

Moments of Narrative Recurrence:
Inter-Generational Social Issue Storylines in British Soap Operas

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Abstract

As a field, soap opera studies has long been fascinated with how these long-running, oftentimes melodramatic, programmes relate to issues of continuity. From programmes' ability to follow multiple generations of the same family to how they cater for both newcomers and long-term viewers who can recall programmes' vast histories, the longevity of soap operas — especially British soap operas — has frequently been a point of scholarly intrigue. However, comparatively little attention has been paid to how British soap operas themselves work to recall their own histories. This thesis examines the phenomenon of British soap operas repeating the same social issue storylines with characters from the same family unit in a way that purposefully cites the past. Following the precedent set forth by narratology, through the close analysis of select social issue storylines from *EastEnders* and *Hollyoaks*, this thesis establishes how these inter-generational social issue storylines are centred around instances of intratextuality. Following this is a discussion surrounding how these instances borrow from the conventions of metafiction, thereby allowing programmes to mark specific past storylines as being particularly significant despite this process further complicating the genre's already fraught relationship with realism. By repeating the past along family lines, British soap operas are able to plausibly represent troubling subject matters while retaining the genre's principal preoccupation with notions of family. Moreover, these moments of narrative recurrence illustrate British soap operas' ability to be hyper-aware of their status as continuous texts as they engage in practices of self-quotation and capitalise on the British soap opera genre's potential for longevity.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
1. The Narrative Workings of British Soap Operas	5
1.1 The Narrative Focus of British Soap Operas	5
1.2 Continuity and British Soap Operas.....	6
1.3 Narrative Endings in British Soap Operas	9
1.4 The Temporality of British Soap Operas and the Real World.....	10
1.5 The British Soap Opera Chronotope	12
2. British Soap Operas, Realism and Social Issues Storylines	16
2.1 The Qualifiers of Realism Affiliated with Soap Operas	16
2.2 Realism and British Soap Operas.....	20
2.3 The Connections Between Social Realism and British Soap Operas	21
2.4 Social Issue Storylines	24
2.5 Discourses Surrounding Social Issue Storylines.....	29
3. Case Study: Bipolar Disorder Storylines in <i>EastEnders</i>	36
3.1 An Overview of Inter-Generational Social Issue Storylines.....	36
3.2 An Overview of the Slater’s First Bipolar Storyline.....	38
3.3 An Overview of Stacey Slater’s Bipolar Storyline	41
3.4 An Overview of Jean Slater’s 2022 Bipolar Storyline.....	45
3.5 Establishing a Sense of Intratextuality.....	47
3.6 A Scene of Familial Bonding.....	48
3.7 The Re-Enactment of Scenes	49
4. Case Study: Kathy Beale and Ben Mitchell’s Rape Storylines in <i>EastEnders</i>	56
4.1 An Overview of Kathy Beale’s Rape Storylines	56

4.2 An Overview of Ben Mitchell’s Male Rape Storyline.....	59
4.3 Television and the Working-Through Process.....	62
4.4 The Male Rape Storyline as a Narrativised Working-Through Process.....	65
4.5 A Close Analysis of the Scene Where Kathy Finds Out.....	68
4.6 A Scene of Familial Bonding.....	72
4.7 Intratextuality in Ben Mitchell’s Male Rape Storyline.....	74
5. Case Study: Luke and Ollie Morgan’s Sexual Trauma Storylines in <i>Hollyoaks</i>	78
5.1 An Overview of Luke Morgan’s Male Rape Storyline.....	78
5.2 Criticisms of Luke Morgan’s Male Rape Storyline	81
5.3 Luke Morgan’s Male Rape Storyline as a Television Moment	83
5.4 Luke Morgan’s Return to <i>Hollyoaks</i>	87
5.5 An Overview of Ollie Morgan’s Grooming Storyline	90
5.6 Intratextuality in Ollie Morgan’s Grooming Storyline	92
5.7 A Scene of Familial Bonding.....	94
5.8 Ollie Morgan’s Storyline as an Avenue of Continuance	95
6. The Metatextual Mapping of British Soap Operas’ Extensive Histories.....	97
6.1 The Burden of Soap Opera Histories	97
6.2 Self-Citation and Metafiction.....	99
6.3 Inter-Generational Social Issue Storylines as Metafiction.....	102
6.4 Returning to the Question of Realism.....	107
Conclusion.....	111
Bibliography.....	113
Filmography	119

Introduction

Much has been written about British soap operas' implementation of continuity. As programmes air for decades, how they link their textual past and present together has been a crucial point of analysis when it comes to understanding the genre. Likewise, British soap operas' relationship with realism has long been an academic curiosity as programmes feature instances of both melodramatic spectacle and grounded representations of serious subjects, otherwise known as social issue storylines. This thesis is concerned with how these two genre-defining characteristics converge. Specifically, I am interested in what can be considered inter-generational social issue storylines. I use this term to describe the narrative phenomenon where British soap operas repeat the same — or substantially similar — social issue storylines with characters from the same family unit, allowing programmes to explicitly recall their own textual pasts through intratextual references. It is this process of recurrence that allows British soap operas to fulfil their desire to act as serious, socially conscious programming while retaining the genre's principal preoccupation with depictions of familial relationships. However, beyond functioning as a merging of televisual interests, inter-generational social issue storylines also provide insight into how British soap operas work to master their own extensive continuities, functioning as a means of reinforcing what moments from a decades-long broadcasting history are worthy of being replicated. To explore this issue, this thesis adopts the methodology of narratology, given the predominant concern is the construction of storylines. Defined by media scholar Sarah Kozloff as a “field concerned with the mappings of narrative structure”, narratology dictates that narratives are comprised of two elements: the story, which involves the sequencing of narrative events, and discourses, which

involves the creative choices that are made in service of telling that story (52/53).¹ It is a mode of analysis that considers both form and content. As such, this thesis is concerned with how these two components intersect to produce narratives which consciously recall the past whilst plausibly covering the effects of various illnesses and traumas. Additionally, I offer the textual investigation of key moments of intratextuality, which involves a semiotic analysis. Thus, this thesis takes a fundamentally structuralist approach to television criticism.

To make my argument that inter-generational social issue storylines feature a mastery of continuity, I begin by considering the genre's narrative workings more generally, paying attention to how the genre's longevity allows programmes to follow multiple generations of the same family line. Next, I work to acknowledge the idiosyncrasies that characterise British soap operas' sense of realism, drawing on scholars such as Alice Hall, Ien Ang, and Leslie Henderson. Henderson's seminal book *Social Issues in Television Fiction*, in particular, provides the basis for understanding how fictional social issue storylines operate in contemporary culture. This then leads to three case studies of key inter-generational social issue storylines. I follow the model set forth by Henderson, where storylines involving specific topics are grouped together and analysed to provide "snapshots" that speak to the broader issue of how social issue storylines function (56). However, where Henderson focuses more on the production processes behind these meditative narratives, my focus is predominantly on the construction of these narratives. The first case study surrounds the three times *EastEnders* (BBC, 1985-present) addressed bipolar disorder involving mothers and daughters from the Slater family. This includes Stacey Slater coping with her mother Jean's illness (2005), the character's own diagnosis (2009), and Jean's relapse (2022). This analysis

¹ This story/discourse distinction, which proves a central tenet of narratology, is a conceptual descendant of the fabula/syuzhet relationship. Conceptualised by the Russian Formalists — with this movement including scholars such as Viktor Shklovsky and Vladimir Propp — fabula (story) refers to a sequence of narrative events, and syuzhet relates to the organisation and presentation of that story (Gorman, 43). In media studies, this concept is often used when discussing filmic time and achronological storytelling.

showcases how programmes build narratives from the foundations of the past, with a sense of repetition being strengthened as the programme re-enacts older scenes with new generations of characters. The next case study involves the connections between Kathy Beale's rape storyline (1988) and Ben Mitchell's male rape storyline (2022) — also from *EastEnders* — and reveals a structure whereby the occurrence of intratextual references is positioned as a narrative turning point in the depiction of a working-through process. The final case study focuses on how the narrative intertwining of Luke Morgan's male rape storyline (2000) and Ollie Morgan's grooming storyline (2018) in *Hollyoaks* (Channel 4, 1995-present) allows the programme to actively continue the legacy of a seminal storyline decades later. At first glance, all seven of these storylines illustrate British soap operas' dedication to accurately representing troubling topics. Yet focusing on how the later bipolar storylines, Ben Mitchell's male rape storyline and Ollie Morgan's grooming storyline evoke previous narratives involving the characters' parental figures indicates other concerns besides verisimilitude. These inter-generational social issue storylines demonstrate the programmes' ability to capitalise on their extensive histories through various intertextual references ranging from re-enacted scenes to replicated narrative contexts. To conclude, I explore how these intratextual references borrow from the conventions of metafiction to serve as commentary on what television moments from a decades-long broadcasting history are most significant. This self-conscious historical management ultimately functions as a way for British soap operas to negotiate with the burden of their own pasts, despite what challenges this may pose to a text's sense of realism.

It must be acknowledged that academic interest in the subject of British soap operas has waned in recent years. Generally, soap operas were once a staple of television studies. Particularly in the 1990s, there was a persistent fascination with defining the soap opera genre and its relationship with practices of femininity and feminism. However, as the age of

prestige television resulted in an increase in artistically adventurous cable programming, which then evolved into the contemporary age of streaming, new issues and interests emerged. Subsequently, Western television scholarship, at least, has largely moved on from soap operas. Although the genre, in all its nationally specific variations, still proves to be an occasional topic of scholarly intrigue, as a field, soap opera studies has arguably passed its heyday. As a result, much of the soap opera-specific scholarship consulted here is at least a decade old. However, although there have been developments, the core conventions of the British soap opera genre remain steadfast, so this should not hinder analysis. As established, this thesis considers British soap opera continuity and realism, two subjects traditionally at the forefront of soap opera analysis. Additionally, given this analysis also concerns intratextuality and the concept of television ‘moments’, the assorted writings of John Fiske, Matt Hills, and Amy Holdsworth also prove crucial when it comes to understanding how these moments arise through methods of self-conscious self-quotation.

1. The Narrative Workings of British Soap Operas

This chapter establishes British soap operas' relationship with continuity and temporality, with consideration given to programmes' longevity and resistance to offering definitive endings to narratives. This acute sense of continuance, coupled with the genre's interest in telling stories about families then produces a British soap opera chronotope based on generational domesticity.

1.1 The Narrative Focus of British Soap Operas

The cardinal concern of the British soap opera genre is telling stories surrounding the personal and the domestic. In her book chronicling the broadcasting history of British soap operas, scholar Dorothy Hobson summarises that “the main focus of [soap opera] narrative is on the everyday personal and emotional lives of the characters” (1). Charlotte Brunson, who is interested in the genre's relationship with femininity, makes a strikingly similar claim, writing that the “frame” of programming is “personal life in its everyday realisation through personal relationships” (14). British soap operas are no stranger to spectacle, with programmes often commemorating their anniversaries with live episodes or large-scale stunts, such as the now iconic tram crash that occurred for *Coronation Street's* (ITV, 1960-present) fiftieth anniversary (Episode 7484). However, the dominant focus is on the mundane. As much as British soap operas include crashes and explosions, the majority of their episodes are primarily concerned with the representation of the quotidian aspects of life: who is meeting who for dinner, what they are talking about and what is being kept secret. Linked to this, and referenced by Brunson, is the fact that soap operas are interested in the familial, romantic, or antagonistic connections between characters, which work to complicate their

emotional lives (14). Fundamentally, soap operas are about relationships, and the issues and events which work to alter, invigorate, or threaten those bonds. Although feuds and supercouples — that is the romantic relationships that programmes feature heavily due to their large fan followings — are significant narrative components, it is often familial relationships that are at the centre of soap operas. The characters involved in feuds or supercouples will likely belong to an established family unit first. The communities that make up British soap operas, the likes of Weatherfield or Albert Square, are comprised of various intersecting family units, like the Barlows in *Coronation Street* or the Mitchells in *EastEnders* (BBC, 1985-present). Hobson states that the “central concept of soap operas is the family and life within and between families” (116). Fellow soap opera scholar Ien Ang supports this, claiming that soap operas generally prioritise complex family dynamics, implying that these are the connections that are at the forefront of narratives (68). The family is always the starting point. It is then the genre’s pervasive longevity which allows these programmes’ narratives to explore the ongoing relationships between multiple generations in a way that takes full advantage of television’s temporality.

