

Is *Dynasty* a Clone of *Dallas*?: Reading Formations for Cultural Politics in Consumer Culture*

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I. Introduction

On January 12, 1981, *Dynasty* took to the air on ABC TV in the United States. Series creators Richard and Esther Shapiro developed a prime-time soap opera that would eventually overtake *Dallas* as the most high-rated television program in America. It was only two months earlier that the whole nation was obsessed with “Who Shot J.R.?” on CBS TV, in which the 1979-1980 season of *Dallas* would climax with the shooting of the ruthless Texas oil tycoon, J.R. Ewing. In November 1980 the conclusion of the *Dallas* cliffhanger

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achieved a huge 62% share of viewers for the CBS network. Thus it was natural for another network like ABC to launch a soap opera that could compete with CBS's *Dallas*. Originally titled *Oil*, *Dynasty* also adopted the oil baron theme and became effectively a version of that soap subgenre.

Dynasty was a prime-time soap opera that revolved around the lives of two extremely wealthy Denver families – the Carringtons and the Colbys. The series followed the life of a billionaire oilman from Denver, Blake Carrington (John Forsythe), and his family. In the premiere episode Blake wedded his former secretary Krystle Grant Jennings (Linda Evans). Krystle's struggle to fit into the family and the Carringtons' lavish, powerful, and sometimes ruthless lifestyle initially drove the series. Blake Carrington and Alexis Colby (Joan Collins), once married but now divorced, were the respective patriarch/matriarch of each clan. While the show primarily and ostensibly concerned the businesses of Blake, Alexis, and Krystle, it primarily focused on their personal adventures, trials, and tribulations. In addition, their respective children, different relatives, and acquaintances engaged in a variety of sinister schemes, stormy love affairs, and shocking betrayals, all designed to attract the audience's interest.

When *Dynasty* (ABC/Aaron Spelling/Fox-Cat, 1981-1990) and *Dallas* (CBS/Lorimar, 1978-1991) are seen as examples of American television's national and international success in the 1980s, it is necessary to address the question of how particular forms of popular entertainment in this period reflected and constituted the social values of the times. This paper will argue that the public and private reaction to *Dynasty* should be understood in connection with the following tendencies. First, there is the increasing commercialization of the TV media in consumer culture of which desire driven by audiences is a cultural formation. Second, American popular culture is expressed in

versions of the perennial myth of the American Dream linked as it is with the Western cowboy myth as political and national self-image. Lastly, how *Dynasty* depicted the issues of gender and sexuality in the Reagan era, which distinguishes them from those issues characteristic of *Dallas*, will be discussed.

II. History, Reading Formations, and the Televisual Apparatus

Generally speaking, in watching TV the viewer is predisposed to assert, “I help it to be born, I help it to live, since it is ... my story ... to come into existence only when it is seen” (Metz 22). The viewer qua subject is thus as much constructed in the process of seeing images as it is constructed in the process of the entry into language.

Stephen Heath, a prominent cinema theorist, has noted that cinema “occupies the individual as subject in the terms of the existing social representations and it constructs the individual as subject in the process, in the balancing out of symbolic and imaginary, circulation for fixity of subject” (Heath 127). Heath considers cinema altogether as an “imagery” text, as an institution completing the subject, and as the translative place of a plural one into a certain historical subject (128). He ultimately sees the fictive text as necessary to construct the subject in the process of reception. He writes:

What moves in film, finally, is the spectator, immobile in front of the screen. While the film is of the regulation of that movement, the individual is of subject held in the shifting and placing of desire, energy, contradiction The spectator is moved and related as subject in the process and images of that movement.

(Heath, *Questions of Cinema* 129)

Another critic, Tony Bennett, explains the individual subject with

Marxist theory. He argues that subjects approach a text with already coded perceptions of the world, which he defines as “reading formations”:

By reading formation I mean a set of discursive and intertextual determinations which organize and animate the practice of reading, connecting texts and readers in specific relations to one another in constituting reading subjects of particular types and texts as objects to be read in particular ways.

