship is in a mess. During those times, Rika . . . , his

colleague, always encourages and helps him. Though they fall for each other once, all this comes quick and ends fast. Rika is simply too 'energetic' and her love is simply too 'heavy' for Kanchi²³.

Tokyo Love Story reached extreme levels of popularity in Japan itself in 1991, and became a big hit in many parts of East and South-East Asia in the 1990s, launching the rise of a Japanese cultural transnationalism through popular culture throughout the region²⁴. What, then, is this transnational cultural zone created by Japanese TV fiction? What kind of cultural affinity do they articulate, and for whom? *Tokyo Love Story* and its successors seem to have been most popular amongst middle-class Asian youth in metropolitan cities: Hong Kong, Taipei, Seoul. Obviously the combination of style and fashion with a romantic narrative of the pursuit of love and happiness has resonated with thousands of young Asian fans, especially young women. What does this popularity mean, especially in cultural historical terms?

In the past few decades these Asian countries have gone through a modernisation process whose pace was much faster than in the West, characterised by rapid changes in the economic, urban and technological environment as well as in lifestyles, norms and values. Young people in the 1990s were among the first generation faced with the task of figuring out how to live in a modernised Asian context – morally, ethically, emotionally. What does it mean to be modern – for example, in terms of gender roles and sexual relationships – from an Asian point of view? Japanese trendy dramas resonated with young Asian audiences because, as Mamoru Ito points out, 'they were thematized as the problems of personal lifestyle born out of the uncertainty of relationship itself [*sic*], which reflected the consequence of changes in contemporary society'²⁵. That is, in contemporary Asian popular culture, the main reference point is not some generic image of global modernity, which tends to be equated with 'America' or 'the West'. Its preferred urban imaginary is not 'New York' or 'London', but 'Tokyo', which in the 1990s was still the most 'advanced' modern city in Asia (a situation which is changing today with the very rapid rise of Chinese cities such as Beijing and Shanghai). Modernisation may unavoidably involve a fundamental element of 'westernisation', but Asian versions of modernity – as a way of life – are by no means a simple replication of the Western model. Just as 'New York' has been the symbolic epitome of urban modernity across the Western world throughout the twentieth-century, so 'Tokyo', for many young Asians, would seem to be the symbol for East Asian cultural modernity, the idealised location for 'trendy' modern life, characterised by material affluence, consumerism, female independence and individualism.

Tokyo Love Story, then, captured the new kinds of challenges life in the new, modern Asian context provokes. Or perhaps more precisely, the show expressed *what it feels like* to grow up modern and Asian in the late twentieth-century, not just in terms of substance but also in terms of style – the ethics as well as poetics of everyday life. What does it feel like to live in societies that have gone through a cultural transformation of 'traditional' to 'postmodern' within not much more than one generation? How does one live through the new gender and

²³ *Tokyo Love Story*, DramaWiki, http://wiki.d-addicts.com/Tokyo_Love_Story, accessed 4 July 2007.

²⁴ Koichi Iwabuchi, 2002, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*, Duke University Press; Koichi Iwabuchi, (ed.), 2004, *Feeling Asian Modernities: Transnational Consumption of Japanese TV Dramas*, Hong Kong University Press.

²⁵ Mamoru Ito, 'The Representation of Femininity in Japanese Television Dramas of the 1990s', in Koichi Iwabuchi, (ed.), *Feeling Asian Modernities*, p. 27.

generational divides it has created? How does one come to terms with the emptying out of traditions – filial piety, for example, or the all-importance of family and patriarchy – which have been held so central to Asian cultures for centuries?

Of course, there is no such thing as a monolithic ‘Asianmodernity’, especially not at the level of everyday culture and experience. The Tokyo of *Tokyo Love Story* is an imaginary Tokyo, read or misread in subtly different ways in different Asian contexts. Imagination and fantasy – attuned and responsive to the situated idiosyncracies of local experience – are always involved in the consumption of TV drama and of popular culture more generally. Thus, as Koichi Iwabuchi cautioned²⁶, cultural proximity is always also accompanied by cultural distance; affinities converge and diverge at the same time, and it is difficult to pin down exactly how. But precisely because of this complex entanglement of similarity and difference, looking at the regional patterns of popularity of TV drama is a useful way of gaining some insight into the contemporary structures of feeling, which are both shared and not shared by young people in metropolitan Asia. Interestingly, it is the *intimacy* of TV drama that makes it so analytically revealing: an intimacy that is not just personal, but cultural²⁷.

