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# **European soap operas: the diversification of a genre**

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**European soap operas: the diversification of a genre**

Analysis of the most popular locally-made soap operas in each of five European countries reveals that the soap opera is not simply an imported American genre. The study of British, Scandinavian and European soaps, based on an 'ethnographic' approach to the social networks in the world of the soaps, shows that these countries have developed three distinctive sub-types of the genre: the Community soap, the Dynastic soap, and the Dyadic soap. For each of these sub-types, we analyze the gender and class context for narrative events as portrayed within the soaps.

While the kinship structure in both the Dynastic (or Patriarchal) and the Community soaps constitutes a hegemonic, taken for granted framework for the programs, the Community soaps tend to be produced in the spirit of public service broadcasting and so are more likely to problematise gender issues in their conscious attempt to transmit social messages. The Dyadic form, which appears to be taking over in the 1990s harps on the modern and post-modern despair of too much freedom and too little trust. It operates in a destabilized environment, in which families have more or less disappeared, romantic dyads cannot be sustained, and women's quest for enduring ties takes the form of seeking primordial, biological, 'genuine', blood ties.

**Keywords**

Soap opera, European television, cultural imperialism, genre, kinship representations.

## European soap operas: the diversification of a genre

### Why analyse European soap operas?

How does Europe preserve its cultural diversity *vis a vis* the swamping of imported, mainly American, globally diffused, soap operas? That first massive influx of American television during the 1980s has already stirred the worried European film and television producers to consider seriously how to rise to the challenge. Dallas, the American prime-time soap, immensely popular in Europe, became the symbol of what was then labelled 'American cultural imperialism' or Americanization (Mancini and Swanson, 1996), terms which may better be replaced by the more neutral 'globalization' or even audiovisual 'modernisation' (Schröder and Skovmand, 1992). 'Europe fights back' was the spirited slogan (Silj, 1988) which called for the local production of European family series in order to combat the threat of television capitulating to Americanization.

But the result on the screens was disappointing. True, France delivered its answer to Dallas in the form of Châteauvallon, a best-seller which transferred the dynastic family from Texas to a French provincial town, and changed the characters from oil moguls into the more cultured occupation of publishers. But it took only a car accident involving its main star for the show to collapse. Germany's Lindenstrasse is another case in point. Explicitly modelled on the British example of Coronation Street, it has nevertheless been influenced by the American formula, focussing less on community issues and more on illicit sex and romance.

Fifteen years later, there is a common perception that the soap opera form has proved so successful in winning large audiences that as a specifically American form it is taking over from many others, and that soaps are spreading around the world to the possible detriment of more 'serious' or local or public-service oriented materials (Schiller, 1992). Of course, defenders of the soap opera (including many feminist academic researchers as well as a sizable audience) might not judge this trend such a bad thing. What surprised us, when deciding to explore this spread of soap operas specifically within the European context, was that the common perception appears to be mistaken: most European countries produce only a few soaps, and some, for example France

and Italy, produce none at all.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, of those produced domestically, many are not simply local versions of an American format.

Our focus in this paper is not on the import of soaps made elsewhere but on the production of local soaps. In this respect we classify countries roughly into three groups: the big producers (Great Britain, Germany), those countries producing one or a few soaps (Greece, Netherlands, Scandinavia), and those who produce none (France, Italy, Spain). Of course there are always exceptions, and there have been various attempts by different countries at different times (e.g. Spain has just introduced a new soap - Medico de Familia - in 1996, and Italy has a series of short serials - modelled on the first, bestselling, Edera - of the telenovella form).

Inquiring whether European states can manage to produce their own successful soaps in this competitive new environment, with the ever increasing threat to Public Broadcasting, becomes more important than ever before. The export of American, Latin American and Australian soap opera is widespread (Allen, 1995; **O'Donnell, 1996b**, Tracey, 1985, 1988) and these soaps are increasingly available to a European audience (and worldwide) through both cheap imports on national channels and the rapid growth of cable and satellite stations. Is it possible to produce an economically viable soap opera in Europe without it ending up identical in form and content to American soaps? Châteauvallon was successful, but was there anything French left? Part of the debate over national identity in relation to broadcasting has rested on the assumption that characteristics of a national culture can be clearly identified in the programmes they broadcast. The history of the soap opera can certainly be traced back to America (Hagedorn, 1995), and so the spread of the genre can be seen as a kind of export or even imperialism. But is the form specifically American? Advocates of this position would stress the emphasis in soaps on middle class life styles and ambitions. Nonetheless, when considering, for example, the emergence of the first two Greek soap operas during the last decade, how is one to say which aspect is typically Greek and which owes more to the adoption of an originally American generic form?

A related concern has to do with the new salience of the issue of cultural identity in Europe. With the growing economic integration of the European Community, and, in parallel, the ethnic and cultural segmentation within national states (not only the extreme case of the former Yugoslavia but also in Belgium, Spain, United Kingdom) - - there is a new urgency in dealing with matters

of national identity. How do the multiple member-states, and ethnic and cultural communities within these states, preserve their own language, art and history? One possible, though not 'purist', answer is producing home-soaps. As Quebecese journalist, Denise Bombardier (1985), has stated, 'if we could have a soap, we would have a nation'.

The focus of this paper is the examination of the diversity and evolution of soap opera forms in Europe. In so doing, we aim to broaden the range of soap operas which researchers consider, for the focus on the 'canon' (comprising predominantly American, and perhaps also British, soap operas) reinforces the impression that it is the American form which is predominant everywhere. Indeed, in an earlier paper we contrasted the British and American traditions of soap opera, arguing that their differences are sufficiently great to justify dividing them into two different subgenres (Liebes and Livingstone, 1992). British soaps (e.g. Coronation Street, see Figure 1) typically present separate, distinct, families, all living in one community, characterized by multi-personal and 'vertical' (intergenerational) encounters. There is harmony between families, and 'organic solidarity' in the community. The network of American soaps consists of a system of destabilized dyadic relationships, in which the balance is always collapsing, and has to be repaired by destroying another balance. The families are intermixed by thick web of marriage and romance which undermine the family structure. The focus of the American soaps on romantic couples means that they are uni-generational -- stretching to include parents of grown up characters, as long as they may participate in the game of romance -- with few or no babies,<sup>2</sup> children or old women (e.g. The Young and the Restless, see Figure 2).

