

SOAP OPERA

by

Nick March

A professor speaking at a conference.

The future.

PROFESSOR

(clears throat)

Welcome all, or perhaps it would be more apt to say, '*aw-right, treacle*'. You're too kind. I would like to begin by thanking you for being here with me today in this lovely, expansive and well-ventilated hall. I know that it took a collective effort to ensure that the appropriate distances were in place between us - and even then we can consider it something of a miracle that the event wasn't cancelled *in toto*. My thanks also to the Faculty of Late-Modern Community Sagas at Xianning University of Television & Radio. My talk today draws heavily on research that I was able to conduct deep in their expertly kept archives during my tenure as a Mitchell Bros. Fellow - and all at a time of continuous uncertainty, so - *xiè xie*. I do hope that I am pronouncing that correctly.

Now, to the matter at hand. I'm sure that as scholars of the period we all enjoyed the opening projection irrespective of its two-dimensional rendering - a baffling but seemingly constant obstacle to our subject's uptake in schools - let alone, dare I say, by my own children - but did the eagle-eyed amongst you spot its significance to the theme of our symposium - the so-called '*cultural lacuna*' of the early-21st century - no?

(beat)

*Whilst comforting, the mask was originally a gesture to prevent the illness of others not of oneself, but history has a way of turning such things inside out - you may remove it in order to speak - still no?*

(clears throat)

Well, whilst I always preferred the simpler term, 'coronal production break', the pandemic that precipitated the many '*lacunae*' of this period affected almost all long-form sagas that come down to us following the post-digital transition. Chief amongst them were 'EastEnders', 'Coronation Street' - or *Corrie* in the vernacular of regular sitters (they would have used the term 'viewers') - the unfairly maligned, 'Emmerdale', and - of course - in my view - the fairly maligned, 'Hollyoaks'. Expect that, however, to be capably refuted by our wonderful colleague, Professor Chen - she's waving at me there in the front row - she will, I'm sure, also be able to situate the necessarily narrow focus of my discussion within an appropriately international context in a reading from her paper: 'Archaic Notions of Culture: Social Media in the "Third World" during Covid-19'.

(wipes brow with handkerchief)

Despite our differences, I do know that we converge on the most important matters of scholarly opinion - we both lament, for example, the terrible loss of 'Brookside' - corrupted in transition or, as some have argued, possibly even cancelled.

(coughs)

Forgive me - now, the projection that we witnessed at the outset was taken from the first episode of 'EastEnders' to be written, filmed and broadcast following that initial and unprecedented break in production. Naturally, it concerns itself with the immediate aftermath of the pandemic - the isolation, lonely deaths and mass burials. The writers skilfully parallel their surviving viewer's lives - we witness their pain, their grief and their suffering, but we are also shown strengthened communities, hope and the compass bearings for a new world - a world that we would inherit. Far from the hyper-performative norms that shaped the intimidating mountain of social media posts that characterise the age, what I wish to submit to you is that - and I know Wendy will disagree fervently with this - ha, she's still waving at me - yes, *hello* - is that, contrary to popular academic opinion, it was *in performance* - and especially the pure performance of community sagas, rather than the destabilising middle ground of social media - out of which emerge the most authentic extant cultural expressions of post-division Britain.

(raises the crook of arm to mouth, but  
does not cough - a beat)

*Some of you may be surprised to discover the virus's origins not far from here - in the not-well-understood 'wet markets' of old Wuhan - we know only that these markets traded in animals long-since extinct and were buried in concrete sometime in the {pas - cough - t} -*

(splutters)

Don't worry, it's just the dry air in this well-ventilated space. Wendy, is waving again - yes, do you have any water - gosh, I'm really feeling my age - all of a sudden - no?

(beat)

So - we know that the 'soap' of soap opera was a term considerably more broad than the potent gels that they signify today - and colloquially reflects their origins in the marketing of laundry detergent especially in the period of restructuring that followed -

(coughing fit)

World -

(coughs)

War - oh, dear.

(recovers)

Two.

(beat)

They were considerably closer in time to the spirit of that notorious 'blitz' - within living memory in some of their most vulnerable cases - than we are to that first outbreak.

(coughs)

This is highly unusual - Wendy, I - yes - think - we must - sadly - curtail - my apologies.

(turning over papers)

Thus, it is critical that we learn the lesson of our ancestors' experience, share in their sorrows, but also in their subsequent joy.

That we allowed ourselves to believe such an occurrence could be confined to history is something that we both shared - for a time.

(suppressing a coughing fit)

Indeed, concerted efforts were made in the early years following the '*lacuna*' to promote the hygiene with which we are now being forced to become reacquainted. As a testament to our shared humanity, I would like to leave you with the words of Mick and Linda from behind the bar at the Queen Vic Pub - '*wash yer'ands will ya - with soap*' - thank you.

The Professor takes a deep breath, before coughing freely into a fist.

End.