WATCHING DALLAS

soap opera and the melodramatic imagination

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Preface

When I wrote the original Dutch version of this book in 1982 I had several things in mind. I wanted first of all to intervene in the heated debate on *Dallas* in the Dutch media, which, to my mind, was characterized by a certain measure of ignorance, whether deliberate or not, as to the cultural specificity of this widely popular but highly controversial television serial from the United States. I wanted to encourage serious reflection on the phenomenon itself and, in order to do this, I deemed it useful to introduce the interested Dutch reader to theoretical perspectives on television and television serials, perspectives which stem mainly from Anglo-Saxon media and cultural studies. Dutch intellectual communities were largely unacquainted with these theories. The book, therefore, acquired a somewhat 'pedagogic' character.

Apart from presenting a framework within which *Dallas* could be taken seriously, however, I also wished to contribute to further problematization and understanding of the social, cultural and political role of serials like *Dallas*. Thus, I also deal

with issues which come to the fore as soon as one adopts a position acknowledging that *Dallas* does matter, especially bearing in mind its popularity: issues concerning pleasure and its vicissitudes, its relations with ideology and cultural politics. Parts of the original text were more or less extensively re-written in order to overcome the difficulties arising from its originally being written within a Dutch national context. *Dallas*, however, matters internationally and it is my belief that the Dutch experience is not altogether a unique one.

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I.A.

Amsterdam, May 1985

Introduction

The moment of DALLAS

If we are to believe the plethora of studies, commentaries and warnings from journalists, critics and even politicians, the beginning of the 1980s was marked for the world's television viewing public by a new, spectacular phenomenon: *Dallas*. This unique status is due first and foremost to the extraordinary but undeniable popularity achieved by this American dramatic serial about a rich Texan oil family. That popularity has been wellnigh worldwide: in over ninety countries, ranging from Turkey to Australia, from Hong Kong to Great Britain, *Dallas* has become a national craze, with the proverbial empty streets and a dramatic drop in water consumption when an episode of the serial is going out. In the Netherlands, for example, over half the population watched *Dallas* every week in the spring of 1982, when its popularity reached its peak. No other fictional programme, foreign or domestic, has ever achieved such high viewing figures.

This almost inconceivable popularity has caused *Dallas* to

develop into a modern myth. It became the symbol of a new television age. Euphoric articles were written, especially in the serial's country of origin, on the success of the *Dallas* phenomenon. *Time*, for example, asserted with satisfaction in a cover story that 'the program's high gloss handsomeness brings a touch of class to the ruck of commercial series TV'.[1] But this American pride is countered in the rest of the world by quite different preoccupations. Of course, the Western European popular press was fascinated by the success story of *Dallas* and eagerly contributed to the myth-making. In more serious circles, however, its very success and popularity were fastened on for renewed expressions of concern over the steadily growing influence of American consumer capitalism on popular culture. *Dallas* was regarded as yet more evidence of the threat posed by American-style commercial culture against 'authentic' national cultures and identities. In February 1983, for instance, Jack Lang, the French Minister for Culture, during a conference in Paris to which he had invited a selection of prominent intellectuals and artists ranging from Ettore Scola to Susan Sontag, had even proclaimed *Dallas* as the 'symbol of American cultural imperialism'.

Of course, the problem raised here is real enough. On the eve of a period in which the structure and organization of the world of mass communications are about to undergo drastic changes, through the advance of the so-called 'new technologies' (cable, satellite), national governments and media institutions find themselves compelled to reflect on the social, political and cultural consequences involved and on the policy measures to be taken at this level. If nothing is done, the assumption is, the dominance of the American culture industries will just grow and grow. In this context the *Dallas* phenomenon functions as an alarming bogey. As Michèle Mattelart has put it, 'It is not for nothing that *Dallas* casts its ubiquitous shadow wherever the future of culture is discussed: it has become the perfect hate symbol, the cultural poverty [. . .] against which one struggles.'[2]

But the mere idea of a threatened 'cultural identity' contains elements which do more to conceal than to clarify the nature of the phenomenon and the problems described. Mattelart *et al.* have pointed out how, in the name of its defence, policy measures have been adopted which will not contribute to real alternatives.[3] It can, for example, lead to a misguided form of protectionism, based on a static, exclusively territorial definition of 'cultural identity', such as the setting of a quota system on imported films. For example, British television is allowed to fill a maximum of 14 per cent of its programming time with foreign programmes. But it can also lead to an unoriginal and unimaginative copying of American success formulae, so that viewers are served up a Dutch or French version of *Dallas*, which will inevitably be of poorer quality than the American original, for the very simple reason that the Americans have far greater financial and organizational means of production available. An average episode of *Dallas* costs at least $700,000, which the television industry of a small country like the Netherlands could not possibly afford.