These subgenres represent everyday life -- particularly women's lives -- very differently. The British soaps opt for motherhood, with various mother figures at hand daily. When genetic mothers are in trouble, surrogate mothers often step in. American soap women characters, on the other hand, are concerned mainly with romance, and both career and motherhood are subordinated to the importance of this. The differences between the soaps in the two cultures were interpreted in light of (a) the choice of the US commercial networks to recycle romantic myths while British television, drawing on social realism, sometimes emerges as too self-consciously, paternalistically pedagogic, and (b) the different social ethos whereby American society, which sees itself as open, individualist, non-class-based, and where everyone is allowed to believe s/he is upwardly mobile, may be juxtaposed with the relatively rigid British

class structure (Hoggart, 1957; Williams, 1974).

But the picture is more complex. First, two distinct varieties of American soap opera exist, the daytime and primetime. Second, none of these forms are close to the major soap opera form of the telenovella, strong both in South America and most of southern Europe.<sup>3</sup> Using similar analytic methods to before (Liebes and Livingstone, 1992, 1994), our present concern is to broaden the analysis of soap opera by surveying European forms of the genre. For this, we suggest at the outset that three main prototypical forms or models can be applied to the soap operas of different countries.

*Dynastic*: this model focuses on one powerful, family, with some satellite outsiders -- connected by romance, marriage, or rivalry -- its periphery. Some have a parallel, interconnected, 'downstairs' network.

*Community*: A number of equal, separate, middle and working class, multi-generational, families (including single parent ones), and single characters, mostly not romantically connected, all living within one geographical neighbourhood and belonging to one community.

*Dyadic*: A destabilized network of a number of young, densely interconnected, mostly uni-generational, interchanging couples, with past, present and future romantic ties, continually absorbed in the process of reinventing kinship relations.

As argued elsewhere (Liebes and Livingstone, 1992), the American prime-time soap operas appear to fit the dynastic model, and the kinship chart for Dallas is reproduced here to illustrate the main features of this model (see Figure 3). Similarly the American day-time soap operas are structured according to the dyadic model (see Figure 2 -- Young and the Restless). Lastly, the community model was identified through the kinship structure of the British soap operas, Coronation Street (see Figure 1) and EastEnders.

These three prototypical forms or models have in some instances evolved historically through the direct imitation of a programme produced elsewhere (for example, The Bold and the Beautiful served as basis for Brightness, and Coronation Street was the source for Lindenstrasse). In other

cases, the model represents an analytic category which attempts to characterise parallel developments in soap opera forms across different countries. More work on the origins of soaps in each country is needed to establish the patterns of diffusion, deliberate or otherwise, and to identify why certain forms appear to fit and be successful in the cultural contexts of different countries.

## **Research orientation and method**

The present analysis is not intended as a complete study of the meanings of European soap operas. Many of the conclusions which emerge from a textual analysis must remain provisional until followed through in an audience study. However, our approach starts with the assumption that texts constrain audiences and that the right balance has to be found between the recognition that audiences are active and the acknowledgement of the restrictions imposed on this activity by the text.

In order to study locally made soaps in Europe, we have devised a new methodological approach modelled on 'ethnographic observation' which we applied to the lifeworld in the soap opera (Liebes and Livingstone, 1994). We believe that it makes sense to study social relations and cultural identity in soaps by examining the ways in which the society within the soap functions on the micro level. By labelling our approach 'ethnographic', we want to emphasise that we start from charting the network of family and romantic relationships as the social context of the soap world in order not to impose our own (paradigmatic or syntagmatic) analytical categories. Moreover, as the story evolves through interactions, and is involved with relationships, the appropriate way to observe characters is within the context of these relationships, focussing on the rules according to which certain ties are allowed, approved of, punished, taken for granted (or combinations thereof) within the kinship structure of the soap opera. Our ethnographic approach does not regard the society portrayed in the soap opera as mimetic, as a realistic portrayal of the society in front of the screen. Rather, we analyse the characters, narratives and situations of the soap opera as they are established and evolve over the lengthy course of a programme's own history, in order to reveal the agenda of concerns, values and metanarratives of the soap opera. Based on what audience researchers have learned of soap opera audiences in terms of their viewing resources, motivations and contexts (Herzog, 1944; Liebes and Katz, 1993; Livingstone,



1995; Press, 1991), this agenda of concerns, values and metanarratives may be seen as indicative of the agenda of the society which watches the soap opera. In short, while any simple mapping of the soap word onto 'real world' is to be avoided, media texts of diverse genres have always been read as revealing the society which produces and views them.

In our own viewing of selected episodes of European-made soaps we were accompanied by informants who were fans of 'their' soap and who belong to the soap-producing country.<sup>4</sup> As long-term viewers, these informants supplied us with expert knowledge on the world of the soap operas and enriched the study by adding their 'national' perspective to the interpretation. Our point in emphasising an ethnographic approach is to stress the importance of conducting this analysis in terms of the generic and programme context, and, especially important for long-running serials like soap operas, in terms of the web of intergenerational and intragenerational relations of blood and romance, together with the meanings that these relations generate over the duration of the serial and which are familiar to its typically long-term viewers. In this way, the meanings analysed are not imposed *a priori* onto the text, as is the case with much formal content analysis aimed at testing particular theoretical positions, but meanings are revealed, bottom-up, through a detailed immersion in the text. The advantage of a comparative approach is that if texts reveal something of the society in which they are successful, then questions of local or global culture may be addressed through textual analysis, provided one conducts an analysis of multiple national soap operas using a common research methodology.

Our ethnographic approach also differs from attempts of a more thematic textual analyses of soap operas. These focus on the syntagmatic aspect of the evolving drama rather than on the paradigmatic, demographic structure (Allen, 1985). These types of studies deal with the motifs of soaps and with the meaning of the form and format of the genre. Cultural sociologists analyse the attributes of the normative framework, asking about the transformation of the Horatio Alger myth in American soaps, or about reflection of modern versus post-modern ethics (Mander, 1983; Arlen, 1980). More literary scholars examine the characteristics of narratives that do not end and the message inherent in a balance built on an endless of unsolved crises (Thorborn, 1982; Braudy, 1982). Others look at the structure of digressions, slow speed, the 'openness' and segmentation of the multiple, never-ending, subplots, in an effort to answer questions concerning the source of dramatic tension,<sup>5</sup> the relationship between structure and ideology (Fiske, 1987)

and between structure and the 'constitution' of viewers (Modleski, 1982). Our own analysis of the way in which the form positions the viewers (Livingstone and Liebes, 1995) points to the socialization of the American soap opera to popularized, psychoanalytic (anti-feminist) notions by the recycling of the Oedipal myth.

