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Soap Opera, Commercialisation and the Proletarianisation of Cultural Production

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ABSTRACT: This article is based on a broader study of the production of *Fair City*, Ireland's most popular television soap opera. The study argues that such shows are potentially important in civil society. They can promote discussion and debate on hidden or taboo social issues. They may thus inform public opinion. Until recently the potential role of soap opera in civil society has largely been overlooked.

The research examined the social issues that *Fair City* could introduce to public discussion by examining its production process. It found the main limits on what the show could and could not say to be determined by practical pressures. The study interprets cultural production through a Bourdieuian conceptual model. Thus in understanding the production of *Fair City* it takes stock of how the programme is shaped by long term processes at organisational, national and international levels.

This article looks inside the production of *Fair City*. It argues that the show's limitations must be understood within the context of a new broadcasting environment. *Fair City's* success depends on a level of rationalisation that is unprecedented in Irish television drama. This has consequences for the diversity of issues that the show may cover. It also affects the working lives of the show's creators.

The pressures of the new broadcasting environment have reduced the professional autonomy and creativity of those who work on *Fair City's* cultural production line. This article offers the hypothesis that this is one example, among many, of how market influence may bring about a 'proletarianisation' of formerly autonomous and prestigious cultural work.

Introduction

Fair City is Ireland's most popular television soap opera. Shown four times a week, it is the mainstay of Radio Telefís Éireann's (RTÉ) drama production. The show frequently attracts over half a million viewers per episode. It regularly gains more viewers than its two rivals, the imported soap operas *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street* (www.medialive.ie). This popularity, coupled with *Fair City's* prime time slot, has made it highly attractive to advertisers. It is also one of Europe's most cost effective soap opera productions (The Project Team 1998).

There is, however, more to *Fair City* than popular entertainment and advertising. The hypothesis presented in this article emerged from broader research exploring *Fair City*'s potential contribution to Irish public life. The show has explored personal and social problems like abortion, euthanasia, homophobia, racism and drug abuse. These representations of social issues are unobtrusively brought through entertainment to large and emotionally engaged audiences. By announcing such issues soap operas can provide a 'way in' to discussion, debate and reflection upon taboo social issues. In this way they can inform the formation of public opinion in matters of personal and institutional politics (Livingstone 1988: 73; Nariman 1993; Elkamel 1995; Singhal and Rogers 1999; Goldsmiths Media Group 2000: 44). Until recently the potential role of soap opera, and other forms of entertainment, in the public sphere has largely been overlooked (Habermas 1989: 12–14: Peters 1993: 545; Goldsmiths Media Group 2000: 45).

This research examined the diversity of social issues that *Fair City* could introduce to public discussion in Irish society by studying its production process.[1] It found the main limits on what *Fair City* could and could not say to be determined by the show's production system rather than the ideas of its creators. *Fair City's* production system employs a level of rationalisation that is unprecedented in Irish television drama. This system reflects broader structural processes. It is a practical response to the pressures of an increasingly internationalised, commercialised and competitive broadcasting environment. These global and local transformations have reduced the professional autonomy and creativity of those who work on *Fair City*. In the recent past, television dramatists exercised considerable power and autonomy, which derived from their cultural position as creators and artists (Brennan 2000: 6).

Today the creators of *Fair City,* stripped of artistic prestige, work on a cultural production line. The, somewhat ungainly, term 'proletarianisation' describes this process.

Bourdieu and production research

Researching television production requires a conceptual model that can explain everyday production work and decisions within a complex globalised media environment. *Fair City,* for example, is the product of a complex negotiation of many influences from inside and outside RTÉ. This research employed a Bourdieuian perspective, which allowed *Fair City* to be understood as the emergent product of numerous struggles to define the show's form and content.

Pierre Bourdieu has provided a comprehensive and coherent account of the processes surrounding cultural consumption and production. His conceptual model[2] is particularly well suited to describing and explaining how long-term, international processes interact with small-scale, everyday activity in cultural production. Inside RTÉ, organisational culture, social networks and numerous power relationships affected how *Fair City* was made. Externally, RTÉ is constrained by economic, political and technical processes. A Bourdieuian model can accommodate the work of individuals within organisational and social structures while recognising the dynamic and emergent nature of the relationship between the two. Before exploring hypotheses about 'proletarianisation' it is necessary to outline Bourdieu's conception of the field of cultural production.

