

## **Dallas with balls: televised sport, soap opera and male and female pleasures**

BARBARA O'CONNOR

School of Communications, Dublin City University, Dublin 9, Ireland

RAYMOND BOYLE

Communication Department, Glasgow Caledonian University, 70 Concaddens Road, Glasgow G4 0BA, Scotland, UK

Two of the most popular of television genres, soap opera and sports coverage have been very much differentiated along gender lines in terms of their audiences. Soap opera has been regarded very much as a 'gynocentric' genre with a large female viewing audience while the audiences for television sport have been predominantly male. Gender differentiation between the genres has had implications for the popular image of each. Soap opera has been perceived as inferior; as mere fantasy and escapism for women while television sports has been perceived as a legitimate, even edifying experience for men.

In this article the authors challenge the view that soap opera and television sport are radically different and argue that they are, in fact, very similar in a number of significant ways. They suggest that both genres invoke similar structures of feeling and sensibility in their respective audiences and that television sport is a 'male soap opera'. They consider the ways in which the viewing context of each genre is related to domestic life and leisure, the ways in which the textual structure and conventions of each genre invoke emotional identification, and finally, the ways in which both genres re-affirm gender identities.

*'Explain the success of snooker on television?*

*"Simple, it's Dallas with balls."*

Barry Hearn, sports entrepreneur, interview with Raymond Boyle, April 1987.

### **Introduction**

Two of the most popular genres within that most popular of entertainment, television viewing, are soap opera and sports coverage. The television serial both naturalistic and melodramatic has since its early television days enjoyed phenomenal audience success. During the mid seventies and early eighties prime time soaps like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* reached unprecedented audience ratings across the western world. Television sports coverage can attract respectable audiences outside peak viewing time, and can also attract extremely high ratings for specific events such as the 1990 World Cup, which broke viewing records both in Britain and Ireland<sup>1</sup>. In viewing terms, both soap opera and television sport are major success stories. Not only are soaps and sport among the most popular television programmes but they also provide some of the most 'talked about' television. They act as important coins of exchange in social interaction. Be it at work or in the pub, discussion of the match becomes a common point of identification between men, friends and strangers alike: sport constitutes an important element of 'male talk'. In a similar way women discuss the latest episode of *Neighbours*, *Eastenders*, *Coronation Street* or *Glenroe* and mull over what has happened and what should have happened. What is striking about these discussions of course, is their gender specificity.

The popularity of each of these genres has been very much divided along gender lines. Soap opera has been popularly perceived as a gynocentric genre both in terms of addressing the female spectator by its textual strategies and of having a

largely female audience. This view has also been corroborated in scholarly research on the subject (see for example, Hobson, 1982; Brunsdon, 1981; Morley, 1986; Geraghty, 1990). Geraghty argues convincingly that soap opera is indeed a predominantly female genre:

Although I have not argued that the pleasures of identification and involvement in these programmes are available only to women, I have proposed that they do address women in a particular way, that women are the skilled readers by whom the programmes are best understood and that, unusually for much mainstream television, the programmes are orientated towards them in terms of the range of characters offered, the types of stories dealt with and the way in which women characters operate as the norm through whom appropriate judgements can be made (Geraghty, 1990, p. 167).

Geraghty also points out that there are recent indications that soap opera has extended its terms of address beyond the female spectator, and has consequently attracted an audience from a wider demographic range including men and teenagers. The male audience has been pulled in by the inclusion of aspects of genres such as the western and the thriller, which have traditionally been regarded as male. One only has to witness the final series of *Dallas* to see that this has been the case.

We would hypothesize, though, that it was the introduction of precisely these elements which was partially responsible for the alienation of the female viewer and the subsequent fall in ratings. We also feel that the extension of narrative organization, while worthy of further investigation, does not override the continuing importance of the more traditional narrative structure and we would concur with Geraghty that 'it is not necessary to overemphasize this [extension of narrative] since the prime time soaps have been particularly careful to continue the traditional role of strong women in soaps'. (Geraghty, 1990, p. 171).