Our approach to the study of the texts of soap operas attempts to map the social structures represented in the genre. How do the social networks of soaps compare cross culturally? Are there national differences? We start by charting the kinship structures of the two most successful soap operas in each of several European countries. Our comparisons attempted, in so far as proved practical, to include soaps from Northern and Southern Europe and from large and small countries. A successful soap is thus defined as one which has a relatively long history and high ratings. In order to qualify for our list, a series had to be among the two most popular family serials made locally between 1990-1995. While we surveyed the domestic soap operas in a number of countries, only Britain, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands and Greece had at least two successful soaps at the time.<sup>6</sup> We also viewed soaps from a number of other countries in addition.<sup>7</sup>

Table 1 about here:

### **The Most Popular Local Soap Operas in each of Five European Countries**

Collecting the data was more problematic than we expected because, like Silj and his colleagues ten years earlier (Silj, 1988), we had to compromise with almost unreconcilable differences in the realities of shared definition and production. First, because despite various attempts to define the genre, there is no common definition of the soap opera shared across Europe (Mohr and O'Donnell, 1996). Nonetheless, we discovered that, for example, Denmark and Norway had only produced one series, that France did not produce any, that Italy had produced three relatively short-run telenovellas, and that Greece had two successful soaps running, produced and written (Vargas style) by the same person. Looking more closely, it was in fact rather difficult to establish whether the French produce soaps, for it would seem that the French pattern is rather the production of romantic teenage comedies in serial form (Pasquier, 1994). For each country we attempted to consult with media academics about their national series and serials, but it was notable that they disagreed among themselves over what counted as a soap opera.

Second, it was difficult to assemble comparable data as, for example, audience data on the genre (e.g. collected by the European Audiovisual Observatory) carries no distinctions between imported and home produced programs. We included two soap formats -- long-term, 'never-ending' ones, and 'telenovellas' or 'maxi-mini' series which may be between 30 and 100 episodes (O'Donnell, 1995).<sup>8</sup>

Despite these difficulties, however, it was generally possible to identify the two most popular soap operas in a number of countries. Thus in Germany, the two most popular soaps were Lindenstrasse, viewed by **some 8.17 million** per episode (11.8%) (Akyuz, 1994) and **Gute Zeiten, Schlechte Zeiten**, with an audience of approximately **3.91 million (5.5%)** per episode (source: ZDF - Medienforschung, Germany, 1995). **In the Netherlands, some 555,000 (4.0%) watch Onderweg Naar Morgen while the most popular soap opera, Goede Tijden, Slechte Tijden, is viewed by 1.7 million (12.3%)** (source: NOS Hilversum, Audience Research, The Netherlands, 1995). Similarly, in Sweden, the popular **Rederiet is watched by some 2.2 million/week with a slightly smaller audience of 1.8 million watching Tre Kronor** (O'Donnell, 1996a). And in Britain, some 31% of the population (16.5 million) watches Coronation Street, and a similar 32% (17 million) watch EastEnders (source: BARB/AGB).

Following the viewing of those soaps for which sufficient information was available, we adopted the anthropological model of analysing cultures by mapping the relationships of blood, marriage and romance among the long-term characters in each programme. The resulting kinship charts were then analysed in terms of the structure of family (extended/nuclear), of community (relationships among families), and relationships between generations (mother/daughter, mother/son) (Liebes and Livingstone, 1992). Having constructed the kinship charts for different countries, we offer a preliminary categorisation of the soap operas in terms of the three main models (dynastic, community, dyadic) outlined above (see Table 2).

Table 2 about here:

### **Three Models for A Comparative Analysis of Soap Operas**

The European soap producing cultures may be divided into 'single pattern' countries, and

'multiple pattern' ones. The two relatively prolific producers -- Britain and Germany -- represent these two types, with Britain's specialization in community soaps and Germany trying its hand in all three patterns. On a smaller scale, Greece and Italy opt for the dynastic family model, Denmark and Norway and Sweden produce some community soaps in rural settings (albeit less cohesive communities than the British), with Sweden also following the dynastic pattern. Meanwhile the soaps made in the Netherlands appear to adopt the pattern of interchanging dyadic couples. One wonders how accidental this pattern is: could a dynastic or dyadic form work in Britain (in fact, attempts thus far have proved failures); could Greece succeed with a community soap?

Looking across European countries, how does their adoption of particular models reflect the cultural contexts and/or institutional structures of broadcasting? Our initial assumption that there are substantial differences because soaps are difficult to export turned out to be unsupported, as many soaps travel well, and represent a considerable export market in certain cases (Cunningham and Jacka, 1994; Mowlana, 1990; Rogers and Antola, 1985). A close look at the different soap operas suggests that both the choice of a particular soap opera model and the way in which each pattern is elaborated is likely to be dependent on the different cultural settings in which it is produced. Thus we turn to an examination of the characteristics of the three soap opera models -- dynastic, community and dyadic, according to the broad cultural parameters of (a) power structures, (b) social locus, and (c) gender relations (see also Liebes and Livingstone, in prep.). Undoubtedly the 'choice' of a soap opera model has consequences for the representation of power, social locus and gender in the lifeworld of the soap, in turn offering different national audiences particular versions of 'everyday life'. Inevitably, such an examination requires a relatively detailed account of the characters and narratives in each soap: we outline these below, attempting to draw out the key features which reveal the national characteristics of each domestic soap opera.

## **1 The dynastic model**

In this model, the patriarchal family network is the most conservative form in terms of power structure, family and gender relations. Divided into two sub-types -- the Godfather, and the Honourable Patriarch (business or professional) -- they invoke somewhat different types of

involvement, drama and moral codes. The Godfather family of the Greek and Italian variants, represent cultural variations on the mafia-chief story, turned into a television series (Mander, 1983). These families fill the whole screen, have enough power to organize the world around them (by bribery, extortion etc.), and economic power is translated into political power. They provide an escape to the world in which crooks may be admired in spite of their immoral actions because they are successful, or because the blame falls on a corrupt society in which the only way to succeed is to have the backing of a mafia-style family. The chart for the Greek Brightness (in Greek, *Lamsi*) is shown in Figure 4.

