

Soap Addicts

Every night in homes all over Britain violent arguments break out, adultery is practiced, crimes committed and appalling secrets revealed. And all of this is done in the name of family entertainment. Britain's TV dramas, or 'soap operas' have been supplying British households with a steady diet of tragedy and trauma for nearly 50 years and doing so in a uniquely British way. The British, like the Japanese, love their drama serials but their respective versions couldn't be more different.

The first major difference is duration. While in Japan a drama series runs for three months, in Britain a soap opera continues until the public stops watching. Britain's most popular soap opera ITV's 'Coronation Street' or 'Corrie', has been going since 1960 and its fierce rival on the BBC 'EastEnders' since 1985. Currently there are 5 half hour episodes of 'Corrie' weekly and 4 of EastEnders, all at peak times and still garnering massive audiences. The actors often stay for years or even decades. 'Corrie' actor William Roach has played the part of Ken Barlow for the last 48 years. In 1981 his character's marriage to long-suffering girlfriend Deirdre got more viewers than the real wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana, televised on the same channel two days later.

Another major difference is content. Japanese dramas usually portray the lives of beautiful people, immaculately groomed and perfectly dressed. In Britain the stories take place among ordinary people, often middle-aged or old, usually plain-looking and living decidedly unglamorous lives. Coronation Street is set in a poor area of Greater Manchester, while EastEnders is based in a Victorian Square of dilapidated terraced houses, in a deprived part of east London.

Why do the British prefer this type of gritty 'kitchen sink' drama? One idea is that the British are obsessed with realism and have trouble accepting anything too obviously glamorous and artificial however entertaining it might be. A British person watching a typical Japanese drama like TBS's 'Mukashi No Otoko' might find themselves repeatedly questioning the story's credibility. In this show Fujiwara Norika played a humble shop assistant yet lived in a beautiful flat with a splendid view of Tokyo Tower. A typically British reaction would be not 'What a lovely apartment!' but 'How can she afford to live there on a shop assistant's salary?' and 'How can she afford to wear different, beautiful outfits in every scene?' and 'Why is there never a single crease in any of them?' and 'How can she afford to take taxis everywhere?'. More recent dramas would provoke similar questions – 'Is Kimura Takuya really the sort of person you would trust in charge of a jet airliner?' And as for 'Fuyu no Sonata'.....

By contrast, Coronation Street's most famous inhabitants were the Ogdens, a family ruled by the mother Hilda, a cleaning lady, never seen without her apron, hair permanently in rollers. Her son was a binman; her husband unemployed. Most of their scenes were in the simple kitchen of their tiny house, usually eating huge platefuls of fried food. Hilda was voted the most recognizable woman in Britain after the royals and her farewell episode was watched by 27 million people, almost half the population of Britain.

However, anthropologist Kate Fox believes there is another reason why the British prefer gritty reality to glamorous fantasy. To her the key is British people's fundamental obsession with privacy. A result of this is that we tend to know very little about the private lives of anyone outside our immediate circle. This has led to a craving for a glimpse into the private lives of people similar to ourselves, partially satisfied by the soaps.

Whatever the appeal the soaps seem here to stay and while the broad accents and dialect words make them challenging for non native speakers to follow, watching them is still a great way to attune yourself to the rhythms and stress patterns of everyday English and pick up some useful, natural expressions along the way. Besides this, they offer a fascinating glimpse of British society as it really is and a kind of TV programme unique to the UK. As the producer of EastEnders Julia Smith remarked 'We don't make life, we reflect it.'