The audiences for television sport continue to be predominantly male (although some sports such as tennis do attract large female audiences). While it is clear that some women do regularly watch television sport (despite the discouragement they may receive from some of television's treatment of sport, in particular football coverage), the schematic gender line-up remains valid. Evidence for this can be found in recent empirical research by Morrison who showed that sport and soaps provide by far the greatest margin of difference between gender in terms of popularity (Morrison, 1986). The gender division is not unconnected to the popular conception of each genre, with the former being perceived as of inferior quality, as fantasy and escapism for women, while the latter is perceived in the popular (male) imagination as a legitimate and even edifying experience. ' "Soap" was a term of derision, an expression which implied an over-dramatic, under-rehearsed presentation of trivial dramas blown out of all proportion to their importance' (Geraghty, 1990, p. 1).

Root has claimed that: 'the fact that soap operas are seen as female has helped to bring the whole form into disrepute. Just like needlework, which was demoted from an art to a craft when it started to be seen as a female rather than a male skill, soap opera suffers from the status of its viewers' (Root, 1986, p. 68). This antipathy towards soaps is clearly manifested in empirical audience research. In a study of the audiences for *Dallas*, conducted by one of the authors, the response of the men's groups to the serial was that it was just a women's programme. The following comment of one of the men was typical of the group: 'most of it is all romance.., too

much romance in it . . . sopiness which appeals to women more than men., and a bit of tragedy thrown in . . . women like that . . . , something that will have them crying at the end., romantic situations in it and the fact that women are downtrodden., there's so much of that in it and I think that's what the women like it for' (O'Connor, 1990, p. 23).

Indeed, these popular conceptions of soaps were mirrored in academe until recently. The soap opera as genre was hardly considered worthy of serious analysis, and it was only in the recent past that scholars, mostly female and feminist, have begun to explore the meanings and pleasures that soap opera afford. Interestingly for such a popular aspect of media output, television and press coverage of sport has until recently also been a neglected area of study within the fields of media and cultural studies.

In this paper we would like to challenge the idea that soap opera and televised sport are radically different. In fact we will argue that both are very similar in a number of significant ways. We will suggest that both genres invoke similar structures and feelings of sensibility in their respective audiences which lends support to the idea that television sport is in fact a 'male soap opera'. While there have been a number of references to the similarities between soap and televised sport, these have been mostly, journalistic, and there hasn't been any attempt to tease out similarities in any systematic way. The term 'male soap opera' was used by Margaret Morse (1983), who had overheard it in a conversation among female football fans. However she goes on to say that the only similarities that exist between the genres is in their importance for providing female and male fantasies respectively. We would like to contest this viewpoint, and illustrate the many ways in which there are parallels between both genres. We propose to do this by considering: (a) the ways in which the viewing context of each genre is related to domestic life and leisure, (b) the ways in which the textual structure and conventions of each genre invoke emotional identification, and (c) the ways in which both genres attempt to re-affirm gender identities.

### **Soap and sport**

'Televised sport continued to imitate soap opera during 1989, the ratings dominated by the serial adventures of snooker's Steves and episodes featuring football's Merseyside *family*'(*The Independent*, 7 March 1990).

The term 'soap' within the context of this paper is used in the broadest sense, referring to both melodramatic soaps such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, and to naturalistic ones such as *Glenroe* and *Eastenders*. We might think of each category as a continuous rather than an 'ideal type' since there are melodramatic elements in the naturalistic serials and, of course, naturalistic elements in the melodramatic. While recognizing that there are a number of distinctions between the melodramatic soaps and their more naturalistic counterparts, and indeed, between the US daytime and primetime soaps, these distinctions are not relevant to the main thrust of the analysis in this presentation.

Of particular interest to us here are some of the characteristics they have in common such as their broadcasting at frequent and regular intervals, their indeterminate (continuous) life span, their range of characters, and the introduction of multiple narrative strands which reach various stages of resolution.