(Bennett, “Texts in history”)

In considering this definition of reading formations two assumptions need to be born in mind. First, a reading formation includes the act of the reading of written texts as well as the viewing of imagery texts. Second, the subject is momentarily constituted in particular ways, because the subject is always constituted in a given historical moment of the reading formation. Therefore it can be posited that history is inevitably the result not of a revelation of the past, but of determinate relations in a given conjuncture between a given text and its subjects.

Sometimes scholars have been misleadingly influenced by the psychoanalytic paradigm and have only focused on the a-historical psychic mechanisms that position the spectator. In contrast, Marxist theorists emphasize the historicity of the reader and spectator. Beginning with Laura Mulvey’s pioneering essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” most feminist theorists have been exploring the complexity of what it means to be a female spectator, but have tended to ignore the issue of historicizing the reader and spectator. In contrast, the emphasis of some feminist theorists on narrative, however, has recently led Teresa de Lauretis to include the female as a historical spectator. De Lauretis leaves room for “a double female desire” that will be useful in understanding gender address in some television programs (34-41).

Nevertheless, although De Lauretis does include the historical spectator, her theory still assumes, in accord with the psychoanalytic paradigm, that a female T.V. spectator is undifferentiated from the subject formation in terms of race, class, or reading formations. As already discussed, TV, as an imagery text, is a special kind of popular art form involving 24-hour continuous flow, to produce a particular image format. Certainly, a soap opera such as *Dynasty* therefore provides useful terrain from which to explore issues concerning history, the historical spectator, and the subject.

Two specific issues will now be discussed using *Dynasty* as a practical model for analysis: first, how far the modified theories have developed in relation to film and/or to the different televisual apparatus (i.e. the distinction between a model and a historical spectator); and second, to what degree a soap opera may embody what is generally inherent to television. Regarding the first question, does a similar distinction between a model like *Dynasty* and a historical spectator arise in television? The TV spectator is drawn into the TV world through the mechanism of consumption. He/she has constant unsatisfied desire, the constant hope of a forthcoming but never realized plenitude, just as film engenders similar individual effects. It is the endlessness of the series of TV texts, a continuous strip that is always available to the spectator even when the set is off, that produces this different effect.

This analysis suggests that the TV world is more like the real one for the TV viewer in that its existence is that of a continuous 24-hour a day cycle that is always potentially "available." The historical spectator is more inside the TV because he or she is, so to speak, "dreaming" in the reading formation of *Dynasty*. Consequently, the distinction between "fiction" and "reality" is less obvious to the TV spectator essentially because the "reality-effect" is greater and the regression to the dream state less so (Stam 23-43). Thus, there is less

cause for the historical spectator to resist his/her textual-visual construction. Also this historical spectator, in his/her construction, is also important in the televisual apparatus, because the viewer is the endless consumer, existing in a perpetual state of about-to-be-filled desire (Stam 43).

A feminist will bring to *Dynasty* a set of reading formations that question and even resist the gender positions that soap operas offer. Other resistances come from elements that bring to the discussion far different cultural formations around sex and politics. What are some of the cultural codes that structure the majority of soap opera programs? How far can we say that these in fact duplicate the reading formations of the spectators?

To begin with, *Dynasty* was symptomatic of Reagan's America in its unquestioning and conspicuous showing of capitalist materialism. *Dynasty* primarily projects an upper-class ambience of consumer culture through its lavishly decorated sets and through luxury items such as expensive cars, fancy clothes, and jewelry that are on view in every episode. Furthermore, in terms of readings formations, there is the new openness toward sexuality that was an important feature of American culture in Reagan's America. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed the eruption within the behavior of young adults of all varieties of sexuality, whether it be bisexuality, homosexuality, sado-masochism or the lifestyles of transvestites. Such an awareness evolved both partly through the emphasis of the 1970s Women's Movement on sex-roles and female homosexuality, and partly through influence of the growing male gay rights movement. Further this cause was advanced by a general loosening up of strongly demarcated male/female sex-roles, thereby providing a variety of options for both genders not previously deemed possible.