Moreover, a stubborn fixation on the threat of 'American cultural imperialism' can lead one to lose sight of the fact that since the 1950s the mass consumption of American popular culture has been integrated to a greater or lesser degree into the national 'cultural identity' itself, especially in Western Europe. As a result, the popularity of a programme such as *Dallas* becomes a totally incomprehensible and elusive issue, a whim of the 'silent majority'. It becomes hard to understand, in other words, why such a large section of the television audience *en masse* watches *Dallas*. Often this position does not seem to get beyond the somewhat rueful realization that non-American peoples have a 'disturbing susceptibility to American media products'.[4] But this 'disturbance' probably looms only in the ivory towers of the policy-makers and other guardians of the 'national culture'. In the millions of living rooms where the TV set is switched on to *Dallas*, the issue is rather one of pleasure.

For we must accept one thing: *Dallas* is popular because a lot of people somehow *enjoy* watching it.

On the other hand we should not make the opposite mistake and let ourselves be blinded by the fabulous popularity of *Dallas*. The enormous fuss made of it can easily lead to a mystification of the phenomenon, to considering it as something unique. The temptation is great to reach for essentialist explanations, which are both too general and too specific. For example, the exceptional attraction of the villainous J. R. Ewing, one of the main characters in *Dallas*, is often cited as an explanation. Or, as the American television critic Horace Newcomb has done, an essential narrative foundation is sought that is assumed to express the Zeitgeist. According to Newcomb, *Dallas* succeeds in an inspired way in transplanting the old values of the Western into the new world of the American West, the world of express highways and stunning skyscrapers. He asserts: 'Probably without knowing it, the show's creators pump nourishment into the audience's veins. Their timing is perfect. As a nation we are actually growing older and developing the caution that comes with age. It is a time of decline, of recession and restriction, a time of real trouble. The grand old cities of the East and the Midwest are burdened with financial failure and bitter winters. Small wonder that the Sunbelt flourishes and *Dallas* leads the ratings.'[5]

This is all well and good, but the 'Americo-centricity' of such a speculative explanation totally loses its force when the worldwide success of the series is at issue. It is in any case somewhat risky to trace the appeal of *Dallas* to one hidden message or meaning, for it is not plausible that Moroccan, Italian or English viewers are all just as open to such a 'message' as Americans are – if indeed we could even lump all Americans together. The oil industry, for example, does not have everywhere the charged mythical significance that it has in American cultural history. Furthermore, popularity is never the unique accomplishment of one isolated cultural product. It is also dependent on and connects with the context in which it is consumed. In

this connection we must not forget that people have become so used to American television programmes – their production values, their style and pace, their language – that merely the expectations they arouse and their familiarity give any new American product a certain advantage. None the less, this does not get over the fact that *Dallas*, just like Michael Jackson or E.T., has exercised a particular fascination exceeding the cultural significance of the average popular cultural attraction. On the contrary, *Dallas* appears in some way or other to have appealed in an exceptional manner to the popular imagination, although – just like any fashion – this is now on the wane. Stuart Hall has described how the popularity of *Dallas* in Britain peaked and declined: 'At a certain moment the programme achieved a kind of popularity other than merely in terms of numbers of viewers. It had repercussions on the whole culture, the involvement of the viewers became of a different order. At a certain moment you could no longer avoid talking about the popularity of *Dallas* when people started using categories from it to help interpret their experiences. This is a secondary type of popularity which it has now completely lost. The same number of people still watch it, but it is no longer active in the collective cultural consciousness.'[6] *Dallas* is nowadays, then, simply a popular television programme. Where viewing figures are concerned it has even been beaten in several countries by one of its own imitations, *Dynasty*.