The field of cultural production

For Bourdieu, cultural production is predominantly carried out by the 'dominated fraction of the dominant class' (1993: 38). This describes a 'cultural middle class' comprised of artists, writers, teachers, television producers and so on. Bourdieu sees cultural production as the site of a class struggle between the dominant and dominated fractions of the dominant class (1993: 378). Members of the dominant fraction are, generally, producers of material wealth through commerce or industry. The dominated fraction, on the other hand, produces culture. In this conflict, cultural producers attempt to undermine the dominant fraction of their class by decrying

wealth, which they lack, and extolling the virtues of culture, in which they abound. Bourdieu sees this as a struggle to 'impose the dominant principle of domination' or ultimately 'the definition of human accomplishment' (Bourdieu 1993: 41). It is a conflict between two opposing visions of the good life. In one, achievement is synonymous with building material wealth, through money and property. In the other, the good life is built through the accumulation of cultural knowledge and associated prestige.

The field of cultural production then contains two opposing sets of rules and two systems of reward. Bourdieu refers to these as 'principles of hierarchization'. The rules and rewards that originate in the field of cultural production are described as autonomous principles of hierarchization. Here cultural producers seek to gain 'symbolic capital' or respect and notoriety among their fellow cultural producers (Bourdieu 1985: 731). The main tool they can use to achieve this is 'cultural capital' (see Bourdieu 1986: 243). This, in other words, is knowledge of their art and the field in which it is produced. Heteronomous principles of hierarchization, on the other hand, refer to a set of rules and rewards that penetrate the field of cultural production from outside. This is the logic of the marketplace rather than that of the world of art. The rewards here are popularity and money, which are disparaged by adherents to the more purist autonomous principles of hierarchization (Bourdieu 1993: 38–40). Symbolic and cultural capital are the chief source of power available to cultural producers in their attempts to maintain a separation between art and commerce.

Broadcasting and the overarching fields of money and power

Cultural producers may hold varying degrees of independence but they are never free from the overarching fields of economics and politics. The influence of these dominant fields varies with geography and from one historical period to another. Changes in cultural production are influenced by a balance of forces between groups with opposing interests in the operation of the field (Bourdieu 1993: 34). While cultural producers have an obvious stake in the field, political and, more importantly, economic interests also shape the production of culture. Economic interests have always affected television. Since the 1980s, however, commercial concerns have become predominant in programme making decisions.

Irish broadcasting has witnessed a sea change since the 1980s. This is due to economic, political and technological transformations, which have been driven, for the most part, by the commercial motives of Transnational Corporations (Schiller 1971; Humphreys 1996: 171; Herman and McChesney 1997; Preston 2001: 75). The new broadcasting system is marked by the dominance of market-oriented political policies. This is true even among parties that are ostensibly left-wing (O'Donnell 1999: 15; see Wheen 2004: 214–29). In the press and political discussion, the notion of viewers as consumers has broadly replaced that of the audience as citizens (Higgins 1999: 2; Gandy 2002: 448). There is an emphasis on the sovereignty of the consumer and the primacy of the 'free market' (TV3 2002: 1–2; Schiller 2000: 121; Gandy 2002: 450; Curran 1997: 240). A view prevails that broadcasting should operate according to a simple logic of supply and demand like many other economic sectors (Corcoran 2002: 2; Herman and McChesney 1997). Generally a programme is only justified in the schedule by its ability to earn advertising revenue by attracting a large audience. This is increasingly true even for public service broadcasters.

Political, commercial and technical changes in broadcasting have been accompanied by transformations in programme output, work practices and professional cultures (Siune and Hultén 1998). Increasingly, programme makers have turned to entertainment in attempts to boost audience numbers. O'Donnell argues that new commercial channels – using soap opera as part of a broad entertainment strategy – have catered for 'popular views, tastes and experiences' that were ignored by public broadcasters (1999: 15). Commercial channels have used soap opera to penetrate new markets. Humphreys comments that the increase in such programmes is unsurprising when one considers the high costs and low revenues of many commercial broadcasters:

> Faced with these economic realities, the new commercial broadcasters had every reason to rely upon the kind of programming that was most likely to maximise audiences and that was at the same time relatively inexpensive. Such programming typically comprised light entertainment programmes, game-shows, cheap drama series and popular 'soaps' (Humphreys 1996: 230).

This emphasis on low-cost and low-risk programming may have originated among new commercial broadcasters but these pressures now increasingly apply to

public service broadcasters. De Bens and de Smaele state that public service broadcasters, like RTÉ, have been, to some extent, 'dragged into competition' by commercial channels (2001: 72).