The second type of dynastic model is seen in the Honourable Patriarchal families of Die Schwarzwaldklinik (not shown here as no longer in production) and Rederiet (Figure 5). These are less glamorous, on a lesser scale, with more claim to 'realistic' representation. Unlike the Godfather model, corruption here is not celebrated and may be controlled. The patriarch is upright and responsible, burdened by having to manage a network of professionals, less totally dependent (and dependable) than family and servants. Brinkman and Dah'len operate within some constraints from an external social world and have to contend with its rules. The dramatic tension in this type emerges from the struggles over authority. Can the patriarch impose his will within the family and exercise power over the workers in the family company?

A look at two charts for both dynastic types (Figures 4 and 5) shows that both have relations between masters and employees (connected through romantic relations); both have three generations linked through a strong hierarchical structure. In both the mother of the dynasty is dead, the second-generation's siblings compete for inheriting the family power, flirt with servants and employees and intermarry heirs of rival dynasties.

(a) *Power structure.* Godfather and patriarch soaps take for granted an unshakable class structure in which the glamorous, larger than life dynasty is the only one worth looking at, both for escaping into a dream world and, at the same time, for 'proving' that the rich and powerful are unhappy. Interestingly 'taking class for granted' has different manifestations in the various cultures. The Greek Brightness and the Italian Edera show no American-style guilt about exposing the servants' network and acknowledging inequality and, on the other hand, personalize and humanize the servants, finding it acceptable to have downstairs characters who take part in the plot, even making it a route for mobility. The patriarchal families Die Schwarzwaldklinik and

Rederei prefer to ignore the existence of servants in the household, implying a certain cultural unease about class structure. The British in the original Upstairs/Downstairs, chose to tell parallel stories of masters and servants (whereas Coronation Street and EastEnders stay within one, working class context, pretending that this is the world).

(b) *Social loci.* In all patriarchal soaps men commute between home and work and there is a mutual invasion of the two realms so that each is used for gaining points in the other. The clear division of labour, according to which women run the home and the men rule the real world from their steel and glass offices, is predominantly kept in Brightness and Edera. Mothers and wives have jobs, businesses, even careers, but are seen mainly at home, worrying about romance and motherhood.

In Die Schwarzwaldklinik and Rederei the workplace, with its network of professionals, achieves a relative autonomy by introducing another parallel network of characters -- that of the family company's employees. Although doctors and nurses who work in the clinic in Die Schwarzwaldklinik and the shipping line workers of Rederei are dependent on the family, they provide another physical and social locus for the entanglements of the plot. True, the clinic and the boat are where patriarchal family men may exercise their power, but the employees are not just the patriarchs' henchmen but are given a life of their own in the series. The women of Die Schwarzwaldklinik appear (mostly as subordinates) in the workplace, and they have to choose between advancing as professionals in the clinic and marrying the patriarch. In Rederei, 'commuting' takes place between home, office and boat. Mothers stay at home but the dynasty's daughters work in the shipping line. The patriarch's workplace is transformed from the sleek locus of power manoeuvres to the more recognizable reality of a professional or business setting.

(c) *Gender relations.* As in the American model, wives sometimes have a profession or work (e.g. Virna of Brightness; Brinkman's women are nurses, even doctors; Edera sells clothes) but they are not allowed a career or real power (in Die Schwarzwaldklinik Christa, for example, has to leave Brinkman's life and the soap when she decides to specialize, Reider Dahlen's granddaughter, who becomes the head of Rederei, remains totally dependent on her grandfather and adviser). Their access to power is still measured by their ability to deliver (beauty or baby) to their husbands (Liebes and Katz, 1993).

In terms of acceptable sexual mores, the asymmetry between the sexes is far more blatant than, say, in the classic dynastic soap, Dallas. While the broader circle of characters are distributed rather equally between JR and Sue Ellen, the entourage of 'old friends' around the central couple of Yagos and his (second) wife Virna, consists mostly of a trail of (past and present) women lovers of Yagos. Moreover, as men are assumed to be polygamous in nature, their illicit affairs are often not kept clandestine. Yagos is portrayed as a good husband although his wife Virna knows him to be frequently unfaithful. The rules of sexual behaviour in Brightness and in Edera also prioritize men far beyond their given biological advantages. Two patterns of love relationships-- in which men initiate, and act, and women pay the consequences--stand out as different from Dallas, in the extent to which this latter allows men to exercise violence toward women without being punished. On the one hand, there is a proliferation of men's 'pure,' unrequited love of a woman and, at the other extreme, the same men may rape the women they love, or kill their foetus when a baby is undesirable. As rape is seen as a masculine privilege it is not punished.<sup>9</sup>

## **2. The Community Model**

Community soaps open up the closed self-sufficient structure of an overpowering Dallas-type family to include a whole neighbourhood of ordinary families. The all-embracing, hierarchical, dynastic dream world is substituted with a community in which loves, betrayals and reconciliations are part of the struggle through recognizable daily routines, coloured by more or less pedestrian hardships of sickness, unemployment and teenage drug habits. Britain, as stated above, has the longest tradition of community soaps celebrating the life of working class urban people. Whereas in the nineties some small beginnings have been made in Scandinavian countries to produce soaps which portray their own rural communities (Denmark and Norway with Landsbøyn and I de Beste Familier respectively), the most established, long-term production of a community soap in Europe is the German Lindenstrasse, which has been running, partly in parallel with Die Schwarzwaldklinik, since the mid eighties.<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, in spite of the professed intention of its producer, Lindenstrasse turned out to be quite different from its British inspiration.

(a) *Power structure.* European community soaps all attempt to overcome social conflicts and class differences by offering an idealized or nostalgic vision of living together. The British tradition of community soap is proudly working class (with Brookside as a more middle class exception). The harmonious all-embracing neighbourhood acts as a cosy environment in which the restrictions on upward mobility are not noticeable as both success and failure drive characters out of the neighbourhood and the soap. Lindenstrasse, Germany's community soap opera is about middle class people, although there are many lower-middle class characters, and most women work as secretaries, waitresses and nurses.