The term 'television sport' encompasses a wide range of sporting activities, and some would argue non-sporting ones (darts, snooker?). All these activities have, to varying degrees, been subjected to the imposition of television's own institutional

codes and conventions. The changes that this process has had on our perception and understanding of sport in modern society has been dealt with elsewhere (Whannel, 1992; Goldlust, 1987; Hargreaves 1986). For reasons of space and convenience our attention in this paper is focused on two particular television sports: snooker and football. They provide an interesting contrast. One sport takes place indoors, the other out. Snooker is an individual sport that has embraced television, while football, a team game, has been wary of its relationship with the medium. The former is the most watched sport on British television, the latter is played and watched throughout the world.

While superficially it appears that television sport is 'actuality' and soap opera is constructed drama, on closer inspection this demarcation between fact and fiction becomes increasingly blurred. The difference between watching a live sporting event, and viewing a match live on television is considerable. Not only do geographical differences exist in the location of the spectator/viewer, but television has also transformed the event through a series of televisual codes and techniques. Sport has become a cultural form that is tailored for the needs of television.

Television does not simply relay the event, although it likes to portray this as being the case. It selects, organizes and makes sense of the event for the viewer. Birrel and Loy (1979), highlight five areas in which television has transformed sport into light entertainment. They highlight the reduction in the size of the image, the compression of time, the stopping and slowing of time, the isolation of individual events and the provision of additional information. In short, as in soap opera, television constructs, through a multiplicity of camera angles and televisual techniques, a visual and verbal narrative structure through which sport is made sense of for the viewer.

It is obvious though that there are a number of differences between the genres which need mentioning before developing the similarities. Sports programmes, while a definitely constructed commodity, are based on actual events. Soap on the other hand is a totally fictitious production though simulating real life situations -mimetic in form. Music is an important signifier in soaps and is a constant throughout the text. There is an increasing use of music in TV sports coverage as background to goal highlights and sports previews. Televised football and snooker are also accompanied by commentary, and by panels of experts who comment on the performance, elements which are absent from soap.

### **Pleasure and practice**

Perhaps it is appropriate at this point to broadly place ourselves in terms of our conceptualization of the television audience. Since we are dealing with popular entertainment genres, we feel that ideas are not the most important focus of interest. We would concur with Bourdieu (1984), when he says that popular pleasure is characterized by an immediate emotional or sensual involvement in the object of pleasure. We are interested, therefore, in understanding the more emotional, as opposed to the more cognitive aspects of audience responses (both are of course interconnected in a varied and complex way that cannot be addressed here). A useful concept for our purpose is that of 'structures of feeling and sensibility' which was originally coined by Raymond Williams, particularly in relation to social class, and developed by Terry Lovell (1981). The term refers to those dimensions (and for our purpose those gender related dimensions) of art and culture which cannot be reduced to ideas and would include such concerns as (a) the historically established gender

properties of aesthetic form and (b) the appropriateness of certain forms of gender habits and values.

Television viewing is itself a social practice and the forms and genres of television viewed must therefore be understood within the wider context of people's social position and cultural experiences. The differential gender experiences and cultural competences of men and women in our society have certain implications for the kind of television which they find most enjoyable. It is no surprise, for instance, that women's participation in sporting activities (despite increasing activity and visibility) remains low in comparison to men. Research confirms the view that it is still very much a masculine domain - a male bastion. While it is not our intention to propose a total correspondence between television viewing of sport and actual participation in sport, there is a high correlation, since the viewer needs some level of identification with the representations. Recent work illustrates this in the case of women's football, which at a participatory level has benefited from television exposure on Channel 4 (Williams and Woodhouse, 1991). More on this later when we look at the 1990 football World Cup. As Ang suggests: 'what matters is the possibility of identifying oneself with it in some way or other, to integrate into everyday life . . . popular pleasure is first and foremost a pleasure of recognition' (Ang, 1986, p. 20). Alternatively, men are not centrally involved with the discourses of the private and the personal - the stuff of soap opera. We would concur with Brunsdon who has argued that within the current social configuration it is women who process the cultural competences to decode and enjoy soap opera texts because they call on the traditionally feminine competences associated with the responsibility for 'managing' the sphere of personal life (Brunsdon, 1981).