1.2 Continuity and British Soap Operas

As a medium, television is commonly conceptualised in terms of its relationship with time, as it relates to issues of continuity, duration, and liveness.² In her analysis of television news coverage, media scholar Mary Ann Doane begins by claiming that “time is television’s basis, its principle of structuration, as well as its persistent reference” (222). Likewise, in his

² Pioneering scholarship of this topic includes Raymond Williams work on flow, which remains the seminal writing on issues relating to continuity — and discontinuity — and the medium of television. This thesis focuses on issues relating to the continuity of specific programmes, and so while William’s work helps prove that the temporality of television has long been a cornerstone of television studies, it is not overly relevant to this discussion.

investigation of post-network television in the United States, cultural historian Jeffrey Sconce claims that “what television lacks in spectacle and narrative constraints, it makes up for in depth and duration of character relations, diegetic expansion, and audience investment” (95). Whether the focus of analysis is fiction or non-fiction programming, the starting point is the same: time is integral to how television operates, and the ability to spend vast amounts of time telling a story is a benefit of the medium. Many television programmes have, in theory, many hours spread across multiple years to tell their stories.³ British soap operas then fully utilise the potential for longevity offered by television.

Generally, the soap opera genre proves a constant presence within the television schedule, with programmes airing episodes between three to five nights a week, usually all year round, for years on end. However, their scheduling details depend on the specific show and country where that show is being broadcasted. For example, in New Zealand, the country’s main soap opera *Shortland Street* (TVNZ, 1992-present) airs five nights a week but does not broadcast episodes over the Christmas and New Year period. In comparison, British soap operas such as *EastEnders* air episodes in the United Kingdom during that period, although *EastEnders* specifically airs only four nights per week. However, regardless of the scheduling specifics, a defining feature of the soap opera remains the fact that the programmes can and do run for decades. The times and days episodes air may change, but programmes will still be being broadcast, with Britain’s longest-running soap opera *Coronation Street* celebrating its 63rd anniversary in 2023. This means that British soap operas not only tell stories about family units but also have the opportunity to follow multiple generations of the same family. When *Coronation Street* began Ken Barlow (played by William Roache) was a young bachelor. In 2023 the character is a grandfather. Audiences have the opportunity to spend years following characters as they age; get married and more often than not divorced; and have children,

³ Exceptions include genres such as limited series.

grandchildren and, in some cases, great-grandchildren. It is a genre that uses television's potential for longevity to grant audiences the ability to follow characters from the cradle to the grave in near real time as the overall story continues on chronologically year after year. Given the uniqueness of this televisual longevity, the soap opera's relationship with time has proved a site of academic fascination, with there being a tradition of using some version of the word continual when attempting to define the genre. In 1981, soap opera scholar Christine Geraghty used the soap opera moniker interchangeably with the term "continuous serial" in her seminal essay 'The Continuous Serial' (9). A year later, in her influential study of the American soap opera *Dallas* (TNT, 1978-1991), Ang claimed that the "steady continuance" of narratives was a fundamental element of the genre (57). Twenty years later academics still stressed soap operas' longevity. In 2002 media scholar John Ellis defined soap operas as existing in a "state of continual but slow-burn change" (60). In 2003, Hobson referred to soap operas as a "continuous form", harkening back to Geraghty's original essay (35). The genre's long-running nature is perpetually positioned as its principal feature. Even those who work within the television industry take part in this trend. David Liddiment worked as the Director of Programmes at the ITV Network Centre — with ITV producing both *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale* (ITV, 1972-present) — and was the executive producer for *Coronation Street* between 1989 and 1992. When asked to define a soap opera, Liddiment simply replied, "Continuing story, continual story, it just goes on forever" (quoted in Hobson, 52). Soap operas' focus on telling stories about relationships, their settings, and their audiences are ignored in favour of highlighting their longevity. At its core, it is this ability for programmes to continually tell their stories for years, if not decades, which make soap operas a unique fixture within the landscape of television. Operating within a medium that is already lauded for its ability to spend a lot of time telling its narratives, soap operas such as *Coronation Street* or *Dallas* can be considered the epitome of television's relationship with linear time.

1.3 Narrative Endings in British Soap Operas

The ways in which the structure of soap opera narratives relates to their ongoing nature is a longstanding topic of inquiry within the field of soap opera studies. The aspect of this structuring, however, that is particularly relevant to this thesis is how British soap operas treat their endings, as it is this treatment that ultimately allows for the recurrence of narratives.⁴ Much has been written about the ways in which soap operas forgo endings. Geraghty states that programmes feature “the continual postponement of the final resolution” in another example of the word ‘continual’ being used in relation to the genre (*The Continuous Serial*, 11). Likewise, Ang claims that soap operas lack “a conclusion or final denouncement” (239). However, it would be an oversimplification to claim that soap operas forfeit conclusions entirely. While there are no grand endings, Marion Jordan, who is interested in televisual realism, claims that instead the genre features “minor conclusions” where events stop being at the forefront of the programme without reaching some point of final resolution (28). Narrative events can be considered as coming to tentative endings, where they no longer function as an active part of the story, but they can always be returned to and expanded on at some point in a programme’s future. Families may once again fall into debt, feuds may be reignited, and couples who have been separated for years may get back together as their stories continue. Even if characters go to live offscreen, thus leaving a programme, their stories may still progress as the return of a character is always a possibility. *EastEnders* characters Colin Russell (played by Lord Michael Cashman, CBE) and Barry Clark (played by Gary Hailes) cemented their place in British soap opera history when, in 1987, they became the first gay characters to kiss onscreen (Episode 288). However, various

⁴ Other work on the structure of soap opera narratives includes Hobson’s writings about “recurrent catastasis”, where the scholar describes how the genre organises its narratives so something is always happening and about to happen in the world of soap operas (30).

trials and tribulations meant by 1989 both characters had left the show separately. However, in 2022, Cashman and Clark briefly reprised their roles, and it was revealed that the characters had reunited in the intervening years (Episode 6607). Despite what it may have seemed like at the time, Colin and Barry's separation in 1989 proved to be only a "minor conclusion" (Jordan, 28). Audiences are then well aware of the fact that final denouements will be perpetually delayed. Soap opera scholar Tania Modleski claims that the way in which soap opera narratives are constructed means that audiences are not continuing to watch programmes to see how things end but rather to see what new complications will arise in the characters' journeys (29).⁵ This anticipation of complication and narrative returns is part of the joys of soap opera viewing.

1.4 The Temporality of British Soap Operas and the Real World

This long-running nature has then led to soap operas' representation of time being comparable to audiences' experiences of time. Much like the trend of academics using the term 'continual' to define soap operas, academics have also frequently commented on these parallel temporalities when analysing the genre. Due to programmes' ability to spend many months telling their stories, television scholar Horace Newcomb claimed that soap operas are "closer to experiential reality than any other form of video art" (163). This claim was solely based on the continuous nature of soap opera narratives; it is about form, not content, discourses, not story. Many other academics working in both television studies and soap opera studies more specifically have made similar statements. Ellis, Geraghty, and Hobson all

⁵ Modleski ultimately positions this as a distinctly feminine pleasure, a sentiment which obeys an arguably outdated view of the gender binary. Despite there being a long history of linking soap operas to womanhood, male audiences have been proven to enjoy soap operas as well, with Hobson, in particular, doing audience research about young men who enjoyed watching *EastEnders* in the 1990s (194).

mention how the passage of time in soap operas, and programmes' continual presence in the lives of their viewers, recalls the audience's experience of time passing (J Ellis, 60; Geraghty, *The Continuous Serial*, 10; Hobson, 1). Brunsdon takes this concept a step further, claiming that soap opera temporality, with its dismissal of definitive endings and focus on representing characters living with the consequences of their actions, allows for a certain "homology between soap life and viewer life" (25). Again, this kinship is something that those who work to create soap operas seemingly recognise. Kay Alden, who worked as the co-head writer on the American soap opera *The Bold and the Beautiful* (CBS, 1987-present), claimed the genre is "beautifully reminiscent of life" due to the way programmes' longevity allows the characters and audience members to grow up alongside one another (88). Viewers who began watching *Coronation Street* in 1960 may themselves have been young adults figuring out their place in the world like Ken Barlow. Those who still watch today may be grandparents like the character is today. It is not only that soap operas continue for decades but that this longevity allows them to parallel the lives of audience members.

This affinity between soap opera temporality and audiences' lived temporality is then aided by soap operas referencing actual world events when they happen (Geraghty, *The Continuous Serial*, 10). For British soap operas in particular, it is common for programmes to film and include last minute scenes where characters speak about significant cultural, sporting, and general world events that have recently occurred. The *EastEnders* episode that aired on 12th September 2022 in the United Kingdom includes a pre-credits scene honouring the death of Queen Elizabeth II, with various characters gathering around a photograph of the late monarch while discussing her passing (Episode 6554). Beyond functioning as a tribute to the Queen, this added scene works to strengthen the connection between the world of *EastEnders* and the real world, as viewers see a representation of the types of conversations that likely would have been occurring in their own lives at the time. In 2022, *Eastenders* also included

scenes referencing Ukraine winning the Eurovision Song Contest (Episode 6486) and The Lionesses winning the UEFA European Women's Championship (Episode 6530). These additional scenes work to strengthen the intentional sense of verisimilitude between the world the characters inhabit and the world the audience does, highlighting how both the characters and viewers partake in a recognisable, shared passage of time.

1.5 The British Soap Opera Chronotope

British soap operas, therefore, makes use of a specific temporality that indulges in television's ability to spend a long time telling its stories, as programmes follow the lives of various generations in a way that evokes the audience's lived temporality. However, the temporal sense of a text does not exist in isolation but rather is often thought to be closely related to the space of a text. This means that in the case of British soap operas, the genre's everyday temporality is simultaneously established and reinforced by its focus on domestic spaces. Russian philosopher and literary critic M.M Bakhtin developed the theory of the chronotope to describe the relationship between temporality and spatiality in a narrative. Borrowing the space-time concept from Einstein's theory of relativity, Bakhtin defines the chronotope, which he notes translates to 'time space,' as describing "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84). History and the passage of time leave their marks on places, meaning time allows spaces to become "charged", and, in turn, these physical manifestations give evidence to time, meaning space "thickens" time (Bakhtin, 84). Bakhtin's concept is a departure from the traditional sole focus on temporality — the type of focus identifiable in works like those of Doane — by treating temporality as fundamentally intertwined with spatiality (Tischleder, 120). This relationship between space and time then influences how a narrative can progress.