The central thrust of the new environment in broadcasting is economic. Unsurprisingly, de Bens and de Smaele find that it is economic, rather than cultural, motives which are the basis of the recent growth in domestic serials (2001: 70). McQuail sees that in such transformations investors and producers are simply adapting to the 'predominant norm' where the current commercialised global media environment means that 'there is no longer much real choice' (1998: 116). Throughout its history RTÉ has faced strict economic constraints (see Savage 1996: 43–58). The fact that *Fair City,* a low cost soap opera, is the flagship of RTÉ drama production is a 'choice of the necessary'. It is a response to the practical pressures of the global media environment. Reflecting these same pressures, the show's production process has been highly rationalised to minimise costs, reduce risks and maximise audience ratings. The everyday pressures of *Fair City* production then reflect an emerging domination of the cultural sphere by the rules and rewards prioritised by commerce.

The economic invasion of cultural production

Garnham and Williams argue that cultural producers share 'a mutual interest with the dominant economic class in maintaining the overall set of material class relations'. This is because 'cultural capital must ultimately be transformable into economic capital or material resources'. Moreover, it is because 'the dominant economic class now require the services of the producers of symbolic goods in the imposition and maintenance of orthodoxy' (Garnham and Williams 1986: 123). This is clearly visible in the increased importance of media as aids to industry and as important industries in themselves (Schiller 1971; Herman and McChesney 1997; Klein 2000). Garnham and Williams ask how 'this might affect the field of force in the struggle between the fractions of the dominant class in a situation in which the economic interests of the dominant fraction directly threatens the cultural interests of the dominated fraction' (1986: 129). Garnham goes on to hypothesise on the consequences of the increased penetration of the cultural field by industrial capital:

> Once capital moves into cultural production and distribution in a major way, a divergence develops between the economic and ideological interests of the dominant class, since, as in other social areas, the spread of capitalist relations of production and exchange is corrosive of inherited social distinctions and hierarchies (Garnham 1993: 188–189).

This implies the dissolution of cultural producers' cultural and symbolic power. For Garnham, the dominant fraction now has a direct interest in the structure and functioning of the field of cultural production. Accordingly, 'members of the dominated fraction have to be brought within the disciplines of capitalist production'. Garnham describes this as a 'process of proletarianisation of the intelligentsia' (1993: 187–9). This process leads to the disintegration of the cultural hierarchies that set cultural producers apart through their possession of cultural and symbolic capital. There is a danger then that cultural and symbolic capital, the weapons used by the 'dominated fraction of the dominant class' in their struggle against the dominant fraction, may be taken from them (Garnham 1993: 189). Power, and criteria of quality, in the field of cultural production then may be reduced to a purely economic . plane. Since this process dissolves the structural separation of the fractions of the dominant class, Garnham claims that it 'thus strikes at the very heart of Bourdieu's theory' (Garnham 1993: 189).

Contrary to Garnham's claim, Bourdieu's model accommodates this development. Bourdieu sees that the emergence of 'large collective production units in the fields of radio, television, cinema and journalism' has been accompanied by a 'decline of the intellectual artisan in favour of the salaried worker' (1993: 31). In the struggle between class fractions, Bourdieu recognises that, at any given time, one fraction may have more or less influence over the cultural field. The economic invasion of broadcasting may signal that we are in a period when the interests of the dominant fraction prevail. By ripping apart cultural hierarchies, this class moves closer to the existence of a single, monetary hierarchy, which Bourdieu has identified as their goal (1993: 41). This is accompanied by the rise of a 'proletaroid intelligentsia' (Bourdieu 1993: 131). That is, a cultural class, without aura or prestige, whose personal creativity must be sacrificed to the demands of rationalised production systems. This, in many respects, describes the experience of those who produce *Fair City.*

Fair City as rationalised cultural production

Fair City must regularly attract large repeat audiences at the lowest possible cost. This, in turn, necessitates rigorous control over production with work on *Fair City* resembling many of the productive aspects of Fordism. The twentieth century saw an explosion in material production due to production techniques named after Henry Ford and inspired by Frederick Taylor's scientific management (see Harvey 1989: 125–6; Ritzer 2000: 181). This involved fixed production lines where highly controlled, low-skilled workers produced vast numbers of homogeneous products through standardised labour practices. Fordism can be described through four central components, which are efficiency, calculability, predictability and control[3] (Ritzer 2000: 12–14). This form of strict regulation is corrosive to the use of cultural capital, symbolic capital and the autonomy that formerly characterised much of RTÉ's television drama production (see Brennan 2000: 4).