Nostalgia to a *gemeinschaft* in Denmark's Landsbeyer returns to the country and to a traditional community of farmers who have to rely on each other to weather daily hardships and economic slavery to the banks. Directed at an older audience, as is Coronation Street, the rural community of Landsbeyer is another form of nostalgia -- to life in the country and to working the land. In the modern world of capitalism and materialism, it tells us that the good old values of hard work and loyalty to friends are lost. The villain in this almost Ibsen-like drama is the new bank manager, originally a boy from the village, who left with a grudge, made good and comes back to revenge himself.

(b) *Social loci.* In all European community soap operas characters struggle through domestic and work problems both at home and at work, and they work mostly within the community. People meet in the common public places. In Coronation Street, these are the pub, the garage, the greengrocers, the newspaper shop and the launderette; among the gloomier public spaces of Landsbeyer, the bank is a prominent symbol of threat; in the street, central to Lindenstrasse we are introduced to the café, the doctor's clinic, the flower shop, the bench in the park and the Italian and Greek restaurants. Fewer chores, more leisure.

(c) *Gender relations.* A look at the relationships between couples shows that women are stronger in the British community. Like Coronation Street, the families of Lindenstrasse are mostly of two generations--characters in their twenties with middle aged parents (see Figure 6). Unlike Coronation Street, it is a common (but acceptable) scandal for older men to have affairs with much younger women, often going on to marry them (as in the case of Brinkman in Die Schwarzwaldklinik). During the episodes we reviewed it was the fifty years old Kurt Sperling



who was having an affair with Iffi, his son Momo's girlfriend, while the two teenagers were bringing up their (perhaps his) child. Other cases in the history of the soap include Hans Breimer who divorced his wife Helga because he was having an affair with the younger Anna Ziegler, whom he then married, Andy Zenke (Iffi's father, married to the much younger Gabi), and the fifty-five year old Dr. Dressler, who had two children from a former marriage, is married to the 30 year old Tanja.

In Coronation Street, while characters break up, have affairs and remarry, romance and marriage usually stays within the same generation. Moreover, there are a number of older single women who are active and independent and take part in the story. In Lindenstrasse most women are young; the few older ones, such as Else King, who, with Onkel Franz, provides the moments of comic relief, and Helga Beimer ('fat, not nice or attractive,' according to our informant, 'was the boss in the house when she and Hans were married') are ridiculed, even hated. The one exception is Amelie Von Der Marwitz, sixty-ish, aristocratic and the 'fairy godmother' of Lisa who has no real mother. Our informant adds that her money comes 'from having had relations with wealthy men,' and she is now single. Interestingly, though Lindenstrasse provides a middle class environment, Eva Sperling (Kurt Sperling's wife) is the only woman who has a profession but (as in the American daytime soaps) she is not shown in her professional surroundings and the story-line presents her as weaker than her unemployed husband. Gender patterns seem to indicate a segregation between networks of buddies, and (to a lesser extent) of women friends, who feel much better with same sex than with opposite sex contacts.

### **3. The Dyadic Model**

Interchanging couples constitutes a type of soap which is destabilised in three ways. First, it operates by characters constantly exchanging places within the framework of intragenerational and intergenerational relations, with perpetually characters experimenting with new intimate partners. Second, the structure of those relationships is changed as characters experiment with new forms of partnership (from heterosexual to homosexual, from a dyad to a triad). Third, the biological structure itself is constantly reinvented as characters keep trying to resurrect a 'real' (and maybe stable) lost family, and relationships have to be redefined as familiar characters emerge as biological blood relations. This type of soap both redefines family and community, and brings about the destruction of each as a stable environment and framework for the story.

This pattern is represented in our sample by the German Gute Zeiten, Schlechte Zeiten and the Dutch Goede Tijden, Slechte Tijden<sup>11</sup> and Onderweg Naar Morgen (see Figure 7). While this subgenre draws heavily on melodrama -- no social realism here -- it goes one step beyond the classical American daytime soaps which do feature interchangeable couples but keep the dependence of the young generation on powerful patriarchal moguls. (Less family centred soaps such as Melrose Place and Beverly Hills may be a closer variant).

(a) *Power structure.* As in the community (and unlike the patriarchal) soap, the status of characters of changing couples is equal and interchangeable. The older generation is demoted from power. This type of soap is mostly one-generational, about young couples, with a few middle aged characters of the parent generation<sup>12</sup> who participate in the romantic game but have lost their authority. The motivating force is individual fulfilment, not the continuation of the dynasty. The holding, stable, framing of community has also disappeared as characters are metaphorical orphans and do not belong to families or to communities.

(b) *Social Loci.* The network of changing couples may be casually organized around a bar (as in the case of Gute Zeiten, Schlechte Zeiten) or a café (run by Jan Reitsema in Onderweg Naar Morgen) frequented by members or, as in the case of Goede Tijden, around a person--in this case, an ex-high school teacher, a postmodern surrogate mother, whom a number of the young people have studied with at high school.

(c) *Gender relations.* As nobody can be sure of their lovers, all relationships are in constant conflict, often accompanied by extreme violence. The stable, sometimes boring, harmony of the community gives way to high melodrama. It is not uncommon for a lover or a spouse to attempt to kill their mate<sup>13</sup> and, in the spirit of postmodern life-style, everything goes and characters may go to prison only to return to the soap untainted. Thus, paradoxically, the world in which both genders dedicate their lives to seeking happiness and true love is filled with distrust and fear of the person who is supposedly the closest to them. Violence in these soaps lies therefore within the most intimate circle and constitutes the deepest anxieties (Cavell, 1981). Not surprisingly, as romance fails it is not uncommon for people to have mental breakdowns and end up in a religious sect or in mental hospital. The chaotic, casual, interchanging of couples, the deep

mistrust of the credibility and durability of human emotions and the (paradoxical) quest for durable relationships leads characters to trespass traditionally accepted boundaries. Every boundary becomes a challenge. There is no respect for generational differences or for accepted family taboos.

Incestuous love occurs sometimes knowingly, in other cases innocently.<sup>14</sup> Sex or romance override professional relationships (between patient and therapist), and work relations between bosses and employees. Traditional forms of intimacy are also unsatisfying. These include perverse forms such as women falling in love with men who come to molest or kill them.<sup>15</sup> Heterosexual love has to be weighed against homosexual ones (recall the lesbian relationship of Laura's). The idea of couples is put into question not only by the constant exchange of mates but by trying out new forms such as menage a trois.