In his own writings about chronotopes, narratologist Kent Puckett claims that the chronotope “governs the selection, the organisation, and the management of events as they are turned into a meaningful repression of events” (158). It also sets up how the reader expects the narrative to progress (Puckett, 157). Time and space converge to establish the framework for a narrative, as it is this convergence that helps determine what narrative events can happen and guides the ways in which they can be represented. In his essay ‘Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel’, Bakhtin chronicles different forms of the chronotope as they arise in various genres, including the ancient novel. Bakhtin claims this genre rarely features any sense of cyclical time unless it is linked to agriculture, and thus there is little repetition (127). If there is no sense of temporal repetition, there can be no repetition of narrative events. It is subsequently the agricultural landscape, that specific space, which does allow for a specific cyclical sense of time to occur in the ancient novel and, by extension, more repetitive depictions of narrative events. Thus, for Bakhtin, the chronotope “determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature” (85). It functions as the foundational building block of any narrative. Although Bakhtin focuses on the written word, the chronotope as a concept can be applied to any form of narrative, as all narratives surround the organisation of events. Media scholars such as Babette Tischleder have worked to apply the concept to television programmes such as *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013-2019). Therefore, the concept of the chronotope can also be applied to the British soap opera genre.

Another chronotope Bakhtin analyses in his essay is the chronotope of the family idyll, which has significant similarities with the chronotope of British soap operas. Both the idyll and the British soap opera locale are linked to the concept of family and the interactions between multiple generations. Admittedly, the spaces of the idyll and the British soap opera are markedly different. Idylls are pastoral, having strong links to the natural world (Bakhtin, 226). British soap operas, however, are largely uninterested in the natural world and instead

prioritise the domestic world. Programmes are set in particular fictional communities, to the point where the titles of all four British soap operas currently airing reference those particular settings. *Coronation Street* refers to a specific street. The village in *Emmerdale* is called Emmerdale, although it was not called this when the programme began. Likewise, the village in *Hollyoaks* (Channel 4, 1995-) is called Hollyoaks. Even *EastEnders* is an allusion to a place, as the fictional borough of Walford is meant to be located in London's East End. These settings are then comprised of both domestic and domesticated spaces. Sociologist Brian Longhurst claims that soap operas focus on the private space of the home, especially living rooms, which relates to their narrative focus on characters' personal lives (634). Even the public places within these communities become somewhat privatised. British soap operas have much of the narrative action occur in places such as pubs and cafes as these are where the entire community can come together regardless of their particular family unit. However, these public places become domesticated as they are frequently the setting of private disputes and personal conversations ranging from confessions of love to disclosures of trauma (Longhurst, 641). Even *Emmerdale*, which surrounds a farming community, obeys more of a domestic focus rather than a pastoral one, as homes and pubs are featured far more than fields, as well as the fact the programme has shied away from its initial interest in farming in recent years. But the family idyll and the British soap opera community share significant similarities in how they function as spaces where multiple generations of the same family can live for their entire lives.

Bakhtin writes that the idyll, in general, is a "little spatially limited world [where] a sequence of generations is localised potentially without limit" (225). This has clear parallels with the British soap opera, a genre which, as established, is partially defined by its ability to follow multiple generations of the same family as they live in these near-insular communities without a definitive ending. For Bakhtin, the idyll can be defined by its "unity of place", as it

is where families and the events that make up the narratives of their lives cannot be separated from where they live and therefore those generations cannot be separated from one another (225). As multiple generations are tied to a single place, the various temporal markers of life subsequently become tied together. The idyll is a place where births and deaths can occur within the same narrative, much like British soap operas, and as a result, there is a sense of “cyclic rhythmicalness” to the temporal structure of the idyll (Bakhtin, 225). With British soap operas, there is that sense of cyclical, everyday time as viewers tune in day after day, year after year, to check in with various characters who themselves are represented as going about their daily lives, even if those lives are marred by a perhaps higher-than-usual rate of tragedy. With the idyll, the events that can occur as part of the narrative are limited to those that are mundane, with Bakhtin listing “love, birth, death, marriage, labour, food and drink, stages of growth” (225). As established, these are the essential elements of British soap opera narratives, a genre which predominantly focuses on the personal lives of characters and their relationships, although, unlike the idyll, soap operas can include more sensationalist elements, including murders, car crashes and explosions. However, at the most basic level, the British soap opera chronotope has recognisable similarities with the chronotope of the idyll. Both feature an everyday, long-lasting sense of time. In terms of space, where the family idyll is about the pastoral, the soap opera is based on domestic spaces, but both these spaces are areas where multiple generations can come together and stay together. Ultimately, then the chronotope of the British soap opera is based on generational domesticity, which then proves to have considerable influence over the genre’s relationship with realism.

2. British Soap Operas, Realism and Social Issues Storylines

This chapter examines British soap opera's sense of realism, as it relates to programmes' sense of plausibility and emotionality, and how this is challenged when considering the genres' inclusion of social issue storylines. Consideration is given to how these mediative narratives seek to align themselves with the ethos of social realism and have subsequently proven to be a site of academic contention about the appropriateness of the genre featuring such serious storylines.

2.1 The Qualifiers of Realism Affiliated with Soap Operas

As the primary narrative focus of British soap operas is the quotidian lives of ordinary people, yet programmes simultaneously indulge in narratives involving scandal and spectacle, the genre's relationship with realism has proven the site of much academic fascination and debate. In her analysis of the way audiences understand realism, media scholar Alice Hall defines realism as "the way in which a media representation is seen to relate to real-world experience" (624). It is about the perceivable similarities between the world of the text and the world of the audience. While a text's temporality contributes to its sense of realism, other factors such as setting, narrative events and characterisation all contribute as well. Based on her audience research, then, Hall identifies six qualifiers of realism: plausibility, factuality, typicality, emotional involvement, narrative consistency, and perceptual pervasiveness (624). The realism of British soap operas can then be considered as relating to notions of plausibility and emotional involvement in particular, due to the genre's commitment to depicting a

recognisable world, which includes representing society's problems, while telling emotionally compelling narratives.

The plausibility of a text proves to be one of the main factors that influences its sense of realism. Hall defines plausibility as involving the representation of "events or behaviours that have the potential to occur in the real world" (629). It is about the audience's ability to identify that the happenings of a text reflect happenings that can possibly occur in real life, including the way characters act and the world they inhabit. Hall found that the plausibility of a text was positioned as the main qualifier for whether or not a text was seen as realistic, as all forty-seven participants mentioned it, usually within their initial responses (630).

However, there is a degree of subjectivity at play when it comes to individuals' ideas of what precisely constitutes plausibility. Respondents often debated the believability of a text, particularly when the behaviours of characters failed to match expectations created by their own lived experiences (A Hall, 631). Soap operas, in general, do have a sense of plausibility.

There is a sense of plausibility to programmes' temporalities, as the genre depicts time as being both continuous and linear, which audiences can recognise as mirroring their own experiences of the passage of time. As established, their primary narrative focus is on the mundane, day-to-day lives of characters as they face various life events that are recognisable to audiences. Even the more sensationalist elements of soap operas — the stunts and scandals — are events that could theoretically occur in real life. Tram crashes are unlikely but not impossible. However, this does highlight the vagueness of the plausibility qualifier, with there being a difference between something being theoretically possible and something being likely.

The other qualifier of realism that is crucial for understanding the soap opera genre is emotional involvement. Hall uses the term to describe the phenomenon where texts may seem implausible but represent familiar emotions and subsequently inspire strong emotional

responses in viewers (635). Emotional involvement occurs if the “audience could either feel the characters’ emotions or have an emotional response to the characters as they would to a real person” (A Hall, 635). Respondents talked about how films such as *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999) or *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994) felt unrealistic in that their narrative events did not seem entirely plausible, yet the films create such an affect-based bond between viewer and character, that they felt somewhat realistic or at least respondents forgot about the unrealistic aspects of the texts (A Hall, 635). This qualifier then links to Ang’s writings about soap operas and realism.

In her seminal book *Watching Dallas*, Ang argues that soap operas obey a sense of “emotional realism” (45). Much like Hall, Ang based her ideas about realism on audience research. In her analysis of various letter-writers’ responses to *Dallas*, Ang found that respondents “ascribe mainly emotional meanings to Dallas” (45). Respondents did not find the text resolutely implausible; there are examples of letter-writers claiming that “Dallas could really happen” (Letter 2, quoted in Ang, 44). In another letter, the respondent states they “also find some elements true to life” (Letter 11, quoted in Ang, 44). However, these claims of partial plausibility are less about the actual narrative events occurring and more about the emotions caused by those events. In soap operas, any happiness characters experience must be temporary as for the narratives to continue indefinitely, there must always be another misfortune or trauma waiting to occur. In a soap opera, a couple may seem blissfully married, but it is only a matter of time before there is some affair, sickness, or death. This impermanence of happiness is then the basis for Ang’s conceptualisation of emotional realism, as it is thought to recall real life (46). No one can be content forever. Ang claims that, ultimately, then, soap operas feature a “tragic structure of feeling” (46). Much like in reality, characters exist in a state of emotional flux, with audiences responding to this. In Letter 16, the respondent claims that the pleasure of *Dallas* comes from the fact that the

programme cycles through feelings of fear, happiness, romance, sadness, and suspense (Ang, 45). The fact that soap operas do not depict characters as being resolutely happy or satisfied is what is being identified as being realistic. This leads to Ang claiming that “what is recognised as real is not knowledge of the world but a subjective experience of the world” (45). The narrative events of *Dallas* may not seem plausible; in fact, many of these events are viewed as unrealistic due to the extreme wealth depicted in the programme. However, in Ang’s view, narrative plausibility is secondary to *Dallas*’ ability to portray characters as experiencing a full range of feelings. Much like with Hall’s qualifier, the emotions of the text have the potential to offset the perceived implausibility of narrative events.⁶ Ang’s idea of emotional realism is ultimately about how soap operas depict emotional journeys that subsequently grant audiences the pleasure of recognition.

This idea of emotional realism has proven to be highly influential on how soap operas are conceptualised, with many of Ang’s contemporaries making similar statements when analysing the genre. Sociologist C. Lee Harrington claims that the longevity of soap operas means that many more narrative events happen in characters’ lives than would typically occur in real life, using the example of soap opera characters often marrying upwards of seven times (111). Harrington claims this creates a “lack of narrative realism” — in other words, it seems implausible to return to Hall’s qualifiers — yet this is secondary to soap operas’ emotional realism, which Harrington defines as “the authentic, affective impact of these events on individuals and their relationships” (111). The plausibility of the event is inconsequential when compared to the plausibility of characters’ reactions to that event.

Likewise, Hobson claims that the “history of drama of soap operas is the history of

⁶ Hall also uses the term emotional realism when writing about emotional involvement. However, her definition differs in that she uses the term to refer to the emotional attachment viewers have to characters rather than representations of emotionality (A Hall, 635). Additionally, Hall makes no reference to Ang, *Dallas*, or the soap opera genre, despite the fact that Ang’s book preceded Hall’s article by over two decades. Going forward, it is Ang’s conceptualisation that is relevant, and thus when emotional realism is being referred to, it is in terms of Ang’s original definition.

emotions— universal feelings which are known and shared by the audience and with which they can connect” (128). This statement clearly echoes both Ang’s concept of emotional realism and Hall’s qualifier of emotional involvement, as all appeal to the ideas about the affectual relationships between text and audience. The soap opera genre’s sense of realism is consistently conceptualised in terms of programme’s ability to represent plausible emotions rather than plausible narrative events. However, it is important to note that when conceptualising emotional realism, Ang is writing specifically about *Dallas*, which is an American soap opera and American soap operas are often thought to be less realistic than their British counterparts.