Soap opera is the genre most suited to routinised production with workers performing limited repetitive tasks (Paterson 1981: 58). So, in soap opera, cultural production resembles the traditional mass production of goods on an assembly line (for a fuller discussion of Fordism applied to cultural production see Lash and Urry 1994: 111–144). The work, and the working conditions, on the set of *Fair City* strongly suggest that the 'proletarianisation' of cultural production, hypothesised by Bourdieu and Garnham, has been, to some extent, realised (Bourdieu 1993: 131; Garnham 1993: 189).

Rehearsals: The start of the studio production line

The working week on *Fair City* began with rehearsals on Saturday morning. This provided a mental map of the week's work for the cast and crew. Four episodes were rehearsed in one day with actors reading their lines together for the first time. Studio scenes were rehearsed in the order in which they were to be shot.[4] Rehearsals ran from nine o'clock to five o'clock. Scenes were rehearsed in blocks. All the pub scenes, for example, would be rehearsed at once. If an actor was lucky all their scenes might be rehearsed together in one or two blocks. Otherwise, they could end up waiting hours for their scenes. Saturdays were long days for the cast with a lot of

hanging around. Despite this, given the run of the week, the atmosphere was relatively easy going.

At the time of the research (June 2001), *Fair City* was a standardised product. Every episode contained four storylines. One tended to be 'serious', dealing with crime, family crises and the like. Another would offer light relief, while the other two would fit somewhere in between. Every episode contained 17 scenes. The show's Production Assistant (PA) meticulously timed every scene in rehearsal. There was no leeway for a scene to go under or over time, every episode had to come to a standard 25 minutes. Soap opera is all about rationalisation. It is an efficient, calculable, predictable and highly controlled genre (see Ritzer 2000: 12–14). Rehearsals were an important first step in standardising each episode.

The production run: predictability and control

Mondays on *Fair City* began with a full camera rehearsal where all the scenes for that week's four episodes were rehearsed in episode order. This was referred to as the producer's run or the production run. The producer, writers, script editors, technicians, PA and so on would oversee this. One director described it as a form of surveillance and control for the producer, script editors and dialogue writers. It allowed them to survey performances and adherence to the script. The cast and crew were effectively prevented from contributing to storylines because there was simply no time for debate over how the show should progress. The rationalised structure of *Fair City* meant that control over the programme's form and content rested predominantly with those at the highest level of the programme's production. These were the producer, editors and writers. The cast could employ certain resistive strategies against management. These, however, were limited and largely cosmetic in nature.

The production run played an important role for scriptwriters and script editors. It served to standardise aspects of the show. One script editor explained that occasionally actors would object to the 'way that vocabulary is used'. Actors might feel that stories reflected badly upon them as a person (bearing in mind that some viewers tended not to distinguish between cast members and their characters). She described how actors are only given stories in 'pockets'. The writers and editors, she explained, 'are way ahead of them' in foreknowledge of the story. Therefore actors

may not know why they are being asked to say certain lines, but to drop them could prove disastrous for the future development of the story:

> I have to be very careful, at the producer's run on a Monday, that they actually say what they are given to say. The other thing that I am very careful about is that the writers have worked very hard on these. They are professionals; they have put together the scripts carefully. We have edited them carefully to maintain the smoothness of language and vocabulary and the movement of story and all of those things. Trying to make sure that they are actually all running together. So for an actor to change it, who is a professional actor but not a professional writer, to change it can actually throw things quite considerably (Editor B).

Actors made their contribution without understanding the overall product or production process. They resembled Fordist factory workers who must act as cogs in a machine they can neither change nor fully understand. Despite the importance of the production run to the story team, many of the crew regarded it to be tedious, procedural and of little value. The value of the production run, however, was clear to the people who were, in effect, the production's managers, the producer and the series editor. It was a means of surveillance, control and standardisation.

Less time and less room for risk

In television production, financial scarcity and commercial competition can translate into a shortage of time. In order to maximise audience figures and advertising revenue, with only a modest increase in costs, *Fair City* moved from three episodes per week to four. The financially prudent move to four episodes greatly increased time pressures on the production team. Cast members felt that their potential for creative input had decreased. A consultation process, which previously existed, between cast and writers had been abolished because it slowed production. Thus increased time pressures further decreased the power and autonomy of the cast.