In short, popularity is an extremely complex phenomenon. No simple answer is possible on the question of why *Dallas* is (was) so popular, just as it is not possible to explain fully how it is that Michael Jackson or E.T. have exercised such mass attraction. Very divergent factors, including historical ones, contribute to this, and it seems almost pointless to try to examine the success of *Dallas* without taking into account the wider social context of the postmodernist media culture. This book sets itself a more modest role. No attempt will be made to give the definitive answer to the burning question: why is *Dallas* so popular? Instead I want to concentrate my attention

on a phenomenon, one aspect of popularity which is in itself complex enough: pleasure.

However, before turning to this topic, it is necessary to first describe what viewers are offered when they watch *Dallas*. As it is the way in which this programme is received and consumed which will be the focus of this study, I will not go into its production context here. I will confine myself to giving a short and simple summary of the *Dallas* story line; a more structural analysis of the programme will follow in the next chapters.

DALLAS: television fiction without an end

Dallas is a continuous fictional television serial which can, in principle, go on *ad infinitum*. The story centres around the very rich Ewing family who live in the luxurious Southfork Ranch, situated a few miles outside the city of Dallas (Texas).

At the beginning of the story, seven members of the family are living in the ranch: Jock and Ellie Ewing, the parents, their sons John Ross (known as 'J.R.') and Bobby, with their respective wives Sue Ellen and Pamela, and Lucy, daughter of their wayward son Gary.

The dramatic complications always revolve around the weal and woe of this family. J.R. plays a central role in this; he runs the family concern, Ewing Oil, in a villainous manner, treats his wife like dirt and only shows respect for his parents when it suits him. But it cannot be said that J.R. plays the main part: all the other characters in principle are just as important. Jock is the patriarch of the family who, around forty years ago, came to seek his fortune with his friend Digger Barnes in the oilfields of Texas. When success came he dropped Digger and set up Ewing Oil, which has since developed into a powerful concern. Furthermore, he also pinched Digger's girl friend, Ellie Southworth, daughter of the owner of Southfork Ranch. Ellie married Jock but has continued to have a soft spot for Digger. Meanwhile Digger has married another woman, Rebecca, and had a son and a daughter: Cliff and Pamela Barnes. Fate (or the

plot) wills that the beauteous Pamela marries Bobby Ewing, Jock and Ellie's youngest son. Thus Pamela finds herself in a difficult predicament: on the one hand she belongs to the Barnes family and is loyal to her father and brother, on the other hand she is married to a scion of the Ewings, something her brother Cliff in particular cannot stomach because he is firmly resolved to avenge his father and destroy Ewing Oil. Cliff Barnes and J. R. Ewing are arch enemies. Cliff tries to fight J.R. through his work as lawyer and politician (something he hardly ever succeeds in doing because J.R. always manages to outwit him), but also by beginning an affair with J.R.'s wife Sue Ellen. The latter lives on a war footing with J.R. but also quickly gets fed up with Cliff. She is in a constant state of crisis: she goes to a psychiatrist, takes to the bottle from time to time and would like to leave J.R. but does not know how. Pamela has had more luck with Bobby, although the fact that she cannot have children (she has had a few miscarriages) casts a shadow over the happiness of their marriage. Fortunately her work for a fashion shop offers her some diversion. Meanwhile Lucy, who is around twenty years old, lives her own life. Now and then her father Gary comes back to Southfork Ranch with his wife Valene. He had previously left because he wanted to have nothing to do with the oil business of his father and J.R. (Here Bobby occupies a middle position: he likes the cowboy life on the ranch but is also fascinated by the modern business life in the city.) Gary is the favourite son of Miss Ellie, who is also suspicious of the oil business because it lays waste the virgin land around the ranch, and she sees the disintegration of the family with regret. The ranch is run by the cowboy Ray Krebbs who, surprise, surprise, later turns out to be an illegitimate son of Jock's.

As can be seen, mutual relations are extremely complicated. This is made even worse by the fact that from episode to episode secondary figures keep coming and going. For example, there is Kristin, Sue Ellen's sister, who starts an affair with J.R., but tries to shoot him when he deserts her; Alan Beam, a