The antipathy towards soap and sport manifested by men and women respectively creates a need (at least in one-television households) to negotiate a space within the domestic sphere for viewing. For men this does not represent a problem because the home is a place of leisure, a break from work in the public sphere. This is not the case for women, who, whether working outside the home or not, almost inevitably carry responsibility for domestic work and childcare. In other words, domestic leisure is for them contradictory, while men can quite easily relax away from work for blocks of time (e.g. Saturday afternoon) to watch their favourite sports programmes. While it has been argued that television viewing for women is characterized by distraction, and that men maintain dominance in terms of viewing choice (Morley, 1986), we would argue that women who are regular viewers of soaps negotiate a regular viewing space. Recent research by one of the authors supports this view (O'Connor, 1990). Men, conversing about their partner's viewing of soap, claimed they had to vacate the house on certain evenings because the female members of the household were watching *Dallas*. It is suggested therefore, that both men and women (with more difficulty) negotiate a space within the context of family viewing for both soap and sport.

### **Kicking to touch**

One of the main arguments of this paper is that television sports coverage exhibits many of the melodramatic elements which characterize soap opera. Peter Brooks considers melodrama to include the following elements: 'indulgence of strong emotionalism, moral polarization and schematization, extreme states of being, situations, action: overt villainy: persecution of the good and final reward of virtue: inflated and extravagant expression: dark plotting, suspense, breathtaking peripety' (Brooks, 1976, pp. 11-12). It is clear that almost all of these characteristics could be

equally applicable to television sport. An exploration of the above mentioned characteristics in both genres would probably be very fruitful, but is beyond the scope of this paper. We are selecting the 'indulgence of strong emotionalism' for analysis since one of the strongest parallels between sport and soap is the play of emotion and the invocation of a strong emotional response in the viewer. While women in our society are regarded as creatures of emotion, given to tears and outbursts at the least provocation, their emotional displays are 'tolerated'. However, there are strict limits imposed on the emotional displays by men, and sport is one of the few arenas in which emotionality is given a legitimate outlet. Paul Gascoigne is still a man in part because he *did* cry on a football pitch and one is tempted to treat some of the hyperbole that viewed Gascoigne as the personification of the 'new (English) man' with the degree of scepticism it deserves.

Emotional response in television sport is based to a large extent on identification with players and characters. There are a number of devices, both textual and contextual, operating to invoke such a response. In terms of context, familiarity with characters and players is a *sine qua non* of regular viewing. Regular viewers of soap opera know the history of each character and their place not only within the current narrative, but also their place and relationship to others in the past. Similarly, regular viewers of television football know not only the players in a particular match, but also the trajectory of their careers to date; their performances in other games, tournaments and such like. This type of viewing builds up a loyalty and support for favourite individuals and teams. Television sport attempts to construct and amplify the different characters on display to the television public.

The prolonged and continuous nature of the text-viewer relationship raises the issue of the nature of the text itself. There is no contention about the fact that the soap is an 'open' text. Given the conventions of the serial form, there can be no final closure. Despite claims to the contrary, television football is not a closed text, symbolized by a final result. As in the soap/serial, we argue that from the viewers point of view, the final score is only a temporary resolution, because the framework of viewing is that of an ongoing series, be it a league championship or cup competition. Both soap and televised sport are open texts, and it is precisely this openness which allows for multiple and complex identifications with players.

Emotional identification is encouraged by the process of personalization in each genre. This is achieved in a number of ways. One common way of increasing familiarity and knowledge of players and characters is through intertextuality, where other media cover the 'stars' of both popular television sport and soap. Tabloid newspapers and women's magazines lay bare the personal lives of both for the world to view. There is an increasing intermingling in popular discourse of the lives of characters and actors on the one hand, and of players on and off the field of play on the other. For example, Steve Davis, the most successful of the new era of television snooker stars, has not only appeared on chat shows, but has also hosted a quiz programme of his own. Gary Lineker has appeared on a range of television and radio programmes, among them *Desert Island Discs*. This process helps to reinforce the concept of the sportsperson as public property and media star.