Young people living in Hong Kong or Singapore may be watching US shows such as *Sex in the City*, but the phenomenal popularity of trendy dramas such as *Tokyo Love Story* (whose subject matter has elements of similarity with the US ‘dramedy’) have led me to wonder about subtle differences in prevailing structures of feeling. In particular, it is remarkable that the most popular Japanese dramas are not infused by the ironic knowingness that has become so pervasive in US shows. On the contrary, it is precisely the representation of a tragic structure of feeling that seems to be the source of popularity of Japanese trendy dramas. As Toru Ota, the creator of *Tokyo Love Story* remarked, ‘what most appeals to the young female audience in general is unrequited love’²⁸. Indeed, asked why *Tokyo Love Story* remains top of the list of people’s favourite dramas in Japan, Ota points emphatically to its melodramatic elements: ‘even today, dramas that can make you cry become popular dramas. I believe there are very few dramas before *Tokyo Love Story* that could really make the audience sympathize with the character and weep for her. The advent of *Tokyo Love Story* showed the audience that dramas can make them weep, and to *hamaru* (be absorbed, immersed) in dramas can be pleasurable’²⁹. In this sense, the appeal of *Tokyo Love Story* is comparable more to that of *Dallas* than that of *Dynasty*, articulating an emotional realism that takes intimate experience seriously. As one *Tokyo Love Story* fan writes in her personal website:

Rika and Kanchi work together. Rika is outgoing type and loves Kanchi from the beginning. Kanchi is always wondering and twisted around by Rika. Rika wants him to love her and Kanchi once loves her but because they are too different they can’t live along. Rika is too energetic but in fact she is always lonely³⁰.

The contemporary Asian appetite for melodrama is even more pronouncedly evident in the Korean TV drama series that have taken the region’s TV audiences by storm in the early

²⁶ Iwabuchi, 2002, *Recentring Globalization*.

²⁷ Michael Herzfeld, 1997, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*, Routledge; Ien Ang, ‘The Cultural Intimacy of TV Drama’, in Koichi Iwabuchi, (ed.), *Feeling Asian Modernities*, pp. 303–9.

²⁸ Toru Ota, ‘Producing (Post-)Trendy Japanese TV Dramas’, in Koichi Iwabuchi, (ed.), *Feeling Asian Modernities*, p. 73.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

³⁰ *Tokyo Love Story*, http://www.sempai.org/~mwduncan/tokyo_love_story.shtml, accessed 4 July 2007.

twenty-first century³¹. One of the most popular was *Winter Sonata/Gyeongju yeonga* (KBS Productions, 2002), a 20-episode series with an unabashedly sentimental melodramatic narrative not dissimilar to Douglas Sirk's 1950s film melodramas. The DramaWiki website gives this synopsis of the series:

Winter Sonata begins when Joon-sang [Yong-Jun Bae] moves to a new high school in search for his biological father. Yu-jin [Ji-Woo Choi] and Sang-hyuk [Yong-Ha Park] have been close childhood friends; though Sang-hyuk wants to be more than a friend, Yu-jin sees him merely as a brother. On a trip together with some other high school mates, Oh Chelin [Sol-mi Park], Jin-suk [Hae-Eun Lee] and Yong-kuk [Seung-Soo Yu], Yu-jin is saved after an accident by Joon-sang and after that they get to be really close and she opens up his cold heart. However, circumstances and fate dictate that their love will never be. He abruptly disappears from their lives. Ten years later the old High School buddies get together to celebrate Yu-jin and Sang-hyuk's soon to be wedding. Yu-jin who was deeply in love with Joon-sang, still has this fire in her heart for him, even though he's been out of her life for a decade. But at this party Oh Chelin's new boyfriend arrives, and he looks just the same as Joon-sang. Could it be him or is Yu-jin only dreaming?³²

Winter Sonata is only one of the enormously popular Korean TV dramas that have swept through East Asia in the past few years, and most of them have a melodramatic character and appeal. While these Korean dramas tend also to thematise the lives of young people in modern urban settings, what distinguishes them from the Japanese dramas, in narrative terms, is their focus on family relationships as integral to the lifeworld of the characters. When I spoke with a few passionate Hong Kong fans of *Winter Sonata* a few years ago, a group of professional women in their thirties and forties, they indicated that the reason they loved the show was its unconditional, nostalgic embrace of the ideal of 'true love' that is no longer current in the fast-paced contemporary life in modern Asia. For these viewers, as for many viewers of *Dallas* in the West in the 1980s, irony is irrelevant for their viewing pleasure: they confirm Ota's suggestion that what gives them enjoyment is the opportunity to weep.

Of course, I am not suggesting here that irony does not exist in Asian popular culture, although its articulation and circulation among audiences would need separate examination and analysis. Moreover, Asian audiences are as internally diverse, fragmented and dynamic as they are in 'the West'. There are also many structural similarities in lived culture across the globalised world today; hence, it is important not to homogenise or objectify neither 'Asianness' nor 'Westernness'. As in the West, the last few decades have proved a profoundly confusing and perplexing time for people in Asia, a time of great affluence but also economic crisis, a time of great cultural uncertainty and change. Globalisation has meant greater cross-cultural interconnection and confluence, but it has not erased subtle differences – least of all at the intimate level of feeling. Generic variations and local/regional specificities within the landscape of global television fictions are an excellent site for understanding how, in the current world, difference and disjuncture persist beyond the surface of a globalised cultural modernity. The differential appeal and resonance of melodrama across the globe is a case in point.

³¹ Beng Huat Chua and Koichi Iwabuchi, (eds), forthcoming, *East Asian Pop Culture: Approaching the Korean Wave*, Hong Kong University Press.

³² *Winter Sonata*, DramaWiki, http://wiki.d-addicts.com/Winter_Sonata, accessed 4 July 2007.