As will become evident, beneath this set of socio-political "reading formations" lies the message to middle-class desire already

noted, a message intended to operate at the unconscious level. Values, narratives, and images are organized thematically according to these reading formations. However, they are always inflected to satisfy unconscious fantasies, wish fulfillments, and subject formations in the imaginary since television may itself be seen as the mobile interface between the spectator and the visual text.

III. The Cultural Politics of *Dynasty*: Politics, Myth, and the American Dream

Dynasty was an apparently new televisual text designed to meet specific economic and cultural desires and requirements in the era of the Regan Presidency. But what were these desires and requirements and how did they manifest themselves in a given prime-time serial made in the US? A general answer is given by considering the commercial character of US network television and the specific socio-cultural context that examined in this paper. American prime-time television aims for the largest possible viewing audience by offering program content that adheres to the dominant socio-political values and issues of the times. During the 1980s such influences included the frontier spirit of the Western myth, Carter and Reagan's political ideologies, the oil crisis-fuelled economic recession, women's sociopolitical power, and homosexuality.

Dallas and *Dynasty* both gained large audiences by similarly exploring and exploiting family feuds, the oil business, stereotypical myths of the South, modern incarnations of the cowboy, and homo- and hetero-sexuality. These two prime-time soap operas shared many similarities due to the generative influence of the political unconscious in 1980s America. During the final days of the Jimmy Carter Administration and America's "malaise days," Americans looked

forward with hope to the presidential inauguration of Ronald Reagan the week following *Dynasty's* premiere. Economic and political uneasiness around the world had brought discomfort and some anxiety to the lives of many Americans.

While Carter was asking them to conserve energy and ran his 1980 re-election campaign amidst skyrocketing inflation and unemployment, Reagan was convinced that "America's best days are yet to come." The former actor turned governor of California asked voters, "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" He got his answer when Americans went to the voting booths in November 1980. Although many thought him to be a renegade cowboy ready to launch a nuclear attack on the Soviet Union, enough Americans believed in Reagan's campaign promise to bring economic prosperity to the United States. Voters felt they could not sign on for another four years of malaise and, like Reagan, they wanted the country to move beyond economic hardship.

In *Dynasty*, Krystle Grant had achieved (albeit by marriage) the enormous wealth that Americans dreamed about in the 1980s. She was a success story that advertised the potential opportunities available to an economically prosperous American people. Krystle symbolized what the new presidency and the new decade might afford all Americans in the near future. It is important to note that the concept of a wealthy oilman may not have been successful if *Dynasty* had been created before 1981. It was the precise timing of the inception of *Dallas* amidst the oil crisis of the mid-1970s that made the oil industry an interesting subject for television audiences in America.

Reagan's election as president merits further analysis. This time the country reached as far west as possible and found a "cowboy" with a ranch near the metropolis of Los Angeles. Notably, Reagan projected the persona and identity of a being a western cowboy, an image further enhanced and cemented due to his experience as an

actor. However, the fact that Americans elected Reagan expressed their need for a real Western hero, not merely for the appearance of one. His image was a masterful amalgam of the frontiersman's qualities. Frederick Jackson Turner's famous "frontier thesis" seems suitable when interpreting *Dynasty* in light of Reagan's political ideology and national self-image. Turner had theorized that the characteristics of American life were determined by an empty continent luring people westward ("The Significance" 1-18; Carpenter 117-29). Central to this argument is the view that the collective consciousness of Americans is composed of the basic social values inherent in the American Dream, in addition to a tense and dynamic opposition between moralism and materialism.

Cowboy and horse were virtually inseparable in the older Westerns but now, instead of conquering a horse, the modern billionaire cowboy oilman on *Dynasty* was conquering machine and capital: "A machine can't fight back. A machine has no intelligence. And a machine and capital is powerless without a man to turn it on. A fast car may have a certain grace, but is nothing like the animal grace of a loping horse" (Calder 97).

Unfortunately, however, the cowboy and Western hero's victory over machine and capital does not compensate for morality winning over material desire in light of the American Dream. The likes of movies like *Superman* and *Urban Cowboy* – pure presentations of timeworn unrealistic stories without a touch of self-parody or recognition of the modern environment – were no longer received by the desire of *Dynasty* viewers. The consuming desire for wealth, power, and material possessions goes beyond the moral content of the American Dream. In considering *Dynasty* as a representation of media consciousness, consumption is offered as a problematic solution to the power relations of an unequal society that is based on naked economic power. *Dynasty* posits an imaginary community of anonymous

consumers and spectators with shared desires.