2.2 Realism and British Soap Operas

Although there is an undeniable kinship between American and British soap operas, ultimately, there are significant, if not subtle, differences between the two genres. Admittedly, both feature continuing stories, domestic spaces, and highlight the family unit. Both American and British soap operas follow characters as they go about their daily lives and cycle through feelings of happiness and despair. This means that despite Ang conceptualising emotional realism in terms of an American soap opera, it is applicable to the British soap operas as well. Likewise, in *EastEnders*, Ian Beale (played by Adam Woodyatt) has been married six times, fitting with Harrington’s idea that soap opera characters tend to go through more significant life events than the average viewer. Additionally, when referencing the genre’s “history of emotions”, Hobson is writing about British soap operas (128). However, it is widely recognised that a significant difference between American and British soap operas is their relationship with realism, with British soap operas often being seen as portraying more realistic narratives. When conducting audience research with women who worked in an

education department, Hobson found that respondents believed that British soap operas were generally more realistic than their American counterparts (177). Hobson subsequently claims that while American soap operas “offered fantasy,” it was the British soap operas that offered viewers a sense of “realism” (177). This is partially due to the class differences between American and British soap operas. Leading soap opera scholar Robert Allen states that it is British soap operas’ focus on the lives of the working class which separates them from American soap operas (8). Viewers who are not a part of the upper classes are unlikely to view representations of wealth as realistic based on their own lived experiences. Thus, there is an aspirational element to American soap operas as they surround the lives of the wealthy (Hobson, 69). This idea of American soap operas indulging in notions of fantasy can also be seen in the plots that are featured in programmes. American soap operas tend to include storylines that seem implausible. The American soap opera *Guiding Light* (CBS, 1952-2009) has plotlines involving lead matriarch Reva Shayne (played by Kim Zimmer) believing herself to be Amish after suffering from amnesia, temporarily becoming a princess, and having to face off against a clone of herself named Dolly in the late 1990s. This is not to say that American programmes are entirely or consistently implausible, but this inclusion of more fanciful plotlines combined with a tendency to focus on the lives of the wealthy has led to audiences recognising them as more unrealistic, as evidenced by Hobson’s research. Thus, it is that qualifier of emotional involvement that is the primary basis for any sense of realism programmes do possess. British soap operas’ comparatively closer relationship with plausibility can then be linked to how the British soap opera genre parallels the genre of social realism.

2.3 The Connections Between Social Realism and British Soap Operas

Though it is not the only location that produces social realist films, plays and television, Britain has a long-standing preoccupation with the genre. In their writing about social realism, Hallam and Marshment define the genre as being “a mode of cinematic representation that focuses on the lives of characters in a particular milieu or environment that is at some remove from the images of people and places that populate most commercial generic production” (190). Social realism was popularised in Britain in the 1930s and since then directors such as Ken Loach and Shane Meadows have continued the tradition, creating social realist films and television (Forrest, 1). The style of social realism is naturalistic, the tone is often serious, and narratives are intended to be entirely plausible, with a focus on representing life’s difficulties. Social realist texts typically follow members of the working class as they cope with events and circumstances beyond their control, with the genre being concerned with the mental and emotional impacts of socio-political hardships (Hallam and Marshment, 192). Issues such as unemployment or domestic violence are explored through the representation of how these issues impact the lives of particular characters. This has led to Jordan claiming that the narratives of social realism are concerned with “personal events” as by framing the representation of social issues around how they impact only a few characters, issues such as unemployment become personalised (28). Jordan goes on to acknowledge that this focus on characters’ personal lives is homologous with the established focus of soap operas, especially British soap operas as these programmes typically surround working-class communities, much like social realist texts (28). However, this is not the only similarity between the two genres. Hallam and Marshment note that social realist texts often focus on inter-generational conflict, which parallels British soap operas’ focus on familial relationships (194). They also claim that because characters in social realist films face circumstances they cannot control, their narratives have “no simple resolution at the level of plot closure” (Hallam and Marshment, 210). In other words, there are no definitive points of denouement,

creating a structural similarity between this genre and British soap operas, with both featuring this lack of final resolutions. Social realism and British soap operas remain two separate genres; fiery explosions and scandalous affairs would be out of place in a social realism text. Yet there is a distinctive harmony between the pair as both are ultimately concerned with the complexity of mundane life for the working class. This is why Jordan concludes that British soap operas share the same “viewpoint” as social realism, even if the “method” of delivery is different (39). This kinship is a significant reason why British soap operas are viewed as having a closer relationship with realism than their American counterparts; British soap operas operate from the same perspective as a genre that is entirely committed to appearing realistic.

Because of the apparent similarities between British soap operas and the social realism genre, it is not unusual for soap operas to be compared with social realist texts. Hobson quotes Mal Young, a former producer of both *Brookside* (Channel 4, 1982-2003) and *EastEnders*, who claims that soap operas became the “replacements” for social realism television plays, explicitly comparing *Brookside* and *EastEnders* to the seminal social realist television play *Cathy Come Home* (BBC, 1966) (51). *Cathy Come Home*, directed by Ken Loach, follows a young mother as she becomes homeless after husband struggles to find work in the wake of an accident, with the final scene seeing her three children taken into care. The television play was watched by twelve million viewers in the United Kingdom; sparked significant debate about issues relating to homelessness, unemployment, and social services; led to an increase in donations to the homeless charity Shelter; and aided in the founding of the charity Crisis in 1967 (Allan, par 1). Due to the television play’s focus on representing taboo social issues in a sympathetic manner and its ability to cause some degree of actual social change, many consider *Cathy Come Home* to be a landmark in the social realism movement. Scholar Leslie Henderson, whose primary concern is television fiction’s ability to address social issues,

notes that the play can be viewed as the epitome of television's ability to become intertwined with particular societal problems, becoming a paradigm for how homelessness is considered in the United Kingdom (22). Thus, to compare British soap operas to the play is to highlight the extent to which British soap operas can operate in a realistic mode of storytelling, although Young works within the industry and thus is likely to have a favourable bias towards the power of the soap opera genre. However, Young is not the only one to make this type of comparison. When writing about *Cathy Come Home*, Catrin Prys uses *Coronation Street* as another example of a social realism text, showcasing the extent to which British soap operas are connected with the genre (41). However, much like Young, this statement can be considered slightly hyperbolic. While having strong links to social realism, *Coronation Street* is still British soap opera; that is its primary genre, and it is not constantly operating in a social realist mode of storytelling. It is, after all, a show which features a week's worth of episodes dedicated to an explosive tram crash which is a departure from telling stories about the daily hardships faced by the working class and instead is a moment where the storytelling is orientated towards spectacle. Ultimately they are two distinct genres. Instead of conflating them, however, British soap operas can be considered as having links to social realism, with the strength of these links depending on the specific types of narratives being featured in a programme at any given time.

2.4 Social Issue Storylines

Social issue storylines are then the category of British soap opera narratives that most closely align with the spirit of the social realism genre. Social issue storylines are those which take on a more grounded and serious tone as programmes work to represent the uncomfortable and often under-discussed issues present in society. These narratives

commonly surround serious illnesses, mental health conditions, sexual violence, or other serious crimes, with programmes typically consulting with relevant charities and organisations to ensure a reasonable degree of accuracy. Social issue storylines subsequently become some of British soap operas' most publicised, discussed, and praised storylines. In 2022, four of the five narratives nominated for best storyline in the British Soap Opera Awards were social issue storylines, with the *Hollyoaks* storyline 'Misbah's historic rape' winning the award. In the last decade, eight out of nine of the best storyline award winners were social issue storylines, including 'Stacey's post-partum psychosis' from *EastEnders* winning in 2016, and *Emmerdale's* 'Jackson's choice' storyline, which involves the topic of assisted dying, winning in 2012. These results indicate how significant these types of storylines are from an industry standpoint, as well as their overall public profile. These are the storylines that those who help create programmes push to get nominated, and these are the storylines the industry validates as being worthy of being deemed the 'best' storyline of their respective years. In many ways, then, social issue storylines have become the pride of British soap operas.

However, despite being recognised as an integral aspect of the British soap operas in recent decades, the genre did not initially have a strong commitment to representing society's ills. When *Coronation Street* began airing in the 1960s, it occasionally touched on serious subject matters, but it did not centre the representation of social issues in its storylines (Geraghty, Social Issues, 66). In efforts to attract new audience demographics — including younger viewers, male viewers and those generally interested in politics — *Brookside* and *EastEnders* sought to examine social issues in a more overt manner when they began broadcasting in the 1980s and frequently represented controversial topics such as HIV or teenage pregnancy (Geraghty, Social Issues, 66). One of the most renowned social issues storylines is then the Jordache storyline from *Brookside*. In February 1993, *Brookside* began this narrative with the

introduction of the titular family, including Mandy Jordache (played by Sandra Maitland) and her two daughters, Beth (played by Anna Friel) and Rachel (played by Tiffany Chapman), who were living in a safe house after Mandy's husband Trevor (played by Bryan Murray) had physically abused Mandy and raped Beth. For the next two years, the storyline involved Trevor reintegrating himself into the household, resuming his abuse of Mandy, sexually assaulting Rachel, and Mandy killing him in self-defence during the following confrontation (Henderson, 60). In May 1995, Mandy and Beth stood trial for his murder and in July 1995, Mandy was released from prison after Rachel testified about the abuse she suffered.

Throughout the Jordache storyline, then, *Brookside* was able to explore issues relating to domestic violence, childhood sexual abuse and how the British justice system treats women who kill their violent husbands (Henderson 64). This storyline epitomises British soap operas move towards social issues storytelling, with *Brookside* being dedicated to addressing challenging subject matter that is unfortunately plausible. It is the type of narrative that would not be out of place in a social realism text; it is an entirely serious storyline that explores socio-cultural problems like domestic violence and childhood sexual abuse by representing how those problems affect a single working-class family. However, *Brookside* is not a social realist text, it is a soap opera, and the Jordache storyline is constructed in a way that specifically utilises the narrative workings of soap operas, particularly the programme's longevity. *Brookside* took two years to tell the Jordache story. There was time taken to show Trevor's reinstating his place within the household. The narrative did not solely include the immediate aftermath of Trevor's death but rather how that event impacted Mandy, Beth and Rachel in the years that followed, including the time it took for Rachel to come to terms with the fact she was sexually abused (Henderson, 60). Henderson claims that the power of television, particularly soap operas, stems from programmes' ability to represent a "coming to terms" process with characters journeying through various emotional stages (174). There is

time to dwell on the reactions of characters — including denial, anger, sorrow, healing, or acceptance — as they face various struggles and hardships. As episodes of British soap operas air nearly daily for many years, audiences can watch as characters grapple with these issues and their mental and emotional effects in near real-time, as evidenced in narratives such as Rachel coming to terms with what happened to her. *Brookside's* Jordache storyline demonstrates British soap operas' turn towards social issues storylines, as programmes make full use of programmes' longevity to comprehensively explore problems prevalent in society no matter how unpleasant they may be.