Listening to our informants, it seems that these constant exchanges, and new try-outs are extremely casual affairs: 'Vera recently fell in love with a man..' recounts one fan of Gute Zeiten, Schlechte Zeiten, 'she wanted to go round the world with him on holiday but when Clemens (her husband) shows up in the airport to give her something, she makes her decision to go back to her husband.' But though characters act in a way which puts their lives in total jeopardy, these acts are accompanied by what would seem outdated intense, often violent, emotions of possessiveness, jealousy and suspicion which move the story along. Melodrama is intensified not only by threatened and actual crime, but also by a lot of disappearing and reappearing, looking for one's 'real' mother or father, and trying to discover one's sexual identity.

## **Conclusions**

### *The soap opera: a diversity of subgenres*

Despite the common assumption that European television is undergoing, willingly or not, a process of Americanization, we have argued that detailed examination of the diversity of soap operas around Europe reveals that the soap opera is not simply an American genre which is being imported -- either directly, or by adapting formats and conventions -- into Europe. While undoubtedly American (and Latin American and Australian) soap operas prove highly popular

when imported into Europe, we have shown that Britain, Scandinavia and northern Europe, and, to a lesser extent, southern Europe, have developed three distinctive sub-types of the genre--the community soap, the dynastic soap and the dyadic soap. Of these, only the last owes much to the American day-time soap opera and an institutional analysis of cross-national export and production would doubtless reveal a story which might fairly be labelled 'Americanisation' (Mancini and Swanson, 1996). Following the analysis of *Dallas*' success offered by Liebes and Katz (1993), we suggest that both America and Europe sustain, at various times, various examples of the dynastic model because the patriarchal and primordial themes which structure social relations in these soap operas draw on common and fundamental themes in Western culture. In these cases, therefore, it is inappropriate to argue that influence flows from America towards Europe, even though it may be true historically that the overwhelming success of *Dallas* prompted the development of this version of the genre in other countries. Lastly, the community subgenre -- the most distinctively European of the three forms -- would seem to be associated with a strong public broadcasting tradition, for it comes to prominence, typically among the top rated programmes for the country, in Britain, Germany and Scandinavia. Whether this form could be made to succeed in France, Italy or Greece is unknown: while there are many successful formats available for import across national boundaries, certain choices are made, and these surely reveal the cultural assumptions and audience expectations of a particular nation.

How should the apparent success of different forms or subgenres of the soap opera in different countries be explained? We offer the possibility here that a social-anthropological perspective which links family structures and ideological systems may prove useful. For example, how should we explain the choice of the Dynastic type in the first locally-made productions in Germany (*Schwarzwaldlinik*) and in Sweden (*Redereit*)? Emmanuel Todd (1985) analyses the type of family relations (between fathers and sons and between husbands and wives) which characterises different European countries. Distinguishing between Authoritarian and Individualist family types, he suggests that Germany and Sweden belong in the Authoritarian type, as inheritance is customarily unequal (that is, one son only inherits and married sons continue cohabiting with their parents). The Anglo-saxon world, on the other hand, with equal inheritance and no cohabitation, is characterised by Todd as Individualist. If one accepts this mapping of family structures and cultural assumptions, then the further link to the conditions for production and reception of different subgenres of the soap opera within different European

countries is relatively straightforward.

In addition to the considering the possible connections between the soap opera world and the everyday culture of the audience, we suggest further that each of the three subgenres creates a particular communicative relationship with the viewers. Frye (1957; Chesebro, 1987) distinguishes among dramatic genres by the way in which they establish relations between viewer and text. Five types of communicative relationships -- ironic, mimetic, leader-oriented, romantic, and mythic -- are derived from the characterization of the main characters' intelligence and capacity to control the environment in comparison with those of the viewers. Analysing the European subgenres of the soap opera according to Frye's scheme, we find that *Community soaps* are mainly mimetic (positioning the viewers with characters 'like us' on both dimensions), with some ironic elements (characters whom we may feel superior to). *Dynastic soaps* are either romantic, with leaders of superior level of intelligence and capacity to control the surroundings (recall the Swedish or German serials), or mythic, with leaders who are superior in kind on both counts (the Greek soaps, faithful followers of *Dynasty* and *Dallas*). *Dyadic soaps*, seemingly mimetic, go through mythic transformations, in which (lost and existing) characters are found or rediscovered as owning special powers.

The moral economy (Morley and Silverstone, 1990) of the soap opera is connected with the kind of relationship it establishes with its viewers. The more mimetic the subgenre -- the less it escapes from the dilemmas of daily life -- the more it is socially responsible. Thus, the community subgenre is always socially responsible. The dynastic may take one of two forms, depending on whether it is anchored in a broader social reality, and dominated by a socially responsible patriarch (Sweden, Germany) or situated in a fantasy world, and dominated by a power-crazy rogue (Greece; cf Mander, 1983). The dyadic is never socially responsible, as it is in search of a new, as yet undiscovered, moral code.

While both the patriarchal soaps and the community soaps operate within a structure of power relations that it takes for granted, the community soap have been produced in the spirit of public broadcasting, indicating certain pedagogic aims. Thus, unlike the patriarchal dynastic type which is supposed only to appeal to the viewers' fantasy, here we may examine the kinship structure in terms of the social message they are consciously seeking to transmit, i.e., what issues are

intentionally problematised, and, in parallel, what these soaps take for granted. In other words, we were interested in how they constitute a type of public forum for debating social issues. We regard the kinship network as the static, taken for granted, hegemonic elements, and thematic analysis as complementing the picture by revealing the extent and patterns of openness to change.