The manifest plots of the *Dynasty* series were not about the individual freedom of its central characters, a value traditionally espoused in literature that promotes the American Dream. Rather, the stories revolved around the power struggle between Blake and Alexis and their respective oil empires. Cecil Colby laughed on his deathbed at the thought of the two of them fighting to the bitter end. In 1985 Alexis found Blake's estranged brother, Ben, living in the outback of Australia, brought him to Denver, and helped him sue Blake and Dominique for a share of their father's estate. Ben had been left out of their father's will because he was, in fact, responsible for their mother's death. But, by perjuring themselves, Alexis and Ben convinced a jury that Blake was responsible.

As a result, Blake was forced to give up a large portion of his empire to his brother. Alexis managed to steal Blake's South China Sea oil leases from him and then financed several loans that Blake couldn't pay because of her clever business manipulations. Blake became so incensed that he finally tried to kill her. However, not even that would stop Alexis. She bought a newspaper, the *Denver Mirror*, to use to mount a campaign against Blake in which she accused him of burning down his hotel, *La Mirage*, to collect the insurance money. He spent several weeks behind bars because of the phony accusations. Eventually Blake lost everything to Alexis but, of course, he maneuvered his way back to the top by digging up enough proof of their perjury to blackmail them into returning his holdings. Years later the two even competed for the governorship of Colorado.

The manifest plotline of *Dynasty* exploits gender differences to the extreme mediated as they are by money, power, and property relations. But the characterization in the drama does follow the cleavages expected from the patriarchal structure of American society. In this light of this interpretation, let us now consider the main women

characters in *Dynasty*.

IV. Female Historical Subjects

Why is Alexis cast as more active and dominant in business than the magnetic Blake? Why is Alexis more popular and notorious than Krystle? In responding to these questions female representations in *Dynasty* are of paramount importance and need scrutinizing. The two main female characters – Alexis Carrington Colby and Krystle Jennings Carrington – embody American society's dichotomous good-and-evil view of the female heroine. Krystle is depicted as good and pure, a prime candidate for the label of "perfect woman." She is identified primarily as a wife and mother, although she has worked sporadically. Overall, Krystle provides emotional support for virtually everyone on the show with the exception of Alexis and assorted other enemies of the Carrington family. Her one flaw seems to be that she once had an extramarital affair; but that is long past and her marriage is now as strong as ever.

Owing to the charisma of Alexis' character few viewers may remember that *Dynasty* started out as a *Dallas* clone, distinguished from its model by the creator-producers' explicit attempt to make the Ewings look rather pedestrian and petit-bourgeois. What characterized both serials as a new type of melodrama on U.S. prime-time television was their representation of corporate capitalism as being outrageously immoral and patriarchy as being excessively monstrous.

Alexis, an aggressive, power-hungry, and enormously successful career woman, can be seen as the personification of the immoral side of possessive individualism. In her transgressive behavior she is everything American culture says that good women are not: she is conniving in her lust for power, and shamelessly exploits her sexual

allure for personal gain. Her only redeeming feature is her apparently genuine concern and love for her children. We watch Alexis's unscrupulous and successful attempts to appropriate and exercise power in both the public and the private spheres. Since the reality of power is so inextricably interwoven into the male cultural sphere, the synthesis between a female character and the blatant execution of power is bound to be particularly effective. Like the melodramatic vamp, she is represented as a sexual threat to the men around her. Not only does she threaten Blake's marriage to Krystle, but Cecil Colb's sexual encounter with Alexis ultimately costs him his life. Furthermore, Alexis' young lover and future husband Dex Dexter suffers considerably because of his sexual addiction to her. As a woman beyond the magical age of forty, Alexis chooses and gets the men she wants. Thus, her character combines a variety of traits, which men's culture has marked woman as the other. She is presented in the fictional world of *Dynasty* as men's fantasy of a woman coming true and saying: "Here is your worst nightmare."