A floor manager remarked that since they had moved up to four episodes ' the word subtlety had gone out the window'. Scenes were now 'lashed together'. Cast members saw that rigidity and standardisation had increased in *Fair City* since its

increase in output. When I noted in conversation that *Fair City* had a standard structure, and that it appeared quite rigid, an actor agreed and said that this was more likely to be the case now that they had gone on to producing four episodes per week. Another actor joined in here and said that this would remain the case because if you broke from formula and tried something different, a special event for example, if it went wrong 'you were fucked'. One of them described an episode in which his character ran in the Dublin City Marathon. The close ups were shot in advance but a wide shot of the start of the race was taken by an outside broadcast unit on the day of the actual marathon. This also happened to be the transmission date for that episode. Despite this, the outside broadcast material was brought back to RTÉ and edited into the episode in time for transmission that evening. This was an extremely risky approach but it gave much greater immediacy and a greater sense of localisation to the episode. The actor involved thought that this would never happen again because of increased time pressure and an associated unwillingness to take risks. The practically rational move to four episodes per week made economic sense and insinuated *Fair City* more solidly into weekly viewing habits. Soap opera audiences are built on emotional stimulus and habit (Hobson 1982: 116). The move also, however, greatly reduced the creative autonomy of *Fair City's* cast, crew and writers.

Story assembly

Away from the studio floor, in the production office, *Fair City* storylines were assembled in various stages. Writers described the process as a production line. Storyline writers created *Fair City's* initial plot ideas. These were then moulded in a series of meetings with the show's producer and script editors. Script scenarios were finalised at storyline meetings with the producer, script editors and all storyline writers. A storyline writer described this process:

> You write up your storylines and in a sense you try to protect them and guide them through all the processes through which they must go. They go down the production line and they are commented upon and sometimes attacked perhaps. And people are desirous of changing them. And you are in a sense trying to protect them. So essentially it is putting the points to the producer

> and all those people are who are involved as to why you feel story [sic] should go this way (Writer E).

Storylines were thus moulded through struggles between producers, editors and writers. These struggles were biased in favour of the producer and editor who held an effective veto over the show's content. Finalised storylines were then passed onto scene breakdown writers who broke the storylines into episodes and scenes, allocating each scene to a particular location. This was chiefly a logistical task that depended on the availability of sets and resources. Dialogue writers then applied dialogue to the standard 17 scenes that were broken down for each episode. Scripts could be changed marginally during rehearsals but these changes were largely cosmetic. Scripts were finally vetted and refined in a script meeting, which took place after the Monday morning production run. Soap opera commentators generally see writers as occupying a position of control (Elliott 1972: 128; Alvarado and Buscombe 1978: 30; Newcomb and Alley 1982: 88; Cantor and Cantor 1992: 71). Contrary to such expectations writers in *Fair City* exercised very little control over a story's final production. This was because they wrote in a multi-tiered team. One writer explained that she had sometimes been embarrassed to see her name on the credits because the end product bore no relation to the material she had written. Another said that she would often think 'oh shit that wasn't the story I had written at all, you know, what comes out the other end of the mill' (Writer A). The story, like a car on a Fordist production line, rolled on out of the sight and control of the storyline writers to be upholstered by the dialogue writers. Rather than being autonomous authors, within *Fair City's* production system, writers could only offer creative contributions that might find their way to transmission.

Standardised tools

Writers tended to talk about generating 'story' as a generic material in the same way that journalists talk about copy or bakers talk about bread. They also used standardised tools in their creation of 'story'. This further contributed to standardisation and rationalisation of the programme. It became evident in the discussion of storylines that the story team employed soap opera-dedicated tools akin to the dedicated factory tools of Fordism (see Lash and Urry 1994: 114). These were

formulae and rules of thumb that could be used to translate loose scenarios into soap opera stories. They converted loose situations between characters into emotional storylines. Two examples of this were the use of 'confidants' and the triangular arrangement of characters.

Soap opera deals primarily with relationships, emotions and character psychology. All these, largely, internal processes, however, must be made visible and audible for the television audience. For this purpose *Fair City* writers made regular use of what they referred to as 'confidants'. These were characters that lent an ear to the difficulties of another. In this way internal difficulties were externalised and made explicit. As Editor B explained 'You always need a confidant with a character so that they can explain what they are feeling'. One writer described confidants as being 'functionaries' or 'stock people' who let us into the character.

Typically characters' difficulties in soap opera involve a relationship with a lover or friend. The addition of a confidant creates a triangular arrangement of characters. The triangle was another rule of thumb employed by the story team. Discussing a proposed storyline the show's producer commented:

> That is a viable soap storyline because it is about Tara and McCann, and you could probably get somebody else across that because you would need, to a large extent, have a triangle. Their triangle would invariably be created by McCann talking to the confidant or Tara talking to a confidant. That is a viable story.