Emotional identification is also encouraged through the textual strategies and practices (Whannel, 1992). One of the central techniques employed by television as it attempts to hold and build an audience is the continual forging of points of identification and emotional engagement between the medium and the viewer. Visual style is an important element in personalising the sporting event and enhancing identification, particularly the frequent use of close-ups. The closeup signals

emotional intensity; feelings deeply felt. The close-up cut away is the staple diet of snooker coverage, as we see players *feel* the pressure, and in some cases crack before our eyes. As Nick Hunter, former Assistant Head of Sport at the BBC, and a man instrumental in developing the manner in which television covers the game, commented:

'Sport is about people; you can't take faces away from sport, if you do all you have are footballs, cricket balls or snooker balls on the table, and people aren't going to sit and get interested in that. [with regard to snooker coverage] What I wanted to do was to involve the faces of the players almost as much as the balls . . . this meant lighting the players around the table, not just when they were playing a shot, but when they were sitting down supposedly at rest' (Interview with Raymond Boyle, 1987).

This trait of personalization also extends to coverage of team sports. The individual stars are highlighted before the event. In televised football this nominating of 'the players to watch', helps construct a series of sub-plots that are woven through the main fabric of the match itself. The roles that these characters portray are developed by television in conjunction with the printed media throughout the season. Both snooker and football on television provide an abundance of heroes and villains who reappear throughout television's sporting year.

Television sport, as television soaps, revolves around stars, stories and action. It relies on conflict and drama to attract not only the sports fan but also the elusive 'floating viewer'. In televised snooker the gladiatorial arena, the (barely!) suppressed emotion, and the lack of physical contact contrast with the elements on display in televised football. Here the pitch is portrayed as the battle field, the players as soldiers, the managers as generals. Each team must compete, organize, attack, regroup and win the battle in midfield. In the background the microphones pick up the chant from the fans, 'We're on the march with Graeme's army, we're going to Wembley'. The reciprocity between sporting and militaristic language is particularly acute in British media discourses, and is not as evident in the rest of Europe. (Blain *et al.*, 1993)

Television does not view football as graceful: a combination of skill, balance and aesthetic pleasure, it's a 'man's game'. It is important here to recognize the key role that the popular press plays in this process, as it increasingly sets the parameters within which sport is discussed. Snooker is also a predominately male preserve, but with different characteristics. We will come back to this latter. However it is important to note that while you can't lump television sport together as a homogenous entity, various sports do provide similar pleasures. As Mike Bury has noted: 'sport-games such as snooker offer a ceremonial display of important elements in modern popular culture; glamour, style, conflict and individualism, combined with deeper and older sources of meaning, namely restraint, order and harmony (Bury, 1986, p. 60).

### **Guys and dolls**

Not only do soaps and sport imply a gendered audience in terms of scheduling, etc, but they also address a gendered audience at a textual level; they imply, if you like, a gendered spectatorship. Both genres construct and confirm more vigorously than others certain kinds of male and female identity. They play on and evoke responses of masculine and feminine traits which are in opposition to each other. Televised sport affirms fantasies and realities of power, control and autonomous activity. Soap opera attempts to address and construct a female audience in terms of tolerance and passivity clustering around three areas of particular concern to women: the family, motherhood and romance.

With reference to the ways in which soaps construct a feminine spectator, Modleski has claimed that:

the characteristic narrative structures and textual operations of soap operas, because they demand multiple identification, posit the viewer as an 'ideal mother' - a person who possesses greater wisdom than all her children, whose sympathy is large enough to encompass the conflicting claims of her family (she identifies with them all), and who has no demands or claims of her own (she identifies with no one character exclusively). (Modleski, 1982, p. 70)

It has also been suggested that soaps posit states of passivity as pleasurable. In this context Modleski again has argued that narrative is constantly placing complex obstacles between desire and fulfilment and in this way makes anticipation of an end an end in itself. Ang (1986), also refers to the cultivation of passivity in the viewer of soaps. She claims that the 'melodramatic imagination' which structures women's viewing of soaps is a type of imagination which appears to express mainly a rather passive, fatalistic and individualistic reaction to a vague feeling of powerlessness and unease. She feels that this 'susceptibility' is related to the way in which women have become accustomed to facing situations psychologically and emotionally.