Within this gender and class context, what social problems do community soaps in British and German cultures address? Both have unemployed characters, teenage drug taking, sexual harassment and battered wives. Both soaps make attempt to deal with the issue of xenophobia and racism.<sup>16</sup> Lindenstrasse transmits two messages regarding immigrants on the street. One is the explicit statement of the immigrants themselves that they would prefer to go home. The second, implicit in the story, is that violence of neo-Nazis against immigrants is exercised by misguided, harmless youngsters, and is basically under control.<sup>17</sup> Coronation Street did not at this point have any foreign inhabitants.<sup>18</sup> While both communities are harmonious, and in control of violence, it does threaten. Our tentative observation (which has to be confirmed) is that in Coronation Street violence is mostly external, anonymous, and arbitrary.<sup>19</sup> In Lindenstrasse there is more violence from within.<sup>20</sup>

### *The postmodern future?*

Both the community and dynastic types offer stable patterns of social relations, and hence an image of a stable society. Two main forms of stability are represented, one based on generational hierarchy, the other based on social class. With regard to the production of soap operas in Europe, it seems that the community and dynastic forms are the two most commonly adopted. The community model, as noted above, is more often associated with public service tradition, the latter seems to fit with the cultural preoccupations of the countries which produce them. Or, more accurately, one might say that the dynastic form, based on hierarchical power relations of one form or another, allows space for the expression of particular sociocultural concerns, where these differ across nations, in a manner not so readily permitted by the dyadic form of soap opera, in which individualistic longings take over. Thus Rederei struggles with issues of ecology, town planning and workers' rights (all invading the grand designs of the dynastic family), while Die Schwarzwaldklinik addresses such issues such as the limits of patriarchy and

the meaning of 'countryside' in the German tradition (Kreutzner and Seiter, 1995).

In the dyadic form, the absence of cultural content is the point. This form, we suggest, lacks stability. Hence the primordial quest for blood relations. While this type makes no attempt to debate social issues, in its pursuit of viewers (and ratings) it harps on the despair of too much freedom and too little trust that goes with the modern and postmodern loss of a sense of place. In a destabilised social environment, where families have disappeared, no biological ties may be relied on as 'real,' as new ones keep cropping up, romantic dyads are precarious, as no emotional ties are sustained for long (nor is it believed to be possible), seeking 'real,' enduring, ties becomes a major concern for the characters, taking the form of a quest for the most primordial biological relations--a parent, a sibling, a son. The sources of melodrama reside in the turmoil of losing and finding transient lovers, and, in losing and finding 'genuine' blood ties. Thus, new experimental life-styles, which transcend the family, and primordial longings which precede it, operate side by side in the pursuit of happiness, creating chaotic kinship patterns. In other words, the invention of a cohort of 'self-imagined orphans,' who go on not only with the losing battle of securing their own romantic relationships, but also with trying to re-invent (or reconstruct) the biological ties they rejected, has jeopardized the structure of kinship itself, put it into constant flux, and (having all but destroyed it) attempts to recreate it by trying out various options of dyadic relationships, and various candidates for 'blood' relatives. In effect, then, this dyadic form is less expressive of any particular cultural environment; insofar as this form is coming to represent the global form of the soap opera, this makes it increasingly difficult for nationally produced soap operas to reflect the cultural concerns of their country.

From the beginning of the 1990s, the trend of both community soaps and dynastic soaps seems to be developing in the direction of the increasing success of the dyadic form. Thus, Die Schwarzwaldklinik and Châteauvallon, both dynastic forms, have ended. New soap operas are either dyadic or combine dynastic and dyadic. Older soap operas, rooted in either community or dynastic forms, such as EastEnders, Coronation Street and Lindenstrasse, may be said to be moving increasingly in the direction of the dyadic. Thus while European soap operas have traditionally become established by expressing, in various ways, significant national cultural concerns, this depended upon incorporating both formal and content features of the genre. Thus, the move away from culturally specific contents towards a more 'empty form' may be seen to

threaten cultural expression through the soap opera.

More optimistically, it may be that where the broadcasting capability exists, countries may produce soap operas on more than one model. For example, in Germany, both the community and dyadic models exist; and in the new Greek soap operas, again, one fits the dyadic model, the other the dynastic. The exceptions may require national explanations. As discussed in Liebes and Livingstone (1994), British soaps are always community soaps, and attempts to produce dyadic models have not succeeded. In the Netherlands, both main soaps are dyadic: this may reflect a combination of factors in the broadcasting system, first as a country with no tradition of local soap opera production, and second as a country where, because of its size and geographic location, has a tradition of receiving programmes from multichannel cable channels, from diverse countries in Europe and America. The preference for local soaps over imported ones wherever these exist (Silj, 1988) suggests that local production remains worth pursuing for both economic and cultural reasons.



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## Endnotes

1. In the forever-open issue of what series may qualify as soaps we have decided to adopt the definition of the genre commonly assumed, if not made explicit, within the research literature: a programme which continues endlessly (not a finite number of episodes culminating in a conclusion), featuring at least two generations, concerned with the daily lives of the characters, with no single hero figure, and reliant more on dialogue than action. We therefore excluded such offshoots or kin-genres such as romantic comedies and teenage series which, while sharing a number of features with soaps, are constructed on other forms of social networks or which make viewers laugh as much as they make them cry or which adopt a linear narrative which progresses towards a closure. These deserve a separate study.
2. The idea of babies, however, does play a central part in the plot, mostly as pawns in the exchange between the sexes. Women often use a baby, real, false, or expected, for improving their position, but babies hardly ever appear on the screen.
3. We arrived at the three forms in two stages. First, we found it useful to label the basic structure of the networks of the American versus the British sub-genre as 'dyadic' and 'community'. Second, when we observed the networks of other soap-producing countries in Europe, we found that some clearly conformed to one of our two categories, albeit within a specific cultural context (i.e. the community of Lindenstrasse), while others adopted the network of one dynastic family.
4. These informants were recruited by advertising for soap-fans among European students in London.
5. In each scene rather than in the overall plotline, which is expected and never-ending at the same time (Thorburn, 1982).
6. France and Spain did not produce any soaps, although Spain did subsequently produce a popular soap in 1996. Among the European states only Germany is a prolific producer which may be compared to Britain.
7. We are extremely grateful to our colleagues across Europe who recorded and supplied tapes, provided reprints in the various languages, and themselves assisted in interpreting the cultural meanings of European-made soaps.
8. A third category, in terms of target audience, are the 'minority' soaps such as Catalan (in Spain), Gaelic (Ireland), Flemish (Belgium). These are made specifically for a regional audience, or, in other cases, as a means of preserving a local language or dialect.
9. Thus, for example, Demitris who rapes Elvira, ends up marrying her mother, while Evira keeps her baby.
10. It is somewhat ironic that Die Schwarzwaldklinik, itself strong on German cultural connotations, was aimed at exporting overseas, and succeeded in doing so, while

Lindenstrasse, modelled on the very British Coronation Street and EastEnders, had been intended for only for home consumption (Silj, 1988).