Rules of thumb of this kind served as a means of shaping and selecting storylines. Such dedicated tools are typical of Fordist production. In *Fair City*, of course, they also contributed to the standardised form and content of the programme. Arguably, the use of formulae could also be seen as part of a rationalisation process. Rather than needing to create new stories from scratch every time, writers could merely insert scenarios into pre-established story templates. Thus it may have contributed to the demystification of cultural production and the proletarianisation of television drama writers (Garnham 1993: 189; Bourdieu 1993: 131).

Progressive politics in a conservative form

Bourdieu's observations on the field of cultural production predict an alliance of position between cultural producers and other dominated groups in society. Class struggle between opposing fractions of the dominant class may lead to alliances of position between cultural producers and other dominated groups in society. Bourdieu notes that economically weak but symbolically dominant cultural producers 'tend to feel solidarity with the occupants of the economically and culturally dominated positions within the field of class relations' (Bourdieu 1993: 44). This predisposes cultural producers to sympathise with other dominated groups. They are likely to prioritise culture over money and aspire to ally with the dominated and excluded in society. In previous research, this sympathy for socially dominated groups was prevalent among RTÉ drama producers working at different times and in various dramatic genres (Brennan 2000: 6). *Fair City's* writers held similar liberal or leftwing views.

Bourdieu, however, also predicts a contradiction between such progressive politics and the inherently conservative nature of mass-produced culture. Most importantly, in an industrialised system, cultural producers are stripped of symbolic and cultural capital where collective 'intellectual labour' cannot lay claim to the 'charismatic aura attached to traditional independent production' (Bourdieu 1993: 131). This implies a loss of autonomy for producers and a lack of control over their work. Traditional cultural producers controlled their means of production and invested only their 'cultural capital'. This was symbolically charged since it was 'likely to be perceived as a gift from grace' (Bourdieu 1993: 131). However, when cultural production is industrialised there is a 'demystification of intellectual and artistic activity' due to changed working conditions:

> They constitute a proletaroid intelligentsia forced to experience the contradiction between aesthetic and political position-takings stemming from their inferior position in the field of production and the objectively conservative functions of the products of their activity (Bourdieu 1993: 131).

This was clearly visible among *Fair City* writers who had ambitions to address certain social issues. These ambitions, however, were thwarted by the imperatives of low-cost, low-risk production.

The show's representation of poverty was a clear example of this contradiction between personal politics and the show's expressive limitations. This was due to the objective constraints of *Fair City* as a field and not, as past commentary has suggested, due to the ideas of its creators (see Devereux 1998: 124). Many writers criticised the unrealistically low level of poverty in *Fair City*. One writer complained that many characters had won or inherited money and that this was highly unlikely in such a small locality. This was particularly salient given the story teams' aspirations to be realistic and the fact that the show's fictional Carigstown is set in a working class area in Northside Dublin. One writer accepted criticism of *Fair City* for a lack of stories about poverty, saying that all the characters were doing 'pretty well'. Despite this she did note that *Fair City* had dealt with poverty through its stories and characters. There was, for example, 'a story… about Bella… he was on hard times and he got involved with a money lender and basically in the end Leo had to come and help him and rescue him' (Writer F). This was plainly dealing with an aspect of poverty where people in financial difficulty might feel less stigmatised as a result of seeing central characters, with whom they identify, going through the same thing. A number of characters had ongoing money problems. During my research, three characters had clear financial problems. Despite the presence of such characters and stories there was a structural constraint on the coverage of poverty. Writer F explained this. Poverty was a type of mundane misery. Writers feared that it could quickly bore and alienate audiences. It could prompt them to change channel. In *Fair City*, like any soap opera, one could not risk failing to entertain and hold the audience:

> Actually we had that discussion a number of times about poverty and one of the reasons given was that in a sense poverty is a state not a story, it's kind of a state of being. And that people might find it really boring or depressing if someone is just sort of sitting around in their bed-sit all day. However, I think it is something that is important and that should be reflected and what you have to do is try to find a story around it… I suppose the general feeling about poverty would be that if it is on an ongoing basis, of its essence poverty kind of creates stagnation, so that there is no movement in it. So it is finding the

> way to tell a story about poverty that actually just doesn't have somebody sitting there watching telly all day because that is all they can afford to do… Can you tell that story but still keep some movement in it? (Writer F).