Another way in which the temporality of British soap operas is beneficial to their exploration of social issues is the fact that they can also represent the long-term impacts of social issues (Henderson, 175). Although, social issue storylines come to tentative endings like any other British soap opera narrative, there is always the potential for these narratives to be returned to as programmes represent how these events come to impact characters years later. *EastEnders* began an alcoholism storyline centred on the character of Phil Mitchell (played by Steve McFadden) in the late 1990s. Since then, the show has continued to explore Phil's continued struggles with addiction and how the illness impacts his life and the lives of those around him. In 2007 the character relapsed after learning his son was being physically abused, and in 2015 the character relapsed again, with this leading to Phil being diagnosed with liver failure and having to undergo a transplant. This development then led to a year-long story as Phil attempted to get sober again and find a viable transplant as his health deteriorates. Audiences can also recognise how this history impacts the character's other relationships. In 2020, when Linda Carter (played by Kellie Bright) was at the centre of her own alcoholism storyline, there were scenes of the pair bonding over their respective experiences, with Phil eventually becoming her sponsor. That is over two decades' worth of social issue-based storytelling. Although issues may not always be at the forefront of programmes, British soap operas have

the ability to revisit these storylines years down the line, as a way of representing the continued effects of trauma or illness in a plausible manner, due to their continual nature.

However, as much as British soap operas' longevity allows programmes to be a powerful tool for addressing social issues, there are restrictions on these storylines' duration. Although soap operas may air for decades, the time social issue storylines have to play out before reaching a tentative ending is not limitless because programmes must still adhere to audience expectations. Henderson claims that programmes have to balance "realistic time scales with audience viewing pleasures" (99). For example, a 2012 report by Eating Disorder Association Incorporated found that, on average, it takes people suffering from bulimia nervosa seven and a half years before they seek help for the eating disorder (11). Cleo McQueen's bulimia storyline in *Hollyoaks* played out for a little over a year, mainly in 2018. Theoretically, British soap operas could spend seven and a half years telling a single social issue storyline involving bulimia, but they do not because it would make for unpleasurable viewing. British soap operas' continual nature is still being utilised but those who create programmes — the executive producers, storyliners and writers — are aware that there are still timeframes that they must operate within. Viewers may not want to watch characters they care about suffer for years on end and the programmes themselves often want to focus on representing the fact that support is available, meaning they want to portray characters accessing that support in a reasonably timely manner. There is also the fact that ultimately British soap operas are telling stories, and that means that are certain narrative requirements they must appeal to. Like any other form of British soap opera storyline, social issue storylines are constructed to create a sense of suspense and pace, often involving what Henderson refers to as "dramatic disclosures" (Henderson, 106). Secrets being kept is the cornerstone of soap opera storytelling and suspense stems from audiences knowing that ultimately those secrets will be revealed. Although with social issue storylines, the secrets involved surround disclosures of

trauma or illness rather than affairs and corruption, there is still a sense of suspense that needs to be set up and resolved. In Cleo's bulimia storyline, suspense comes from audiences waiting to see when those around Cleo, particularly her fiancé Joel Dexter (played by Rory Douglas-Speed), would discover the extent of her illness. That reveal came after Cleo had a heart attack during their wedding ceremony, in a special episode solely dedicated to Cleo's story that aired on world mental health day (Episode 5013). Heart attacks are a common result of eating disorders; that is entirely plausible. However, *Hollyoaks* narratively positioned that event to have as much dramatic impact as possible, with it occurring at the climatic wedding, indicating the tension between British soap operas' desire to realistically represent important, often under-discussed issues and the fact they are still television programmes and have other concerns beyond verisimilitude.

2.5 Discourses Surrounding Social Issue Storylines

The narrative framework of British soap operas has then resulted in discourses about the appropriateness of programmes representing social issues. Scholars such as Longhurst criticise soap operas for prioritising the personal over the political, with this resulting in the view that soap operas cannot properly address social issues. Longhurst claims soap operas “block collective solutions to social issues and raised problems by ‘resolving’ these within the confines of the home and the tight-knit community and hence in personal terms” (634). This can be considered as linking back to the genre's chronotope. The British soap opera chronotope, with its focus on an everyday temporality, allows for an extended representation of how social issues may impact people in their day-to-day lives, which is a recognised benefit of the genre. Yet that chronotope also means that the way soap opera narratives progress is limited by those same principles of mundanity and domesticity. The space of the

soap opera is the home, so as Longhurst claims, the arena within which social issues storylines must play out is also the home (645). It should be noted, however, that there is a certain ambiguity to Longhurst's use of the word 'resolving' here. Longhurst gives no specific examples of social issues storylines from soap operas, so it is unclear as to what the scholar qualifies as an issue being narratively resolved, given soap operas avoid definitive resolutions. If a soap opera were to address homelessness, such as Ian Beale's homeless storyline in *EastEnders* from 2012, technically, the issue at the heart of that storyline would be, in a sense, resolved once the character involved is no longer unhoused. However, storylines such as Phil's alcoholism are never truly resolved even when the character is sober, as addiction issues do not suddenly disappear, and *EastEnders* remains dedicated to showing the ongoing effects of living with an addiction. Nevertheless, Longhurst's overarching point is that soap operas treat social issues solely in terms of the personal. Jordan makes a similar statement, but rather than looking at how social issues storylines are 'resolved,' she looks at how those issues are caused. Jordan claims that soap operas neglect "everything which cannot be seen to be caused by people who are plausibly allowed to be physically present" (29). This means that soap operas removed issues from their political and institutional causes (Jordan, 29). Lez Cooke, who specialises in British television drama, makes a similar claim, believing that soap operas "cut themselves off from the real world of social and political agencies" (167). The main critique, then, of British soap opera's ability to address social issues is that they remove these issues from their political and social spheres. The government and other institutions rarely get interrogated when soap operas address social issues. While problems such as a lack of funding, difficulty accessing resources or systematic biases may get fleeting mentions, they rarely inform how storylines progress, as the spaces those issues arise in are not the spaces of soap operas. These become recognisable faults in programmes' plausibility and, therefore, their sense of realism.

However, it is not only soap operas which have faced judgement for the way they approach the representation of social issues. The critique of British soap operas' suitability in addressing social issues parallels those that have occurred in relation to the social realism genre. Although social realism texts demonstrate a broader socio-political awareness of how social issues occur, they also involve narratives exploring how issues affect people in their ordinary lives. Like British soap operas, this personalisation of issues has come under scrutiny. Prys notes that in the aftermath of *Cathy Comes Home*, some critics dismissed the play as being emotionally manipulative as it presents Cathy as a sympathetic figure and aligns audiences with Cathy's struggles (42). It was believed that the representation of social issues could not be objective as audiences were "emotionally involved" with Cathy's character (Prys, 43). There is no way to know whether potential biases towards unhoused people influenced these claims about the television play's sympathies. However, these sentiments indicate a tradition of unease when it comes to presenting social issues in terms of personal stories. There is a critique here of the television play focusing on how particular social issues impact the life of a single character to whom audiences have an emotional attachment. Much like British soap operas, the television play was viewed as personalising these issues rather than treating them as solely belonging to the political sphere. Therefore, it seems that the criticism of British soap operas' suitability for addressing social ills fits within a broader discourse about whether the representation of social issues in television fiction, in general, is appropriate.

However, not all scholars see the fact that soap operas limit the scope of their storytelling to the personal and the domestic as a hindrance. There is an argument to be made that British soap operas focusing on the personal facet of social issues allows audiences a greater ability to understand the impacts of those issues, especially as they often involve taboo subject matters. Henderson claims that the strength of soap operas is the ability to go "behind closed

doors” and witness the private moments (108). These are moments such as Cleo McQueen purging in her bedroom after having breakfast with her bridal party and rushing to tailor her wedding dress as it is now too large in *Hollyoaks* (Episode 5013). Or moments like Phil Mitchell sitting alone in his living room, holding a glass of whiskey with shaking hands, unable to cope with the knowledge that his son has been hurt in *EastEnders* (Episode 3405). Here British soap operas’ prioritisation of domestic spaces is positioned as a benefit, as it allows for the individual, private struggles associated with various social issues to be represented. Henderson subsequently claims that the “repetitive nature of soap [...] may also allow a level of identification and empathy which is impossible to replicate in other fictional forms” (174). Here emotional involvement is considered a strength. Audiences are witnessing depictions of the intimate effects of issues on characters they have potentially been watching for years. This potentially leads to a level of empathy that may allow audiences to consider social issues in ways they previously had not. Thus, in Henderson’s view, the chronotope of British soap operas is not necessarily a limitation but rather a strength when it comes to the genre’s ability to explore social issues, as it allows for the humanisation of those issues. The temporality and spatiality of programmes can be a tool for creating a sense of understanding in audiences.

Hobson makes a similar but more resolute claim about the power of British soap operas. She states that the strength of soap operas stems from the ability to give characters, who are “totally familiar” to viewers, storylines which surround subjects which are “hardly known” (Hobson, 141). This textual intimacy between viewer and character helps to get audiences invested in potentially controversial subject matters. Alcoholism and addiction can be highly stigmatised issues, but the idea is that because audiences may already have a connection with characters like Phil Mitchell, those issues become more palatable to watch. Hobson notes that, subsequently, soap operas can help familiarise audiences with subjects they may not

have any experience with; allow those with experiences to see representations of themselves on screen; and generally, help normalise talking about these types of issues (142). Overall, Hobson tends to be overly utopic in her view of the power of soap operas. Her claim that the temporality of soap operas allows “all sides of the debate” about issues to air is an overestimation, given critics — including Longhurst and Cooke — point out programmes do not consider wider socio-political factors (Hobson, 141). Geraghty also notes that Hobson tends to “assert rather than to debate” her claims (*Exhausted and Exhausting*, 87). However, the sentiment that social issue storylines can help increase knowledge and discussion about social issues is valid if we treat this as a potential to be informative rather than an assurance. Witnessing these personal stories means that audiences may begin to understand and talk about social issues differently or more frequently.

Charities and organisations seemingly believe that programmes are a valuable tool for spreading information to the masses, given they actively consult with programmes during the creation of these storylines. Organisations including Beat, Survivors Manchester, and Terrence Higgins Trust have frequently consulted with British soap operas on storylines involving eating disorders, male sexual assault, and HIV, respectively. Much like how *Cathy Come Home* helped charities relating to homelessness, then, British soap operas have proven to have a symbiotic relationship with the charity sector. Evidence suggests that social issue storylines encourage people to access support services. Tom Quinn, the director of external affairs at Beat, claimed they were “pretty confident [Cleo’s bulimia storyline in *Hollyoaks*] had a significant impact in more people contacting the helpline than ever before” in October 2018 (quoted in Gillett, par 19). When *Coronation Street* aired its male rape storyline involving David Platt in 2018, calls to Survivors Manchester increased by 1700% within the storyline’s first week of airing (Chase, par 1). A press release from Terrence Higgins Trust reports that traffic to the organisation’s website increased by 75% in the wake of Zack

Hudson's HIV storyline in *EastEnders* from 2023, with this coming thirty years after *EastEnders*' seminal storyline involving Mark Fowler confronted social stigmas surrounding HIV in the 1990s (par 7/8). Therefore, British soap operas cannot be entirely dismissed for their focus on the personal over the political. Rather they can be considered another way of addressing social issues that can have real-world impacts.

