

PREFACE

Why Medical Drama?

An Interdisciplinary Study of Narrative Layers and Societal Impact

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In recent years, the academic and critical examination of medical drama has emerged as a relevant area of inquiry, owing to its enduring and widespread cultural influence. Medical drama is a narrative genre that has been one of the most popular products on free-to-air generalist television, not just in the United States, but across Europe and more recently in Asian production (Comelles and Brigidi 2014, Khiun 2011, Lai 2018, Leonzi et al. 2020, Lo and Huang 2021, McAnea 2001, Piscarac 2016, Rocchi 2019, Turov 2010). The critical engagement with medical dramas from a media studies perspective offers a fertile ground for unpacking complex interrelations of narrative, audience, and societal implications. As a genre that consistently appeals to a wide range of viewers, medical drama deserves to be examined not only for its entertainment value, but for its interweaving of elements that reflect, amplify, and sometimes question our understanding of medicine, social structures, and human relationships. This popularity positions the genre as a powerful mediator between the realms of professional health-care and public understanding, a responsibility that underscores the need for analytical attention. But why does this particular form of storytelling have such wide appeal and why does it deserve scholarly attention?

Narrative Formulas and World-Building in Hospital Microcosms

Medical drama serves as a significant touchstone for understanding complex social relations and systems. The hospital setting, often used as the primary backdrop, functions as a microcosm that echoes and represents the macro-

cosm of life itself, a contained world where life's complexities are played out in compressed form. The importance of this setting cannot be overstated. Within the corridors and operating rooms, viewers encounter a spectrum of narrative situations that offer insights into social organization – hospital work, hierarchies, power dynamics, and ethical dilemmas. These running plot arcs (Innocenti and Pescatore 2018), which span several episodes or even seasons, act as a mirror reflecting forms of social life at large. The genre then delves into the intimate sphere of personal relationships. Romantic liaisons, friendships, and familial bonds are explored in a medical environment, adding a unique texture to these interactions. Long-running narrative arcs often focus on sentimental plots, encapsulating these deeply human connections and conflicts within a setting that is universally relatable, as healthcare concerns us all. This narrative strategy not only engages viewers but also provides a framework for understanding the dynamics of personal relationships in high-stakes environments. Finally, medical dramas shine a spotlight on the concept of contingency, the unpredictable nature of life events. Through episodic medical cases, each unique yet strangely familiar, the genre encapsulates the unpredictability and vulnerability inherent to human life. Illness, often depicted with heightened emotional intensity, represents a universally understood form of contingency, owing to its unpredictability and the fear it induces. These anthology plots usually last for a single episode but are critical in sustaining viewer interest by continually infusing the narrative with new elements. These narrative isotopies (Pescatore 2002, Pescatore and Rocchi 2019) – the professional plot, the sentimental plot, and the medical cases plot – are the building blocks that give medical drama its enduring appeal. Each show may employ these elements in varying ratios, but their core functions remain consistent across the genre (Albuquerque and Meimaridis 2016, Rocchi and Pescatore 2022).

Surprisingly, medical dramas have not fully embraced the transmedia storytelling models frequently seen in other genres, although their fan engagement is undeniably high, as evidenced by the multitude of tweets and fan discourses (Antonioni and Holdaway 2023, Hoffman et al. 2018a). Nonetheless, the genre excels in the realm of world-building and narrative ecosystem construction (Boni 2017, De Pascalis and Pescatore 2018). These dramas are typically self-contained: hospitals in medical dramas often become expansive, self-sufficient worlds, sometimes giving rise to spin-offs or integrating into larger media franchises. This peculiar narrative organization leads to some unique characteristics that make it a subject ripe for