The realm of television images repeatedly embodies the received "good-bad" woman dichotomy that has pervaded representations of women in Hollywood films. What *Dynasty* presents is a distorted image of an active and powerful female character – one excessively marked as a fictitious narcissist. Since the Alexis character so vehemently rejects the traditional construction of femininity as egoless, passive and powerless, it allows for the gratification of pleasures typical of postmodern consumerism.

Viewers learn that the bitter Alexis had been exiled from Denver and her children when Blake discovered that she was having an affair with a man named Roger Grimes. What made her more vexed was that, when she returned to Denver to be a surprise witness, she testified for the state in Blake's murder trial. He had accidentally killed his gay son's lover, Ted, and now found himself on trial for first-degree

murder. The issue of homosexuality, frankly exposed in *Dynasty*, presents Stephen as the gay son who is forever confused. Blake and Adam had trouble accepting his homosexuality, which caused Stephen much grief. Every other year he would run away from the family vowing never to return. In the early years he married Krystle's money-hungry niece, Sammy Jo. He stayed with her long enough to get her pregnant, and then decided he was going to leave Denver and live a gay lifestyle somewhere else. Later, he married Claudia Blaisdel to keep his father from taking custody of his son away from him. The marriage lasted until he had an affair with his gay attorney and divorced Claudia. However, Claudia was ready to marry Stephen's brother Adam by then, so she wasn't too upset.

V. Concluding observations

The fact that *Dynasty* depicted and explored so many problematic and provocative social issues undoubtedly in part accounted for its success. It embodied such contentious themes as family feuds, the American oil crisis in the Middle East, the myth of the Southern cowboy, and homosexuality. Its popularity reached the top of the Nielsen ratings chart week after week, and hence brought great advertising revenue to ABC and its affiliates. *Dynasty* was also a merchandising success with *Forever Krystle Perfume* and *Carrington Cologne*, along with several other marketing ventures. It managed to create superstars out of virtually all of its cast members, all the while fattening their pocketbooks as well as those of the show's producers. Along with *Dallas*, *Dynasty* became a symbol of the consumer's desire for capitalism all over the globe. *Dynasty*, as a televisual cultural practice, constructed a social imaginary of envy and offered escapism from the pressures of quotidian life in postindustrial and developing societies

while glamorizing the lifestyles of the rich business class in America.

In asserting its own authority to represent reality, the *Dynasty* T.V. series successfully intervened in televisual consumer cultures all over the world creating a myriad of different reading formations in different cultural contexts of reception. The fetishism of the opulent living of the latter day leisure class in the higher echelons of American society attracted the scopic gaze of envy of millions. And this commercial success occurred despite the fact that female economic and socio-sexual power and male gay sensibility are somewhat slippery phenomenon not easily identifiable with by innumerable televisual subjects.

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Abstract

**Is *Dynasty* a Clone of *Dallas*?: Reading Formations
for Cultural Politics in Consumer Culture**

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In January, 1981, *Dynasty* took to the air, while *Dallas* overtook as the most high-rated television program in America. This paper will argue that the public and private reaction to *Dynasty* should be understood in context of the role of T.V. media in consumer culture. *Dynasty* and *Dallas* are both shown to represent the mass desires of consumers because they are versions of the perennial myth of the American Dream, linked as it is with the Western cowboy myth as a dominant political and national self-image. It is shown that *Dynasty*, especially, dealt with the issues of gender and sexuality in the Reagan era. Also revealed is the fact that *Dynasty* primarily projected an upper-class ambience of consumer culture through its openness toward sexuality that was an important feature of American culture in Reagan's America. Focus is given to the key role of Alexis, who is portrayed as an aggressive, power-hungry, and enormously successful career woman. The paper concludes showing that the commercial success of *Dynasty* occurred despite the fact that female economic and socio-sexual power and male gay sensibility are somewhat slippery phenomenon not easily identifiable with by innumerable televisual subjects.

Key Words: *Dynasty* TV serial, reading formation, Regan's 1980s, sexuality, American Dream