We acknowledge that this is a view which does not go unchallenged. In fact a number of writers argue the opposite, i.e. that soaps can be subversive of the patriarchal status quo (Feuer, 1984). Others, while not arguing explicitly for the progressive potential of soaps, do so implicitly by laying emphasis on the pleasures afforded to women by the genre, while eliding questions of power and hegemony (Ang, 1986). Yet other writers tend to conclude that the sexual politics of soap is an open question because of the sometimes contradictory positions offered to women (Geraghty, 1990).

Similar positions are taken in the debate about the ideology of romance - a core element in soaps. Some feminist writers have argued that they can be subversive of certain aspects of patriarchy such as bourgeois marriage and romantic love (Feuer, 1984). Lovell (1981) has referred to the significance of romance in the naturalistic serial, *Coronation Street*. She claims that because the serial has need for independent women, marriages cannot last and in this way the serial acknowledges the difficulty of maintaining the norms of romantic love and marriage: 'In a sense, the conventions of the genre are such that in the normal order of things in *Coronation Street* is precisely that of the broken marriage, temporary liaisons, availability for 'lasting romantic' love which in fact never lasts. This order, the reverse of the patriarchal norm, is in a sense interrupted by the marriages and 'happy family' interludes rather than vice versa' (Lovell, 1981, p. 50).

While Lovell admits the difficulty of knowing what constitutes order and what disorder, within the overall context of her argument, she seems to opt for the serial as subversive of romantic love.

Geraghty tends towards the opposite view. She discusses the positive way in which soaps validate women's experiences and competences, including romantic love, but also recognizes the limits of this dramatic space: 'The space offered to women by soap is thus a contradictory one. It allows 'women's issues' to be worked through and valued but endorses a female viewpoint only because it is so firmly based on the domestic and the personal; it allows its audience actively to enjoy the trials of the patriarch but reasserts the importance of familial relationships as a model for other kinds of love' (Geraghty, 1990, p. 197).

While the above arguments indicate that it is possible to take any one of a number of positions on the subject of the ideology of romance, it seems to us that



there is a strong case for claiming that soaps do indeed cultivate and perpetuate feelings of romantic love in their female audiences, despite many women's awareness of the contradictions within that ideology. From empirical work on the female audience conducted by one of the authors, it was clear that the romantic element was an important part of the attraction of *Dallas*. In this study (O'Connor, 1990), the women identified with what they saw as the emotional realism of the romantic narrative. These are some of the comments on a storyline involving Bobby and Pam Ewing who were resuming their relationship some time after their divorce: 'When Pare and Bobby broke up before, everyone was saying, 'Oh I hope they get back together again' and that one [episode viewed] was where they did and I found that good about it . . . they still love each other . . . , and it's really attractive . . . so from that point of view when I saw them getting back together again I bawled my eyes out . . . I thought it was beautiful' (O'Connor, 1990, p. 17). Ang's (1986) respondents, too, mention romance as one of the attractions of *Dallas*.

However, the ideological effect of soaps is still very much an open question. We must acknowledge that the positions offered to, and the meanings women take from soaps are not monolithic. But we feel it is important to go beyond an exclusively textual analysis and that further empirical investigation is necessary to further an understanding of the text-audience relationship among particular groups of women.

Turning to televised sport, football on television still remains a bastion of male identity. Indeed televised sport in general remains a key area in the wider cultural construction and reproduction of masculine and feminine characteristics. If women are accommodated within the discourses of televised football and snooker, it is in a marginal and trivial manner. Channel 4's coverage of women's football and the recent satellite coverage of the women's tournament in the World Snooker Masters have offered some hope for the future. In the case of football, a 1985 MORI poll suggested that women constituted 20% of the spectators who attended English League matches. Sport on television equates male sporting success with masculine superiority, thus television sport becomes a retreat in which male sexuality and sexual orientation go unchallenged (unlike female athletes who have been subjected to sex tests since 1962).

