

BROOKSIDE

Christine Geraughty

Soap opera is a despised genre. Mention *Crossroads*, *Triangle*, *Angels* or *Emmerdale Farm* and back come words like 'boring', 'humourless', 'unbelievable', 'contrived'. Its makers either refuse to acknowledge that they work in the genre — 'it's an hour's drama a week, with all the advantages of a cumulative tradition,' said one of *Coronation Street's* producers — or admit it with a resigned awareness that it will win them no professional kudos. On the Left, serials are seen as at best mildly addictive rubbish; at worst as a distraction from the serious issues which have to be tackled. It is a common criticism that by concentrating on the personal world of love, marriage and the family, serials ignore the 'real' world of work, trade unions, unemployment and class. 'Ugly social issues are *reduced to the level of private, family melodrama,*' (my italics) writes Carl Gardner in *City Limits* on how *Coronation Street* handles unemployment. No one

pushes it further, to question why the fictional affairs of Ken, Deirdre and Mike Baldwin should capture the imagination and the headlines, or challenges the patronising criticism of the audience which is implied in the ready dismissal of soap operas as 'escapist' because they deal with personal relationships.

In such a situation it was encouraging to hear that Channel 4 was prepared to invest £3m in a twice-weekly soap opera, produced by Phil Redmond whose commitment to the serial format had been apparent in his work on *Grange Hill* and *Staying On*. Redmond was keen, however, to emphasise *Brookside's* difference from the other British serials. It would deal with personal problems but it would not be 'a romanticised interpretation of life but will be a reflection of contemporary Britain with a sharp edge, tackling issues of unemployment, feminism, motivation and divorce.' In another interview, Redmond argues that 'people will accept and actually

want programmes that tell the truth and show society as it really is.' What is interesting about *Brookside* then is that it shares the Left's general criticism of soap opera, articulates the realist aesthetic which lurks behind such criticism and offers the possibility (although I think Redmond would deny it) of a progressive soap opera.

Certainly, *Brookside* is different from the other serials in its format, the stories it deals with and the characters it represents. Serials such as *Angels*, *Coronation Street* and *Crossroads* are very much based on the notion of a community — a street or a shared place of work — in which each character has a place. Stories often depend on disagreements and quarrels between characters but at times of celebration or distress the serials offer us a resolution through a community response which is generated across family, age or class divisions. When it started, *Brookside* resolutely set itself against this approach and presented us with a number of families which were clearly delineated in terms of



class and whose men, at least, were mutually antagonistic. There is no common pub where the characters meet 'naturally' — Redmond argues that this would be unrealistic — and there is little opportunity for the exchange of gossip and information across the family boundaries which is so characteristic of other serials. There is some evidence that this decision has caused difficulties in that the families in *Brookside* seemed to be living their lives in parallel rather than sharing common experiences. The introduction of Alan as a character who is equally at ease with the Collins and the Grants and a greater emphasis on joint activity — the jumble sale in support of the factory workers, for example — are indications of a change in approach.

Brookside probably signals most clearly its difference from other serials in the type of story it is willing to take on. It has consistently tried to use issues like strikes, redundancies, unemployment and union activity as a source of stories and character motivation. *Brookside* began with Bobby Grant's involvement in a strike at the factory and recent stories have centred on the fight to prevent the factory's closure. Such stories have been handled with considerable complexity and Bobby's role as an able shop steward who could take on a full-time union job has been both supported and criticised by characters within the programme. In addition, *Brookside*, even after the first flurry over four letter words had died down, has taken a more open approach to stories centering on sexual relationships. The treatment of Petra's relationship with Barry Grant, after Gavin's death, fully used the serial form's capacity to explore her shifting emotions and response to a new sexual relationship in a way which was moving and unusual.