interdisciplinary study. From a medical standpoint, these dramas often depict an idealized version of healthcare, where outcomes are largely positive often portraying an inflated success rate in medical interventions compared to real-world statistics (Bitter et al. 2021, Colwill et al. 2018, McFadden 2020, Portanova 2015, Ramirez 2021, Wary 2020). However, this isn't merely a flaw; it's a narrative choice. This narrative choice speaks to the genre's broader purpose: to offer an optimistic lens through which viewers can engage with existential uncertainties. Medical dramas aim to establish long-term relationships with viewers, offering not just entertainment but also a form of emotional support, subtly disseminating an optimistic worldview. Additionally, the genre's "endogamic" nature – where personal and sentimental relationships are confined within the hospital setting – often criticized as exaggerated or soap-like (Branes and Guguanu 2013), supports the narrative world-building, maintaining the hospital as a self-contained microcosm representing broader social systems. Straying outside this world could disrupt its ability to symbolize broader life experiences authentically. Furthermore, medical dramas employ traditional storytelling models, particularly in the way medical cases are constructed. Each episode typically follows the quest for a solution to a medical problem, adhering to a framework that permits both the unpredictability of human life and the control mechanisms in place to manage it, emphasizing medicine's ostensible control over contingency – even when outcomes are grim. While medical cases offer a semblance of closure, it is in the running plots that true contingency manifests, often leading to unexpected narrative pathways, instigated by either internal developments within the narrative or external factors like changing audience preferences and broader sociopolitical contexts. This layer makes medical dramas not just reflections of societal structures and medical practices, but also dynamic entities in themselves – constantly evolving and responding to a myriad of influences.

Narrative Power: How Medical Dramas Shape Social Discourse

The genre of medical drama serves as a particularly illuminating lens through which to scrutinize the intersectionality of social, cultural, and institutional forces at play in contemporary society. What sets medical dramas apart from other forms of entertainment or storytelling is their marked permeability to

the social context in which they are produced. This genre is uniquely situated to incorporate both social discursiveness – what is being talked about in society – and social change. Consequently, medical dramas often become fertile ground for discussing complex societal issues such as gender violence, systemic racism, abortion, and the opioid crisis, among others (Burkhead and Robson 2008, Warner 2015). The resonance of topical events in medical drama can be explicitly illustrated by how they incorporate real-world occurrences; for instance, the Supreme Court's *Roe vs. Wade* ruling reversal finds narrative weight in episodes of shows like *New Amsterdam* (NBC, 2018-2023), aired just months after the real-world judicial ruling.

This responsiveness to social realities can be attributed to three core factors. First, the typical production mode of broadcast TV inherently allows for this permeability. Episodes are often produced in real-time as the season progresses, enabling the integration of contemporary discourses and events within a short period. The lag time between a societal event and its appearance in a medical drama is surprisingly brief, often a matter of mere months. This quick turnaround enables the genre to remain not just relevant but also deeply engaged with the sociopolitical debates of its time. Second, the thematic focus on medicine and healthcare naturally opens doors to a multitude of social issues. Healthcare is not an isolated institution but a fundamental pillar of societal organization and individual lives. It is inextricably linked to questions of social justice, equality, and human rights, among other issues. Diseases do not exist in a vacuum; they are often directly influenced by social determinants such as income, access to healthcare, education, and the conditions in which people are born, grow, and live. Medical dramas, thus, cannot help but address these intertwining complexities, rendering them a major resource for understanding not only medical but also social ecosystems. Third, the medical drama, often set within the microcosm of a hospital, serves as a symbolic representation of the broader macrocosm of life and society. The hospital is more than a place for medical treatment; it's a nexus where personal dramas, ethical dilemmas, institutional protocols, and social inequalities converge. This space must, therefore, accommodate the various phenomena, tendencies, and events that ripple through society at large. Failing this, the genre would be reduced to mere narratives of medical plots. This insertion of social themes into the narrative architecture enables these dramas to transform societal issues into the very lifeblood of the story. They are not mere background context but instead serve as the engine propelling the serial narrative forward (Pescatore and Rocchi 2019).