While snooker and football, as mediated through television, provide images of masculinity, they are somewhat different images. In snooker, there is the repressed emotion of the arena in which the two players attempt to dominate the other through their snooker prowess, while holding centre stage at the table. One reason perhaps why snooker enjoys a degree of popularity among the female population is that it makes the male body available, rather than the female, for the voyeuristic consumption of the viewer. This is something it appears that television (male) producers are aware of as they try to expand their television audience: 'David Hill, who runs the Sky Sports channel, succeeded in wooing women to watch cricket in Australia when he worked there, by ensuring that the cricketers were attractively attired and that the camera lingered on their bodies. It is, apparently, the 'bum not the ball' which attracts many women to TV sports' (*The Observer*, 24 May 1992).

Writing about why women watch sport on television, Poynton and Hartley, referring to Australian TV coverage of Australian Rules Football say: 'For the moment let us leave aside the recipe that turns footy into the intriguing fictions that would qualify it as soap opera for men to imbibe and an interesting text for women to digest. What attracted my interest were the images of male bodies' (Poynton and Hartley, 1990, p. 150). They also suggest that there are a number of different aspects

of masculinity on display for the viewer, some of which are distinctly uncomfortable for the specific variant of masculinity that is embedded in the culture of Australian Rules Football, and wider Australian society.

In contrast to snooker, football on British and Irish television displays the archetypal 'macho' image of sport: aggressive, competitive, and assertive; it exhibits all that is supposedly best about being male. How do you account for the fact that about half of the 24 million who watched the 1990 World Cup semi-final between England and West Germany on British television were female? The success of the England and the Republic of Ireland teams generated record-breaking viewing figures for the televisual events. Why did so many women watch a sport in which they would previously have had little or no interest? A number of reasons suggest themselves to us, both from our own observations and from discussion with others.

To begin with, spectacle appeared to be an important factor in pulling in the female audience. It was indeed a spectacular event, packaged to provide a feast of visual pleasures. Not least amongst these would have been the shots of the Italian location itself with its tourist connotations of sunshine, pasta and Pedrotti in addition to the stereotypical Latin associations of passion and romance. The use of Pavarotti and his music throughout the event would have enhanced the sense of emotionality. In attempting to explain the World Cup's appeal to women, John Williams and Jackie Woodhouse noted that television coverage: 'seemed designed to promote the aesthetic and dramatic qualities of the event above the overly narrow and sometimes mean-spirited partisanship which, arguably, too frequently characterises football support and the presentation of football on British TV. (Williams and Woodhouse, 1991, p. 87) Another striking aspect of the attraction of spectacle was women's perception of the impressively large and clean postmodern stadia, which was in sharp contrast to their image of British stadia as grimy, cramped and even dangerous, set in ugly and depressing urban environments.

We would also suggest that the cross gender popularity of the World Cup had much to do with the various kinds of culturally specific forms of 'national identity' which were expressed in varying ways in each country. An outpouring of almost unprecedented cultural pride in Ireland, following their success in qualifying and performing well in the competition, was expressed in a number of ways. One obvious and important one was the feeling of communality and the creation of 'an imagined community' engendered by the viewing experience itself; of watching the match in the company of other people in a convivial atmosphere. Having viewed the Republic of Ireland v. Romania match in Dublin, we were struck by the first question people asked us when we met later. It was not about some of the intricacies of the match, but '*where did you watch it?*' It was the location and the company that was deemed of primary importance. What was also interesting was the degree of resentment expressed among some males about the lack 'of knowledge about the game' among 'new' women fans. It was almost as if they resented their domain of 'male talk' being infiltrated by another culture.