There are limits, then, to the ways a soap opera like *Fair City* can tell stories about poverty. Poverty for the purposes of soap opera has to be transient and dramatic. It is a short-term problem to be solved rather than a socially reproduced and on-going state. There is little chance, then, of dealing with the long-term experience of poverty as something that affects people's everyday relationships and emotions. It is unlikely to provoke reflection upon the broader causes and consequences of ongoing poverty as part of market-led society. In this respect, despite its writers' ideals, *Fair City* lent tacit support to individualistic accounts of poverty.

Low status work and low creative investment

Bourdieu argues that an artist's attitudes and expectations will adjust to actual possibilities available to them within the field of cultural production. In other words, one's possibilities within the field, based on the capitals one holds, become internalised as, more or less limited, expectations and aspirations (Bourdieu 1993: 64). The field not only intervenes in expectations but also in the value an artist places on their own work in the light of artistic opinion:

> Through the public meaning of the work, through the objective sanctions imposed by the symbolic market upon the producers' 'aspirations' and 'ambitions' and, in particular, through the degree of recognition and consecration it accords them, the entire structure of the field interposes itself between producers and their work. This imposes a definition of their ambitions as either legitimate or illegitimate according to whether their position objectively implies, or denies, their fulfilment (Bourdieu 1993: 136).

Like money on a stock market, capitals and time can be invested to particular ends (see Barker and Brooks 1998). As with any prudent investor, investments of time and capital are most likely to be made when one can afford a loss or is quite sure of a profit. The creative ambitions of *Fair City*'s writers were tempered by their

perceptions of soap opera as low-status, populist entertainment. It was a casual occupation that did not offer great financial or symbolic rewards. Thus it did not warrant personal investment or risk.

None of the storyline writers saw soap opera writing as a long-term career option. Many of them regarded other work that they did to be as important as, if not more important than, *Fair City*. It was implicit among them that if you were going to fit into the show there were a number of things that you simply could not do. It was inappropriate to be tenacious or egotistical. Above all, one could not regard oneself as an author. One's task was to generate ideas that would then be remoulded and used as circumstances dictated. As one storyline writer put it, 'generally you try not to be too attached to a particular line. It is not your baby totally. It is to some degree everybody's baby. You put the ideas on the table but you have to detach yourself from it to a large degree' (Writer E).

None of the *Fair City* writers considered themselves to be pursuing a career in soap opera writing. This was, in part, due to the lack of personal creativity attached to the show. While everybody I spoke to found *Fair City* writing to be fun, few of them found that it provided the financial, professional or psychological rewards necessary for a viable lifelong career. Soap opera work was 'not a forever thing'. As one writer said 'it is great fun and a good challenge for a limited amount of time only because you don't get a real, deeper feedback from it'.

Writers' lack of investment in *Fair City* was allied to the lack of prestige they attached to soap opera writing. For most of them soap opera writing was a means to a greater end. Otherwise, it was something that they had just found themselves doing as a second choice. One writer described the low esteem that soap opera writing was held in when she compared it to acting in advertisements:

> I came into writing kind of sideways, but I'm sure a lot of people that go in and choose writing for a career up-front would very rarely sit down and say I want to be a soap writer for ever. You know it is like when you're an actress you end up doing a lot of ad work. But you never make a conscious decision to, you never say ' oh God I hope I get that ad for such and such a toothpaste!' you just end up there (Writer C).

Writers displayed a pronounced creative fatalism. On the one hand they could not afford to be precious about their 'babies' because they would be inevitably taken from them. On the other hand they felt that their creations were not that important in the first place. All were very quick to cede their personal positions to the story team. Once more, this belief in the wisdom of the team was a 'choice of the necessary' as no writer had the power to persistently disrupt the team and keep their job. In his ethnographic work, Dawson found that some writers saw 'getting the next contract' as their chief criterion of success. He found that sanctions existed against writers, from having one's work rewritten by another writer to the ultimate sanction of being refused further employment (Dawson 1998: 34). Writer C described how if a more senior member of the story team was against your approach to a story then there was very little one could do about it:

> And that is the frustrating thing with belonging to a team, when you are writing by committee in a way. You know we are all a cog in a wheel; the ultimate thing is the final result, which is the script, whether you agree with that or not in the end. You just sort of fight… You have to try and do it so that you bear in mind that you are working with these people all the time. And at the end of the day, and as they say in Cork "it's only a play". You know we're all here tomorrow, you know. And just because you might want to get your way doesn't necessarily mean it is the best way either (Writer C).