Perhaps, then, it is Henderson's cautiously optimistic view of soap operas' ability to address social issues that is most appropriate. Henderson recognises the benefit of social issue storylines. As mentioned, she sees the way soap operas personalise issues as a strength as this allows general audiences an entrance point to understanding these issues (171). However, Henderson also acknowledges it cannot be assumed that social issues storylines in soap operas will automatically have a positive impact and that there needs to be a wariness about overestimating the power of programmes (171). Storylines may be poorly constructed, under-researched, or audiences may simply not take away the programme's intended messages (Henderson, 171). This claim can be considered in relation to Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding communication model. During the production process, messages are encoded into texts, with this being the first level of meaning-making (S Hall, 120). During the reception of texts, audiences decode these messages, with this process being influenced by audiences' recognition of those codes (S Hall, 120). This is the second level of meaning-making. There can be missteps at any of these stages that then limit the impact of social issue storylines. Henderson uses the example of *Coronation Street*'s social issue storyline involving erotomania, a delusional disorder where the sufferer is convinced that someone else is truly in love with them. The storyline involved Carmel Finnan (played by Catherine Cusack) suffering from the disorder while working as a nanny for the Platts and actively pursuing the father as she was convinced he was in love with her. Despite being a recognised mental health condition, the storyline only treated Carmel as a dangerous outsider threatening the

nuclear family unit of the Platts (Henderson, 99). In this case, *Coronation Street* did not consult with any outside agencies, further indicating their indifference to genuinely exploring the issue of erotomania but rather using the condition's symptoms to create a story of a family dealing with a deranged nanny (Henderson, 101). There was a lack of interest in the actual issue during the production process, meaning the messages that were decoded from Carmel's storyline were negative and a mental health condition was instead understood to be an issue of immorality. This can be seen in the YouTube videos reuploading the narrative referring to it as the "Evil Nanny" storyline. Here, the British soap opera failed to raise proper awareness of the issue.

Thus, there is an understanding that, ultimately, social issues storylines need to be treated on a case-by-case basis. However, at their best, they do have the potential to be another means of allowing conversations about important yet uncomfortable subject matters to occur. British soap operas' social issue storylines are not perfect representations. Programmes have other concerns beyond realism, timeframes have to be condensed, and the way they treat these storylines can only ever be at a personal level. Yet when they approach the representation of social issues with care and work to ensure they are presented as honestly as possible within the confines of the soap opera genre, when they research and consult with outside agencies, there is the potential for these storylines to have a positive real-world impact. Therefore, there needs to be a shift from expecting soap operas to provide comprehensive representations to seeing the genre as allowing an entrance point into thinking about and discussing the issues at hand. At their best social issue storylines can form a part of a wider network of texts that address social concerns in a fairly realistic manner, making use of both British soap operas longevity and the genre's narrative focus on families.

3. Case Study: Bipolar Disorder Storylines in *EastEnders*

This case study explores how inter-generational social issue storylines reference the past through examining the connections between three times EastEnders featured bipolar disorder storylines involving the Slater family. Beginning with a consideration of the plausibility the programme's representation, I move on to analyse how these narratives build upon one another in succession, including how the re-enactments of past scenes function as television moments.

3.1 An Overview of Inter-Generational Social Issue Storylines

The longevity of British soap operas means that it is likely programmes will feature multiple storylines surrounding the same social issue during their time on air. Beyond Phil Mitchell's storyline, *EastEnders* has also done alcoholism storylines with Lauren Branning (played by Jacqueline Jossa) in 2012/2013 and the aforementioned Linda Carter storyline in 2020. In the last fifteen years, *Hollyoaks* has had four eating disorder storylines centred on Hannah Ashworth (played by Emma Rigby) in 2007, Jason Roscoe (played by Alfie Brown-Skyes) in 2015, Cleo McQueen in 2018, and Imran Maalik (played by Ijaz Rana) in 2022, respectively. The specific way these storylines develop differ based on which characters are involved. An alcoholism storyline involving a married father like Phil Mitchell has different narrative beats than an alcoholism storyline involving a young girl binge-drinking to cope with her mother's cancer like Lauren Branning's storyline. However, generally, the same issues will reappear, often without any strong ties to their narrative predecessors. Occasionally, however, the same social issue will reappear in storylines involving the same family unit in a way that fully employs the continuity of British soap operas and reinforces

the genre's focus on familial relationships. Often this involves characters being at the centre of the same type of social issue storyline that their parents were in previous years. Although these storylines still function as self-contained narratives, accessible for newer viewers, they gain additional meaning from the way they work to recall the past. These storylines are then not only social-issues storylines but are self-referential, inter-generational social issue storylines.

A clear example of this narrative phenomenon of inter-generational social issue storylines comes in the form of *EastEnders*' three storylines involving bipolar disorder and the Slater family. The organisation Bipolar UK defines the disorder as "a severe mental illness characterised by extreme mood swings and changes in energy levels", which can involve experiencing depression, suicidal thoughts, mania, hypomania, hallucinations and potentially psychosis ("Understanding Bipolar", section 1). *EastEnders* has three key social issue storylines surrounding bipolar disorder: Stacey Slater (played by Lacey Turner) having to take care of her mother, Jean Slater (played by Gillian Wright) in 2005; Stacey's own bipolar storyline in 2009; and Jean's relapse in 2022 which saw her granddaughter Lily Slater (played by Lillia Turner) step into a care-taking role. This repetition of a central social issue then allows *EastEnders* to not only explore the reality of living with bipolar disorder but also how the illness affects families throughout generations. Analysing the connections between these storylines demonstrates the intersection between British soap operas' dedication to plausibly exploring social issues and their prioritisation of familial relationships. This is not simply a case of bipolar disorder being the subject of three separate storylines, but rather these storylines are narratively and visually intertwined, which capitalises on the continuity of British soap operas and their culminating narratives.

3.2 An Overview of the Slater's First Bipolar Storyline

The first time *EastEnders* featured a storyline involving bipolar disorder and the Slater family was in 2005, although the background for this narrative was established a year earlier. In November 2004, the show introduced the character of Stacey Slater, a girl in her late teens who came to live with her great-uncle as she was unable to live with her mother, Jean Slater (Episode 2826). The context behind this move was later explored in an episode that originally aired in December 2004, as Stacey returned home alongside her great-uncle and was met with a hostile and unwell Jean (Episode 2852). *EastEnders* establishes that Jean has struggled with her mental health in Stacey's first scene as Stacey mentions her mother had "completely lost the plot." However, this episode from December is the first time Jean actually appears on screen, and audiences receive insight into what Stacey truly means. Initially, Jean is introduced from Stacey's point of view. After arriving at Jean's house, Stacey eventually sees Jean in the upstairs window. The audience subsequently sees Jean as Stacey sees her, a displeased face peeking out from behind the curtains. This introduction then establishes the dynamic of the following scene and the subsequent storyline. Jean is positioned as someone others, mainly Stacey, must react to. The issue at the heart of this storyline is not what it is like living with bipolar disorder but rather the issue of what it is like having a parent who has a severe mental health condition. Jean is not the central character; Stacey is. The focus of the following scene, where the three of them talk, is on how difficult the situation is for Stacey. The dialogue in the scene is solely about her character, from the great-uncle's insistence that mothers and daughters should be together to Jean's repeated claims that Stacey dragged her down. In response, Stacey argues that when Jean was heavily medicated, she was the one who kept the household running, stepping into a caretaker role despite her young age. Stacey talks about how she made sure Jean was eating and that she was clean, an early indication of the bathing motif that will reoccur throughout the

programme's exploration of bipolar disorder. The scene clearly establishes that Jean is unwell. Beyond the dialogue, Wright's performance fluctuates between her blankly staring into space and viciously yelling. Jean's hair is unbrushed, there is a pile of washing still in its basket along with a discarded ironing table, and the plants on the windowsill seem to be dying. However, if social issues storylines are about highlighting the private struggles of characters, the struggle *EastEnders* is truly emphasising is the struggle of a daughter having to take care of her unwell mother on her own.

This introductory scene is then the precedent for a multi-episode storyline in 2005, where Stacey returns home once again as Jean is in the midst of a mental health crisis after she stops taking her tablets. This occurs nearly a full year after Jean's initial scene, in a clear example of the ongoing nature of British soap operas. This social issue storyline begins with Stacey being informed by a former neighbour that Jean is behaving erratically again, boarding her windows with cardboard, and shouting while only wearing her undergarments (Episode 3057). Because of this behaviour Stacey must return to her old home. Much like the character's initial introduction, here Jean is reintroduced from Stacey's perspective as the audience follows her attempts to re-enter Jean's house. When Stacey arrives, the front lawn is filled with broken furniture and a dust-covered car, whereas the previous year it was reasonably well-kept. Stacey enters through a boarded window and finds the house in complete darkness. When Stacey eventually manages the turn on the light, the full extent of Jean's inability to care for herself is revealed, as the mise-en-scene makes clear that the character is struggling. The table Jean sits at is covered with items piled on top of one another, including empty take-out containers. The kitchen countertops are covered with empty alcohol bottles and opened cans of food. The fronts of the kitchen cabinets are stained brown. At one point, Stacey removes a still-packaged frozen bag of chips from the oven. Jean's illness has left its mark on her house, her domestic space, and the amount of mess

indicates that this mental health crisis has been going on for some time. Audiences understand that the clutter on the lawn and in the kitchen cannot be acquired overnight. Beyond this reveal of the physical effects of Jean's illness, the turning on of the light also triggers a change in Jean's behaviour. At the start of the scene, she is once again hostile towards her daughter, blaming her for her illness and calling her "selfish, spoilt, spiteful Stacey." Once the light comes on, however, her tone of voice changes, going from sounding cold to sounding cheerful and the character can be seen widely smiling in the background of shots. This can be considered representative of the different moods associated with bipolar disorder, with darkness being associated with depressive episodes and the forceful cheer being associated with mania. It is these extreme changes in moods and neglected house that the audience then watches Stacey deal with. While in the scene from 2004, the audience was told about Stacey's caretaking duties, now *EastEnders* is visually representing the additional responsibilities Stacey has taken on during her childhood. During this storyline she is shown to cook and clean for Jean, tidying the kitchen countertops (Episode 3058). A later episode then shows Stacey being socially ostracised due to her mother's illness as Stacey is bullied by a former friend for having to bathe and change Jean (Episode 3059). Throughout this storyline, then, *EastEnders* is plausibly representing the effects of bipolar disorder has on both Jean and her family.

In a 2022 report about bipolar disorder, the mental health charity Mind lists the common behaviours associated with mania, including "speaking rudely or aggressively", "speaking a lot and quickly", and misusing alcohol (6). All these behaviours can be identified in the portrayal of Jean, from the way she speaks to Stacey to the empty bottles that litter her kitchen. Additionally, irresponsible spending can be a sign of mania which *EastEnders* also references (Mind, 6). Before she turns on the light, Stacey asks whether Jean sold her television to buy "China dolls, maps of Norfolk, [and] cupboards full of broom handles

again” and mentions that Jean has not been paying her rent (Episode 3057). Other symptoms of bipolar include a loss of social inhibitions and feelings of “increased sexual energy” (Mind, 6). *EastEnders* refers to this at the start of the storyline, with Jean’s neighbour mentioning a man coming and going from Jean’s house at all hours. Additionally, when Stacey is being harassed, the bully mocks Jean’s promiscuity, calling her “the estate bike” (Episode 3059). The behaviours associated with depressive episodes include not eating properly and being less active, which can be understood as contributing to the state of Jean’s house (Mind, 7). Therefore, *EastEnders* is comprehensively portraying a range of symptoms caused by untreated bipolar disorder. To return to Hall’s qualifiers of realism, *EastEnders* represents behaviours that can be plausibly associated with the mental health condition, meaning there is a sense of realism to this storyline. However, it is also worth noting that the narrative focus of these scenes is still Stacey’s character. She is the one being judged for her mother’s promiscuity. She has to cope with her mother’s harsh words and clean up the unkept kitchen. Additionally, Jean never appears in a scene unless Stacey is present as well. The storyline later comes to its tentative ending as Stacey realises she cannot deal with her mother alone after Jean attempts to take her own life, and Stacey returns to Albert Square after having Jean sectioned (Episode 3060). It is a storyline that appeals to the same ethos as social realism — it is a serious narrative devoid of spectacle that focuses on characters faced with hardships they cannot control — with a particular focus on accurately representing the realities of a child living with a parent suffering from an untreated mental health condition.