The other major difference in *Brookside* is the way in which it represents groups which are not normally given much space or sympathy in serials — men and adolescents. The other serials tend to be dominated by women characters but in *Brookside* the characters of Bobby and Barry Grant, Paul Collins and even Alan Partridge are crucial in terms of the stories built around them and the space given to their opinions. Redmond's previous work has been marked by an interest in the shift from childhood to adolescence and much attention is paid in *Brookside* to the lifestyle, attitudes and problems of young people. Within this group, however, the weighting towards males is even more

strongly marked and the departure of Lucy has left a gap which has been filled by more attention being given to the activities of Damon Grant, Gordon Collins and their almost exclusively male friends.

This change in the range of stories and characters would seem to be an attempt to win over a new audience for Channel 4's serial. Soap opera is one of the few TV genres for which the audience is assumed to be women. It is seen as women's fiction which men may watch but not really get involved with. *Brookside* has been concerned to win new viewers and Redmond has said that the programme gets a good response from young people. Nevertheless the combination of a realist aesthetic and a search for new audiences has meant that *Brookside* has lost some of the pleasures and possibilities which other serials offer, particularly to their women viewers.

Women characters are central to soap operas. They are not peripheral to the stories; they are not mysterious, enigmatic or threatening as they so often are in thrillers and crime series. They are the norm by which the programme is understood and every soap opera has at its heart women characters who are strong, independent, living their own lives, making their own decisions in a way which makes the men seem clumsy and inept. The women handle the complex web of relationships that make up a soap opera with a care and intensity which recognises the importance of close relationships and celebrates the undervalued skills of women in handling them. *Brookside*, because of its other concerns, has never had this full blooded commitment to its women characters. It does take on women's issues — infertility, pregnancy, low pay — but the way in which it represents women seems to reinforce sexual stereotyping rather than to challenge it. Whereas most serials concentrate on the personal world, *Brookside* also tries to operate in the public arena and gives more attention to what are defined as public problems. Women are almost always excluded from these activities. Of the main women characters, only Heather Huntingdon has a job outside the home; there is no attempt to represent women working in the factory or organising in the unions. It is Bobby Grant who is the shop steward; his wife, Sheila, one of the strongest women characters, is not even a union member. The norm is relentlessly that of the married couple, with or without children, with the women taking on the traditional roles of cleaning, cook-

ing and maintaining the family relationships. The public world of work and unions is represented as being exclusively male and the women are presented as supporting their men rather than challenging them.

The strongest relationships within *Brookside* are within the families. One effect of this is that there is little sense of women sharing common experiences across the barriers of class and family. Serials are built on gossip and conversations and it is striking how rarely the women in *Brookside* talk to each other. Their most intimate conversations tend to occur within families — mother and daughter or between sisters — and only the middle class Heather is seen to have a close woman friend. There is some evidence that the programme is trying to change in this respect but at the moment there is little of the casual intimacy that marks the relationship between Mavis and Rita in *Coronation Street* or Jill and Barbara in *Crossroads*, that sense of being down among the women where it is possible to look at the male world from a female perspective. And while it may be more realistic to show the nagging Marie, endlessly washing the children's clothes, it is hard to see what pleasure women are being offered in such representations.

It is revealing to compare *Brookside* with *Angels* which has just finished a twice weekly run on BBC1. There is a tendency to assume that because *Brookside* is on Channel 4 and centres on working class families it will automatically be the most interesting of the current British serials. But *Angels*, because of its hospital setting, has been able to take on stories about unions, privatisation and the cuts in public services, without abandoning the space usually given to women in serials. It has handled stories of rape, abortion and childbirth with considerable frankness and has shown women challenging doctors who tell them what's best for their own bodies. *Brookside's* commitment to realism, its concern to show how working class people really live, is in tune with the common response on the Left to what is felt to be misrepresentation by the media generally. *Brookside* has succeeded in the difficult task of establishing itself as a serial, and the presentation of the Grant family in particular has been a real challenge to other serials. But the way in which it has represented women is a salutary reminder that the conventions and pleasures of more traditional soap operas should not be too lightly discarded.