One editor held that the producer and the series editor were the final arbiters of what was appropriate and inappropriate in *Fair City*. She said she would counsel less experienced writers to heed this rather than waste their time; their work would be changed despite them. She conceded that if one of her ideas was not strong enough to convince senior staff then maybe her story 'was not strong enough in the first place' (Editor B). This was typical of the less powerful members of the creative team. They felt that soap opera was not important enough to fight over. It was certainly not worth losing one's job over. Even if they were to argue tenaciously over a storyline they knew they were unlikely to win. Creative fatalism and a lack of investment were subjective adjustments to the practical necessities of *Fair City* production.

From tacit knowledge to codified knowledge

Throughout the research many writers referred to qualitative audience research that had been carried out for the programme. This identified 'non-normative' behaviour as something that was to be treated with extreme caution in storylines. It identified topics that were best left alone, chiefly paedophilia and incest. The research clearly informed writers' views of what should be admitted into the show:

> I mean I wouldn't have a problem with that but we have learned recently from some research that we had done that this kind of plot, and it's specifically mentioned the paedophile plot, can be alienating to an audience. So if you want to so play safe, so to speak, you wouldn't do this plot, in that particular way (Writer E).

The research had served as a key form of 'audience feedback' for writers and editors (Elliott 1972: 159; Pekurny 1982: 136-137; Alvarado and Buscombe 1978: 251). It also acted as a means of control and standardisation. By revealing audience perceptions of the programme and the type of themes that were likely to alienate, the research resembled a template for what writers could and could not say through *Fair City*. This revealed a final significant step towards the proletarianisation of cultural production. Gitlin notes that a professional's deepest claim to privileged status is 'prowess, or wisdom, or "feel," a personal quality gained from experience and grafted onto the principles and practices of the profession'. It is 'a mystery that permits him or her to make right judgments under difficult practical circumstances' (Gitlin 1983: 22). The role of audience research in *Fair City*, however, suggested that soap opera knowledge was codifiable and in no way mysterious. A writer with no experience at all could quickly learn the key items to omit from or include in a *Fair City* story. This reliance on research diminished the need for writers to depend on their own judgement of what constituted a *Fair City* story. This simultaneously represented a process of standardisation and control. Reliance on audience research rendered cultural capital, a potential source of autonomy, less important to the production process.

Conclusion: The creation of a single hierarchy?

Fair City occupies a position of immense popularity in Ireland. To continue to exist, however, the show must maintain this position despite national and international competition. These external competitive pressures, as I have argued here, have prompted a process of rationalisation. This is a practical means of increasing production, maintaining popularity and minimising risk. The show, then, is shaped largely, not by what its creators want to do, but by what they must do.

One could argue, in criticism of the hypothesis presented here, that it is dependent on a nostalgic vision of a golden age in Irish television drama. Such visions of lost halcyon days are frequently false and are generally more indicative of dissatisfaction in the present rather than past glory (see Gabriel 1993). While the credentials of RTÉ's 'golden age' are dubious the 1980s saw a pronounced drop in the volume and variety of RTÉ drama (Sheehan 1987: 292). It is not necessary, however, to make any comparison with practices in RTÉ drama before the 1990s to argue that there is an ongoing process of rationalisation in *Fair City.* When it started in 1989, *Fair City* had one writer and was broadcast once a week. The show was shot on location in Northside Dublin. Over its ten year history the show has moved to four episodes per week with occasional special episodes. It now employs a multi-tiered writing team and is shot predominantly within RTÉ's campus. The cast and crew expressed the shared view that the show's production had become increasingly rushed and mechanical.

The hypotheses on proletarianisation put forward here are, by their nature, tentative. It appears, however, that this may be an important theme for future research, not only in television but also across the field of cultural production. The diminution of professional power is equally visible in areas such as journalism, teaching and research. The curbing of professional autonomy by financial constraints, time pressure, expectations of quantifiable results and the codification of formerly tacit knowledge is evident in a number of professions (Bacon et al. 2000). A more general diminution of autonomy within cultural work would suggest a period where the rules and rewards of the dominant fraction of the dominant class overshadow those of the dominated cultural fraction. A consequence of this, as Bourdieu suggests is the creation of a single social hierarchy (1993: 41). This, of course, would be a monetary hierarchy, where the 'good life' is one that can be measured, weighed and counted.

Notes

1. This was done using observation research on the set and in the production offices of *Fair City*. This was supplemented with interviews and documentary research.
2. There is insufficient room for a complete outline of Bourdieu's conceptual model. A good overview is provided by Wacquant (1992).
3. Ritzer has adapted this and described it as McDonaldization (2000).
4. Outdoor, or Electronic Field Production (EFP), scenes were also rehearsed but would be shot in a different order towards the end of the week.

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