3.3 An Overview of Stacey Slater’s Bipolar Storyline

EastEnders returned to the issue of bipolar disorder in 2009, in a nearly year-long storyline that saw Stacey diagnosed with the condition. To summarise, the storyline — which

was made in consultation with organisations such as Mind and MDF The Bipolar Organisation — begins with Stacey behaving erratically. A single episode sees her attempting to pay for a range of beauty treatments with multiple credit cards, starting a fight when the beauticians refused to make an appointment, and later attempting to restart a former affair (Episode 3788). These behaviours — overspending, rudeness, and promiscuity — are those that long-term viewers would have seen during the original 2005 storyline when Jean was unwell. Jean, who at this point had returned to the show as a reoccurring character and was managing her bipolar disorder, recognises these signs and confronts Stacey, admitting that she suspects Stacey has bipolar disorder (Episode 3789). Jean forces Stacey to look in a mirror and acknowledge that she is ill. This is where the storyline comes into focus. Stacey's behaviour before this point implicitly references bipolar disorder, and viewers who either remember the 2005 storyline or are aware of the symptoms associated with the mental illness are likely to understand what is happening. However, this conversation between mother and daughter makes it explicitly clear to all viewers just what this storyline is about. Two months after that confrontation scene, Stacey receives a professional bipolar disorder diagnosis, as Jean finally convinces Stacey to see a doctor by threatening to dispose of her own medication. Once again a critical narrative event centralises that all-important mother/daughter relationship. The narrative continues as Stacey struggles to accept her diagnosis and adjust to her medication. In an episode originally aired that October, Stacey stops taking her medication entirely, causing her mental health to further deteriorate to the point where she hallucinates the child she would have if she did not have an abortion years earlier (Episode 3870). Although not everyone with bipolar disorder experiences psychosis, symptoms such as hallucinations, delusions, and paranoia can occur (Mind, 9). Stacey's psychosis then worsens after being raped by Archie Mitchell (played by Larry Lamb), with *EastEnders* following the format popularised by *Brookside*'s Jordache storyline, where

multiple issues become intertwined in a single storyline. During a leaving party for her ex-husband, Stacey then suffers a breakdown after being cornered by Archie and ends up threatening those in attendance with a broken glass, convinced they are conspiring with one other (Episode 3873). This leads to Jean having Stacey sectioned, with this being the storyline's tentative ending, mirroring the ending of the original 2005 storyline. Thus, there is a sense of narrative recurrence at play, as this storyline connects with the bipolar disorder storyline that came before it. In her analysis of the repetition in Showtime's *Queer As Folk* (2000-2005), scholar Margaret Johnson advocates for considering the narrative recurrence of issues as "performing one part of a whole system, [meaning] viewers can look past the individual repetition of subject and recognise the ways such repetition alters and challenges our preconceived notions about the subject" (429). The first-time bipolar disorder was represented within the Slater family, the predominant focus was on the impacts a parent struggling with their mental health has on a child. That was the facet of the social issue being explored; that was the story. The story here is of a young woman being diagnosed with bipolar disorder and her struggle to accept this based on her childhood experiences. Thus, another facet of that same social issue is being explored. These storylines form part of a continuous network of content that comprehensively represents the impact bipolar disorder has on families.

However, *EastEnders* not only made the decision to feature another storyline about bipolar disorder — this time representing the onset of the mental illness — but specifically choose the character of Stacey Slater to be at the centre of that repeated storyline. In some regards, this choice directly relates to the programme's commitment to plausibility. Bipolar UK claims that 50% of people will begin to exhibit signs of bipolar by the time they are twenty-one ("Understanding Bipolar", section 2). In 2009, Stacey's character was meant to be in her early twenties, with the actress Lacey Turner being twenty-one. Additionally, the character's

family history, and therefore the programme's history, make Stacey a particularly suitable character for such a storyline. Although there is not a specific gene, research suggests that in some cases bipolar disorder may be inherited, as those with the mental health condition are more likely to have someone in their family who also has the disorder (Mind, 18).

Researchers also theorise that the high rates of inherited bipolar disorder in some families may be influenced by their living conditions, with Bipolar UK specifically mentioning the hardships associated with living with someone with untreated bipolar disorder ("Understanding Bipolar", section 9). This is something *EastEnders* explicitly references, and therefore informs any unaware viewers about. In the initial confrontation scene between Jean and Stacey, Jean tells her that bipolar can be passed on through generations and that all it takes is a trigger, "something bad to set it off, someone leaving, someone dying", in reference to the breakdown of Stacey's marriage, her brother leaving and her best friend dying. Thus, there is a harmony between this being a social issue that involves the links between generations and a genre preoccupied with notions of family. However, *EastEnders* is not only using the fact that audiences know that Jean has bipolar disorder but also are capitalising on the fact that many viewers will have seen the storyline of Stacey coping with her mother's illness.

It is the history of Stacey's character that gives her bipolar storyline a certain specificity. Henderson claims that soap operas use the characterisation "built over previous storylines" to create a central theme for any social issue storyline (82). By choosing Stacey as the central character of this storyline, *EastEnders* was able to develop the storyline about bipolar disorder around the theme of fear. Beyond the fear associated with being in the middle of a mental health crisis, *EastEnders* frequently mentions that Stacey fears turning into her mother, which links back to the original 2005 storyline. During the initial confrontation between Jean and Stacey, Stacey ends up repeatedly yelling, "I look after you", unable to

confront the reality that she is ill and that their roles have been reversed. During her consultation with a doctor, Stacey has a monologue which includes the passage,

“I feel like [Jean]. I do. I feel like her, and I don’t want to feel like that. I don’t ... I don’t want to be like that. I don’t want to live my life like that. I’ve seen it, close up, year after year, her taking her pills. I don’t want to be her” (Episode 3827).

In her follow-up appointment, when the doctor tries to reassure Stacey that a bipolar disorder diagnosis is nothing to be afraid of, she replies, “Don’t give me that. I’ve lived with it for years. It’s like a never-ending nightmare” in reference to the years she spent caring for her mother (Episode 3829). Long-term viewers will know the circumstances of Stacey’s childhood; they likely would have witnessed the 2005 storyline where she had to care for Jean, so there is an emotional weight behind these passages. It is understandable that Stacey would be afraid of having the same diagnosis as her mother because of the previous storyline, which saw Stacey both witness the reality of living with bipolar disorder and experience the struggles associated with a family member having untreated bipolar disorder. From Jean first recognising herself in Stacey’s erratic behaviours to Stacey’s ongoing fear that she will end up like her mother, this storyline consistently refers to the Slater family’s past while crafting a plausible and effective social issue storyline.

3.4 An Overview of Jean Slater’s 2022 Bipolar Storyline

EastEnders again returned to the issue of bipolar disorder in 2022, forming another component of that system of storytelling. Rather than being someone for others to react to or a supporting character, during this storyline, Jean functions as the main character as her medication stops working, with *EastEnders* highlighting the importance of regular

medication checks. Early in 2022, Jean begins behaving oddly, as once again, *EastEnders* works to represent the symptoms associated with mania and bipolar disorder plausibly. Much of Jean's behaviour would be recognisable to viewers familiar with the older storylines. Once again, Jean is shown to act inappropriately with men and speak harshly towards Stacey, calling her a "self-centred bitch" (Episode 6455). Like with Stacey's bipolar storyline, as the narrative progresses, the worse her symptoms get. In March 2022, Jean's manic behaviour caused her to spend all day on a bouncy castle (Episode 6454). In April, Jean spends the day on a beach in Southend while wearing a wedding dress, experiences hallucinations, and later tries to drown herself in the sea, only to be saved by Stacey (Episode 6477). This progression also coincides with a growing sense of melodrama. The events of the Southend episode are not entirely implausible. Hallucinations and suicidal inclinations are symptoms associated with the disorder. However, the image of Jean in an ostentatious wedding dress wading out into the ocean while her daughter begs her to stop is a melodramatic image. Johnson states that "melodrama aims to expose excess" (420). This scene — which features a body being in peril, the desperation of a pleading daughter, extravagant costuming, and a grandiose setting far away from domestic spaces that make up the British soap opera chronotope — is a scene of excess, at once plausible and melodramatic. Johnson subsequently claims, "The use of dramatic excess can guide viewers to clear and consistent interpretations of actions, thereby allowing viewers to focus on the text's main points" (420). Excess makes ideas obvious. The main points of this scene surround the severity of Jean's illness but also the bond between mother and daughter, a bond which has been strengthened because of the shared experiences they have living with bipolar disorder. This is evident when it comes to the nature of Stacey's pleas. The character directly references the past, describing the scene of Jean forcing her to look in a mirror in an attempt to get her to recognise she was ill. Repeatedly, Stacey asks Jean, "Do you remember?" a question that is posed to both Jean and the audience alike, as

EastEnders works to link its various bipolar storylines together by making an overt intratextual reference to a previous scene.

3.5 Establishing a Sense of Intratextuality

A Dictionary for Media and Communication defines intratextuality as the “internal relations within a text” (Chandler and Munday). Classical studies scholar Alison Sharrock offers a more robust definition, claiming intratextuality is “the phenomenon and study of the relationship between elements within texts”, with this including structures such as “story arcs and other repetitions of language, imagery, or idea” (15). It involves “how disparate parts of texts fit together, and how the presence of an element in one part of the text makes itself felt in the realisation of a far-distance place” (Sharrock, 23). Although Sharrock is concerned with intratextuality and ancient literature, and thus the written word, the same phenomenon occurs here, as this storyline connects to those that came before. All three storylines can be considered disparate parts of *EastEnders*. They occur years apart, and the individual story beats are different. Stacey’s storyline involves her getting an official diagnosis, whereas Jean already knew she had the disorder when the character was introduced. Likewise, Stacey never tried to drown herself at a beach in Southend during her bipolar storyline. Yet the presence of Stacey Slater’s bipolar storyline is felt through it being referenced in this dialogue that occurs thirteen years after the scene it describes. Inter-generational social issue storylines are based on intratextuality. The very fact that the same general social issues are being addressed and the same core characters are involved creates textual relations between the storylines. However, this blatant recollection functions as a more direct reference. Specifically, then, these are intratextual references being made across family lines, as *EastEnders* consistently frames the social issue storyline around the inter-generational relationships. Ultimately,

however, Jean is dismissive of Stacey's pleas of remembrance and wades further out to sea until she goes under, and Stacey saves her. However, the ocean scene is not the storyline's tentative ending, as the show continues to show Jean's experiences when she is hospitalised and her fear of coming back home once she is well again, with this part of the narrative also capitalising on *EastEnders*' textual history.