11. Both, according to Mohr and O'Donnell (1996), based on a long defunct Australian soap The Restless Years, with Dutch scripts produced after the first two seasons and developed independently in both cultures.

12. Such as Laura, in Goede Tijden, who has an affair with Sten, her son's best friend.

13. In Goede Tijden it happened to Helen, everybody's surrogate mother whose lover Koen tried to kill her, and to Robert, who was pushed through a mirror by his wife Laura; in Underweg Naar Morgen Frank was pushed down the stairs by (as it turned out) his wife Daphne, in Gute Zeiten, Schlechte Zeiten the man who goes out with Saskia plans to murder her.

14. Two examples: Renco in Goede Tijden falls in love with Diane, who turns out to be his half sister, and so does Pim, in Underweg Naar Morgen.

15. Such as Saskia of Gute Zeiten, Schlechte Zeiten falling in love with a man who was trying to murder her, or Tina (in the same soap) breaking off with her lover Tom because she falls in love with an extortionist kidnapper.

16. While no immigrants then lived on Coronation Street, two immigrant families lived on Lindenstrasse--the Pavaroties, who own an Italian restaurant, and the Sarikakis who own a Greek restaurant.

17. Seeing Olli, Lindenstrasse's neo-Nazi, as a basically decent, guy, who had suffered from lack of love as a child, and deserves a second chance, is shared by the viewer and by Lisa Hoffmeister, a young teenager -- blond, spiritual, orphaned. Lisa, the gentlest, kindest, most innocently beautiful Cinderella believes in Olli against the advice of older people, making him the hero of the one 'pure' love story of the soap.

18. The exception, which ended tragically, was Deirdre's marriage to Samia, a Moroccan who was under threat to be deported. Samia's kidney was found compatible with the kidney of Deirdre's daughter Tracy, who suffered the consequences of a drug addiction. After Samia donated this kidney he was the victim for a racial attack and died. The story is beautifully pedagogic, as it demonstrates that human blood is identical everywhere, and the spirit of generosity and self sacrifice as well as brutal hatred is not the property of one's own community.

19. Samia, as recounted, was killed by hooligans. Gail's husband Brian is stabbed to death, Vicki's parents are killed in a car crash.

20. In addition to the violence of the two neo Nazis against foreigners, there are violent husbands--Olaf King who attempted to rape his wife (and caused her death), and Anna Ziegler's first husband who beat her up.

**Table 1: The Most Popular Local Soap Operas in each of five European countries (1990-1995)**

| <b>COUNTRY</b>     | <b>TITLE</b>                         | <b>DURATION<br/>(yrs)</b> | <b>FREQ./ WEEK</b> | <b>CHANNEL</b>                  | <b>TIME</b>        |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Germany</b>     | <b>Lindenstrasse</b>                 | <b>12</b>                 | <b>1</b>           | <b>ARD (Public)</b>             | <b>18.40-19.30</b> |
| <b>Germany</b>     | <b>Gute Zeiten, Schlechte Zeiten</b> | <b>5</b>                  | <b>5</b>           | <b>RTL</b>                      | <b>19.40-20.15</b> |
| <b>Netherlands</b> | <b>Onderweg Naar Morgen</b>          | <b>2</b>                  | <b>5</b>           | <b>Nederland 2<br/>(Public)</b> | <b>19.00-19.30</b> |
| <b>Netherlands</b> | <b>Goede Tijden, Slechte Tijden</b>  | <b>6</b>                  | <b>5</b>           | <b>RTL4 (Cable TV)</b>          | <b>20.00-20.30</b> |
| <b>Greece</b>      | <b>The Brightness</b>                | <b>6</b>                  | <b>5</b>           | <b>ANT1 (Private)</b>           | <b>19.45-20.30</b> |
| <b>Greece</b>      | <b>Goodmorning Life</b>              | <b>2</b>                  | <b>5</b>           | <b>ANT1 (Private)</b>           | <b>18.40-19.10</b> |
| <b>Britain</b>     | <b>Coronation Street</b>             | <b>37</b>                 | <b>3</b>           | <b>ITV</b>                      | <b>19.30-20.00</b> |
| <b>Britain</b>     | <b>EastEnders</b>                    | <b>12</b>                 | <b>3</b>           | <b>BBC1</b>                     | <b>19.30-20.00</b> |
| <b>Sweden</b>      | <b>Rederiet</b>                      | <b>5</b>                  | <b>1</b>           | <b>SVT1 (Public)</b>            | <b>20.00-20.45</b> |
| <b>Sweden</b>      | <b>Tre Kronor</b>                    |                           | <b>1</b>           | <b>TV4</b>                      | <b>20.00-20.45</b> |

**Table 2: Three Models for A Comparative Analysis of Soap Operas (With Examples)**

|                    | <b>Dynastic</b>                        | <b>Communitarian</b>                    | <b>Dyadic</b>  |
|--------------------|--|---|--|
| <b>America</b>     | <b>Dallas<br/>Dynasty</b>              |   | <b>Bold and the Beautiful<br/>As the World Turns</b>             |
| <b>Britain</b>     |  | <b>Coronation Street<br/>EastEnders</b> |  |
| <b>Germany</b>     | <b>Die Schwarzwaldklinik</b>           | <b>Lindenstrasse</b>                    | <b>Gute Zeiten, Schlechte<br/>Zeiten</b>                         |
| <b>Netherlands</b> |  |   | <b>Onderweg Naar Morgen<br/>Goede Tijden, Slechte<br/>Tijden</b> |
| <b>Sweden</b>      | <b>Rederiet</b>                        | <b>Tre Kronen</b>                       |  |
| <b>Denmark</b>     |  | <b>Landsbøyn</b>                        |  |
| <b>Norway</b>      |  | <b>I de Beste<br/>Familier</b>          |  |
| <b>Greece</b>      | <b>Brightness<br/>Goodmorning Life</b> |   |  |

**Figure 1: Coronation Street circa 1987 (first published in Liebes and Livingstone, 1992)**

**Figure 2: The Young and the Restless circa 1988 (first published in Liebes and Livingstone, 1994)**

**Figure 3: Dallas (first published in Liebes and Katz, 1993)**

**Figure 4: Brightness**

**Figure 5: Rederiet**

**Figure 6: Lindenstrasse**

**Figure 7: Onderweg Naar Morgen**