Social discourses find their way into the narrative through a direct embedding in the characters, either as cases-of-the-week that encapsulate wider social trends or as ongoing plotlines involving the main characters (Innocenti and Pescatore 2018). Through this weaving of character and context, social issues transition from being abstract or external matters to becoming integral, lived experiences that contribute to the storytelling and, by extension, the audience's emotional and intellectual engagement. This unique narrative embedding affords medical dramas an historically progressive role in society. By exploring socially complex issues through the lived experiences of its characters, the genre often promotes an advanced, open-minded view of these matters. Whether intentionally or organically, the stories disseminated through medical dramas play a not insignificant role in shaping public sentiment and perception. These narratives offer a lens through which viewers can reevaluate and potentially modify their attitudes toward divisive or controversial topics. In this way, medical dramas do not merely reflect societal debates but also stimulate viewers to adopt positions aligned with social progress. This dual function further underscores the genre's unique position at the intersection of media studies and social discourse, reaffirming its multifaceted relevance.

Shaping Societal Awareness and Health Perceptions

Adding to the narrative's transformative impact on social discourse, medical dramas have also wielded considerable influence on public perceptions of medicine, health, and illness (Burzyńska et al. 2015, Cappi 2015, Hoffman et al. 2017, Stinson and Heischmidt 2012). The genre serves as an alternative public health communication tool, achieving levels of awareness that traditional information and promotional campaigns often find elusive (Bavin and Owens 2018, Hoffman et al. 2018b, Hursting and Comello 2021). While it's true that these dramas sometimes exhibit a thematic bias, often favoring surgical procedures or rare and complex syndromes over more prevalent health issues like cardiovascular diseases, they undeniably raise awareness about a plethora of medical conditions and treatments. The spread of such awareness ranges from isolated but significant anecdotes – individual patients who have navigated critical health situations informed by medical dramas (Dahms et al. 2014, Eisenman et al. 2005) – to broader

shifts in societal attitudes toward diseases like cancer, which have historically been burdened by social stigmas and misconceptions (Chung 2014, Hether et al. 2008, Hoffman et al. 2017, Kim and Hmielowski 2017, Rosenthal et al. 2018).

The role of medical drama in reshaping public attitudes towards health and illness is twofold. First, it renders visible the oft-invisible realms of medical treatment and disease management. If cancer is now seen less as a taboo subject and more as a medical condition with varied outcomes – ranging from remission to enduring chemotherapy – it is not only the result of public health campaigns but also owes much to the dramatized depictions of the disease. Medical dramas have the unique advantage of not just informing us but showing us, making abstract or feared conditions palpable, visible, and therefore more understandable. Second, these narratives influence our collective social imagination far beyond the immediate impact of any public health campaign. By humanizing illness, depicting it as a challenge that can be confronted and managed rather than an uncontrollable fate, medical dramas contribute to a lasting shift in how society perceives health challenges. This has a lingering effect, enabling viewers to regard illness as an aspect of the human condition rather than a tragic anomaly. In doing so, the genre not only educates but also culturally recalibrates, making a long-term impact on societal attitudes towards health and medicine. This enduring influence further cements the genre's role as an essential subject of interdisciplinary study, blending the domains of media studies, social discourse, and public health in a singular narrative construction.

In sum, medical dramas manifest as complex narrative ecosystems that not only captivate audiences but also offer critical windows into societal perceptions of medicine, relationships, and life's uncertainties. Their layered narrative structures, genre-specific formulas (Jovanović 2021, Rocchi and Pescatore 2022), and the socio-cultural discourse they generate make them invaluable subjects for interdisciplinary inquiry. It is precisely this weave of narrative and thematic elements that motivated our PRIN research project, *Narrative Ecosystem Analysis and Development Framework (NEAD Framework). A Systemic Approach to Contemporary Serial Product. The Medical Drama Case*. Building on the vital insights and methodologies shared at the 14th Media Mutations Conference *Investigating Medical Drama TV Series: Approaches and Perspectives*, this publication underscores the project's ongoing commitment to advancing the scientific understanding of the genre. Our project adopts a multi-methodological and transdis-

ciplinary approach, aligning with the analytical perspectives discussed in this volume, to explore these narrative ecosystems in depth. Just as medical dramas offer fertile ground for scholarly investigation through semiotic tools, quantitative analysis, and emerging AI methodologies, our project aims to make substantial contributions to the scientific understanding of contemporary television seriality, including how such narratives might be shaped by significant external factors like the Covid-19 pandemic that has possibly interfered in the narrative, production and consumption spheres of audiovisual production of the medical genre.

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