## **Conclusion**

All we have intended to do here is open up some issues for debate and discussion. We have set out to address some of the points of similarity between two popular genres which have commonly been regarded as being mutually exclusive. We have argued that television sport displays some of the melodramatic qualities of television soap opera and have elaborated on the ways in which both genres evoke a strong emotional response in their viewers. We have also looked at the way both genres mediate gender

discourses to reinforce traditional ideas and feelings of masculinity and femininity. This has been an exploratory excursion into the area and there are a number of issues that would benefit from further research. We have found empirical studies of the female audience for soaps very useful for understanding the meanings and pleasures of soap opera for women. However, there is a dearth of equivalent studies of the male audience for sport. This is perhaps because the association between men and sport has been viewed as so 'natural' that it has never really been considered as being a suitable object for study. Having said that, there has been some recent work in this area (Wenner, 1989). However, this has focused on American television audiences and similar work needs to be carried out in Britain and Ireland.

Research is also required into the apparent growing popularity of televised sport among the female audience. There is also a need to develop the relationship that exists between the economic determinants of television production and the sporting texts and discourses that it produces; for ultimately the production of cultural representations can only be fully understood by investigating the economic and social factors which help shape these configurations. (Whannel, 1992; Blain *et al.*, 1993).

## Notes

1. In the Republic of Ireland over two million people watched their match with Italy on RTE Television. In Britain a combined audience of 24 million watched the West Germany v. England match on BBC and ITV television.
2. What then of sport if it is regarded as an open text? Will it not too posit states of expectation and passivity as pleasurable? One could tentatively suggest that since the narrative structure of soap is more complex, with multiple subplots, the space between desire and fulfilment is greater than in televised sport. These issues call for more attention, particularly more empirical studies of the male audience for sport.

## References

- Ang, I. (1996) *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, Methuen, London.
- Birrel, S. and Loy, J. (1979) Media Sport: Hot and Cool, *International Review of Sports Sociology*, 13, (1).
- Blain, N., Boyle, R. and O'Donnell, H. (1993) *Sport and the mass media: European and national identities*, Leicester University Press, London.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Routledge Kegan Paul, London.
- Brooks, P. (1976) *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Brundson, C. (1981) Crossroads: Notes on Soap Opera, *Screen*, 22, (4).
- Bury, M. (1986) The Social Significance of Snooker: Sports-Games in the Age of Television, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 3, (2).
- Feuer, J. (1984) Melodrama, Serial Form and Television Today, *Screen*, 25, (1).
- Goldlust, J. (1987) *Playing For Keeps: Sport, the Media and Society*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne.
- Hargreaves, J. (1986) *Sport, Power and Culture*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Lovell, T. (1981) Ideology and Coronation Street, in *Coronation Street: Television monograph 13* (edited by R. Dyer, *et al.*), BFI, London.
- Modleski, T. (1982) *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies For Women*, The Shoe String Press, Hamden, Connecticut.
- Morley, D. (1986) *Family Television, Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*, Comedia, London.
- Morrison, D. (1986) *Invisible Citizens: British Public Opinion and the Future of Broadcasting*, BFI, London.

- Morse, M. (1983) Sport on Television: Replay and Display, in *Regarding Television; Critical Approaches - an anthology* (edited by E.A. Kaplan), American Film Institute, Los Angeles.
- O'Connor, B. (1990) *Soap and Sensibility: audience response to Dallas and Glenroe*, Radio Telefis Eireann, Dublin.
- Poynton, B. and Hartley, J. (1990) Male-Gazing: Australian Rules Football, Gender and Television, in *Television and Women's culture* (edited by M.E. Brown), Sage, London.
- Root, J. (1986) *Open the Box: About Television*, Cornedia, London.
- Wenner, L.A. (ed.) (1989) *Media, Sports and Society*, Sage, London.
- Whannel, G. (1992) *Fields in Vision: Television Sports and Cultural Transformation*, Routledge, London.
- Williams, J. and Woodhouse, J. (1991) Can play, will play? Women and Football in Britain, in *British Football and Social Change: Getting into Europe* (edited by J. Williams and S. Wagg), Leicester University Press, London.