

'Til Series Finale Do Us Part? Fan Commitment and the Long-running Series

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For several years, the perilous state of U.S. daytime soap operas, a genre with a venerable history, dating to the beginnings of U.S. broadcasting, has been of concern to media audiences, TV critics, media scholars, and cultural observers alike. Now, after the Fall 2009 axing of the 72 year-old soap opera *Guiding Light* (*GL*), and with the impending cancellation of another soap stalwart, *As the World Turns*, the genre's demise seems almost certain. (In late 2010, only six soaps will still be in production.) One reason why the decline of the daytime soap opera genre is significant is that many viewers have forged a longterm investment in certain programs, characters, and storylines; for these viewers, the loss of these narrative worlds will surely be a loss. Another reason is that this often derided, but much-studied genre has deepened our understanding of a great many things, including mass communication, media audiences, narrative structure, and gender role construction. Amid the folding of several long-running daily newspapers, and prognostications that the newspaper industry (at least the major dailies) is at death's door, the demise of the daytime soap opera genre signifies, in no uncertain terms, that the media landscape has changed considerably.

The case of *Venice*, a web series started in late 2009 by *GL* star Crystal Chappell, is very interesting in this context. *Venice* features Chappell (as a lesbian designer) and former *GL* cast mates, including Jessica Leccia who played Natalia, with whom Chappell's character Olivia was romantically involved during the last year and a half of *GL*'s run. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Chappell said she was motivated to launch the series by her desire to take the "Otalía" storyline further than allowed by *GL*, whose writers never showed the couple kissing romantically; in doing so, she also hoped to satisfy fan desires for more depictions of intimacy between the couple (Bernhard, 2009). Indeed, in the first 30 seconds of *Venice*'s first episode, we see Chappell and Leccia (playing Gina and Ani) in a morning-after scenario sharing a steamy kiss. The first season, consisting of 12 brief (under 10 minutes each) episodes, has wrapped, and a second season is planned.

Daytime soaps, for all of their progressiveness in tackling "social issues," have only featured substantial LGBT characters (and only a few at that) in the past two decades. Furthermore, they have been critiqued for marginalizing these characters and not depicting them as having fully-fledged romantic and sexual lives. As Harrington (2003) notes, a number of constraints (among them, fear of angering supposedly conservative audiences and sponsors and a narrative emphasis on established characters and families) have worked against the depiction of same-sex romantic desire and sexuality in the genre. Will *Venice*'s being online and independent allow for more fully-fledged lesbian representation? Will *GL* fans, especially "Otalía" ones, migrate to *Venice*, and will they derive the type of pleasures seemingly denied to them by *GL* program makers? What about soap opera fans in general? Might web series, then, provide a way to save and/or remake this genre and its particular narrative structure, audience pleasures, and industry, media, and viewer relationships? Following this, how might the *Venice* "experiment" shift the balance of power between soap actors, program makers, networks, advertisers, and fans?ⁱ

At this point, I can only speculate as to the answers to these questions. Many people have debated the issue of whether new media offer less problematic and more inclusive representational possibilities for individuals who are marginalized and trivialized in traditional media forms. I find intriguing the work of scholars, such as Nakamura, who argue that

cyberspace, in various ways, reproduces the various –isms and social stratifications that structure contemporary Western societies. Nakamura’s recent work (2009) on how North American and European users of the massively multiplayer online role-playing game *World of Warcraft* racialize what is supposedly a race-neutral cyberworld (e.g., by derisively dismissing certain forms of game labor as “Asian”) is particularly compelling. Although I do believe that *Venice* will go further than *GL* in its rendering of lesbian sexuality (indeed, it already has, judging from its first episode), I do not believe that it, or any text, can be free from bias: Nothing exists outside of ideology -- of course. So, although *Venice* might progressively render certain forms of white middle-class lesbianism, it might be content not to represent racial, class, or other difference or scrutinize privilege in any way. The related issue of whether *Venice*’s being online and independent (and, thus, not constrained by the same factors faced by daytime, broadcast television) will allow for more fully-realized lesbian characters is also interesting. Funded by subscription and without outright content restrictions (in the countries that comprise its target market), *Venice* writers would seem to have fewer barriers limiting their narrative choices.

Another issue has to do with whether *Venice* will appeal to traditional soap opera fans. Scholars such as Modleski (1982) and Allen (1985) have articulated the particular temporal register of soap opera storytelling and how it provides viewer pleasure (e.g., how its characteristically slow plot resolution is often associated with higher audience satisfaction). As a different form of storytelling, *Venice* might offer some sort of middle-ground (e.g., melodramatic like conventional daytime soaps), or something altogether different (i.e., more like other short serial narrative forms). Whether viewers will form a strong commitment to a series, whose continued production is certainly not assured, is also questionable. But, then, again, this uncertainty undergirds the current viewing experience of all fans watching U.S. daytime soap operas.

References

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¹ Fellow soap actor Eden Riegel has also started a web series, *Imaginary Bitches*, which features her along with some fellow soap opera actors. Like Chappell, Riegel has played a lesbian in daytime: Throughout the 2000s, she appeared as Bianca Montgomery, Erica Kane’s daughter, on *All My Children* (AMC). Although the Bianca storyline was groundbreaking in many ways, it was also critiqued by many media critics and fans as a “missed opportunity,” which suffered from *All My Children*’s refusal to commit to fully realizing Bianca’s character. Drawing another parallel to *Venice*, Riegel’s casting of former AMC actor Elizabeth Hendrickson, who played Bianca’s close friend and later romantic partner Maggie on the program, in a role on *Imaginary Bitches* seems motivated, in some ways, to appeal to lesbian fans who were dissatisfied and angered by AMC’s depiction of the Bianca and Maggie romance.

On *Imaginary Bitches*, however, both Riegel and Hendrickson play heterosexual characters who are not romantically interested in one another.