3.6 A Scene of Familial Bonding

The tentative ending of Jean's 2022 bipolar storyline occurs in an episode where Stacey finds Jean living in a caravan park after she has been released from the hospital and must convince her to return to Albert Square (Episode 6537). The resulting conversation between the two presents a nuanced and empathetic insight into what it is like living with bipolar disorder that gains emotional meaning because of how it relates to the past. In 2005, Stacey struggled to cope with Jean's changes in mood. In 2022, Stacey approaches the situation with understanding, now having her own experiences with living with a mental illness. The dialogue in the scene makes frequent references to the character's shared past. Stacey begins by saying, "I know what it's like to be embarrassed by what you've done." Jean later appeals to Stacey, as she delivers a monologue about her experiences saying, "When you're in it, it seems so real, doesn't it?" and "In the early stages, it's like a guilty secret, isn't it?" The dialogue reminds audiences that this experience is common ground for these two characters. It is not an overt intratextual reference; no specific textual element is being recalled. Rather the character's emotional history forms the framework for the scene, as *EastEnders* balances being informative about a social issue with portraying a tender moment between mother and daughter. The visuals depict familial closeness, with the pair frequently being framed via a two-shot interspersed with a close-up of Stacey gripping her mother's

hand in solidarity. At the end of the scene, Jean thanks Stacey for all she has done, with Jean's final line being, "There is only one thing I know, thank God for you, Stacey, thank God for you." This dialogue can be considered as encapsulating not only the relationship between Jean and Stacey during this storyline but their entire relationship dynamic going back to the first scene they shared. This then demonstrates the intertwining British soap operas' dual focus on plausibly representing social issues and telling emotionally complex personal stories. Jean's monologue is about the specific experience of mania. Details she mentions, such as the fact there was some part of her aware that she was ill, represent what it may be like to live with bipolar disorder. There is an educational element at play, providing viewers insight into the lives of others or providing those who have experiences with mania plausible representation. Yet is also presented as a poignant moment between mother and daughter. They can sit together and laugh and hold hands. That dialogue is made meaningful because of how it relates to the past and emotional weight is added because of the complex history these two characters share as they deal with the way mental illness can test families, with that moment of thanks works to summarise eighteen years of history.

3.7 The Re-Enactment of Scenes

However, as much as Jean and Stacey's relationship is at the forefront of these three social issue storylines, they are not the only Slaters involved in the 2022 storyline.

EastEnders also builds on its own history through how the next generation of Slaters is used during the storyline. As mentioned, when Stacey Slater entered the programme, she was a teenager. Between 2005 and 2022, long-term viewers will have watched as she grew up, built a better relationship with her mother, struggled with her own mental health, and had her own children. These children are then involved in the 2022 bipolar storyline, mainly Stacey's

eldest daughter, Lily Slater. At one point, Lily becomes Jean's primary caregiver, which recalls Stacey's introduction in the programme. This narrative beat occurs after the Southend episode but before the conversation in the caravan park and the storyline's tentative ending. After witnessing Jean's reaction to staying at the mental health facility, Stacey tries to care for Jean herself at home, which itself evokes the original 2005 narrative, which saw Stacey's reluctance to have Jean go to the hospital. However, this proves misguided as Jean fears that Stacey will poison her and thus will not accept her help. As a result, Lily ends up being the one to prepare Jean's meals and make sure she takes her medication. It is a clear parallel to *EastEnders*' earlier storyline, with Lily now fulfilling the role that Stacey's character previously had. This parallel is most clearly demonstrated in the scene of Lily washing Jean's hair, which completes a trifecta of re-enacted scenes, with this gesture of bathing appearing each time *EastEnders* has done a social issue storyline involving bipolar disorder and the Slater family.

During the original 2005 storyline, there is a scene of Stacey washing her mother's hair (Episode 3058). Jean is sitting in the bath with her knees brought up to her chest. The bath is to the left side of the frame, and Stacey is kneeling to the right of the tub. While Stacey takes care of her mother, Jean apologises for her harsh words, telling Stacey that she "didn't mean it." Stacey accepts the apology and reassures Jean that "It's all going to be alright." Within the context of this storyline, this scene functions as a cathartic moment. After multiple scenes of Jean acting cruelly towards Stacey, calling her names, and talking about how she ruined her life, now Jean is calm. Stacey, who was previously shown to be frustrated, can now respond with patience. It illustrates the connection between the characters while reinforcing the fact that Stacey has been forced into a caretaking role despite her young age. It is also a scene that epitomises the way British soap operas approach social issue storylines, showcasing British soap operas' ability to go "behind-closed-doors" to represent the private

moments of struggle associated with a social issue (Henderson, 108). Bathing someone is an intimate, domestic ritual, and the scene takes place in a bathroom, an incredibly private space. There is additional vulnerability created due to the fact that Jean is naked and positioned in a childlike pose, signifying the character's emotional openness as Jean reckons with the harm her actions have caused. During this storyline, *EastEnders* has scenes such as Stacey having to clean up her mother's kitchen while Jean calls her selfish in the background. But the programme simultaneously includes scenes such as this, moments when Jean is ashamed of those actions, meaning *EastEnders* can show the range of experiences associated with bipolar and how the condition affects both those with the disorder and those around them as they go about their domestic lives. It then becomes a scene that gets purposefully paralleled in the later storylines, reinforcing the generational component of these three social issue storylines.

During the 2009 storyline, there is a direct re-enactment of this hair-washing scene, with the roles of Stacey and Jean being reversed. The characters act out the past as Jean washes Stacey's hair in another intimate, familial moment. However, it is not only the general actions of the scene that function as an intratextual reference. The scene is constructed in a way that deliberately resembles the hair-washing scene from 2005. The blocking and framing are nearly identical. Stacey sits in the bath, hugging her knees to her chest. The bath is to the left of the frame, and Jean is kneeling to the right of the tub. Stacey is visually in the space that her mother once was, as she narratively fulfils the role Jean once did. The scene, therefore, functions as a syntagmatic sign. Referring to the work of seminal semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure, contemporary semiotician Daniel Chandler claims that "Temporally, syntagmatic relations refer intratextually to other signifiers co-present within the text" (84). This system helps "provide a structural context in which signs make sense" (Chandler, 84). It is about the way that signs gain meaning from their place within a text. This scene, with its depiction of a domestic ritual, gains its emotional meaning because it comes after the original hair-washing

scene. The context is that despite her fears, Stacey is like her mother and Jean is returning the care and tenderness Stacey showed her all those years ago. This is strengthened by the repetitions in the dialogue. Stacey is apologetic for the way she has acted towards Jean, telling her mother that she “didn’t mean it.” Later, Jean tells Stacey, “It’s going to be alright.” Therefore, multiple elements, both visual and aural, are being realised in a disparate part of the programme (Sharrock, 23). It is the most apparent version of the intratextuality of British soap operas. Whereas other references involve older scenes being recalled through dialogue, this is a visual recreation of a past scene. Admittedly, it is not an exact replication. There is additional dialogue, and the scene is over a minute longer than the original, meaning there are additional shots. The scene is also introduced with a bird’s eye view shot of the entire bathroom, which has no counterpart in the earlier scene. Yet the number of similarities means it fundamentally functions as a scenic re-enactment. It gains emotional meaning from how it is positioned in the text and, in turn, works to emphasise the links between the two storylines. Not only is Stacey Slater involved in a social issue storyline surrounding bipolar disorder, but *EastEnders* has crafted that storyline in a way that makes full use of its history.

However, it should be noted that not every audience member would have the prior knowledge needed to fully make sense of this additional meaning. Sharrock notes that intratextuality surrounds the “interpretability of texts” (15). For the emotional meanings to be interpretable, viewers must have some memory of the past being referenced. This relates to media scholar John Fiske’s claim that “people bring their different histories and subjectivities to the viewing process” (57). Not all viewers will have a history of watching *EastEnders* that allows them to recognise this scene as being a re-enactment, meaning they will not be able to appreciate the intratextual links. To unaware viewers, these scenes still function as understandable narrative beats. Regardless of the specific parallels, as individual plot points, these scenes represent familial bonds and domestic caretaking rituals. However, to the unaware Stacey Slater being

bathed is an image that appears ahistorical. But to viewers who have memories of the older scene, it is an image that becomes imbued with a sense of history, as Stacey is shown to be taking her mother's place.

The hair-washing scene is re-enacted for the third time during the 2022 storyline, this time with an eleven-year-old Lily being the one to wash Jean's hair (Episode 6489).⁷ Like with the 2009 scene, there is an establishing bird's eye view shot of the pair of them in the bathroom. Again, the Jean sits in the bath, hugging her knees to her chest. The bath is to the left of the frame and Lily is kneeling to the right of the tub. This signifies Lily stepping into the caretaking role, as she physically fills the space that her mother did seventeen years beforehand. However, tonally, this scene is a departure from the previous two. In 2005 and 2009 storylines, the hair-washing scenes function as points of connection, with Jean and Stacey apologising for their behaviours in their respective scenes. That mutual dialogue of "I didn't mean it" works to stress the way bipolar is affecting their lives, causing them to say things that they would not normally say. In this scene, however, Jean is not at a point where she can understand her cruelty. Instead of being remorseful, Jean is uncaring, monologuing about being able to tell that Lily has inherited bipolar as well. Instead of being peaceful, then, Lily is scared. However, despite the tone of the scenes differing, the visual signifiers are so specifically similar that it still functions as a syntagmatic sign that gains additional meaning through its placement within the text. Not only is Lily taking care of her grandmother, but that in doing so she repeats a generational cycle of lost childhood. This is a message being coded by the image. Audiences subsequently seem to respond to this intratextuality. This scene was uploaded to YouTube, and many of the comments on the video recall the previous

⁷ There is a scene in 2011, in another storyline which sees Jean struggle with her mental health, where Kat Slater (played by Jessie Wallace) washes her hair (*EastEnders – Kat Looks After Jean During A Bipolar Episode, December 2011*). However, this scene is incredibly brief, features little dialogue, and has completely different blocking and framing. Therefore, it cannot be considered a true re-enactment.

scenes, with one commenter saying it is “like a circle” (@randomchannel74757). The repetition of these scenes illustrates how these narratives not only function as individual social issue storylines but also form a network of generation-based stories. It is not only that *EastEnders* is returning to the issue of bipolar disorder, but that the way they approach these repeated social issue storylines is framed around the idea of family, as three generations of Slater women swap in and out of various narrative roles.

These scenic re-enactments in particular can then be considered television moments for how they work as replications of history. Building off the work of Fiske, fandom scholar Matt Hills advocates for the study of television moments, as it relates to the long-running British science fiction programme *Dr Who* (BBC, 1963-1989; 2005-present). The basis for Hills’ article involves “breaking [science fiction] television texts down into semiotic units of analysis” (26). Although the focus is on *Dr Who*, the ideas Hills explores are applicable to British soap operas as well. Like *Dr Who*, British soap operas have a pervasive sense of longevity and produce extensive textual histories. This means that much like *Dr Who*, these programmes have the opportunity to play with those histories and bring signifiers of the past to contemporary episodes. This is what is occurring in *EastEnders*’ three hair-washing scenes. The past becomes a part of the present. Hills claims that when a programme is “foregrounding its intertextual citations of past triumphs, monsters and fan memories”, it produces recognisable moments (29). Although inter-generational social issue storylines utilise intratextuality rather than intertextuality, that same principle of citation can be seen with the re-enacted hair-washing scenes. The memories of fans are being utilised to heighten the meaning of the scenes in question. This principle can then be linked to television scholar Amy Holdsworth’s writing on televisual memory. Holdsworth claims that “memories of television are written into serial narratives through practices of self-citation and self-referentiality” (37). By writing these moments of self-citation, programmes are encouraging

recollection. This, in turn, works to elevate those moments of self-citation into something which is in itself memorable. While the moments that Hills analyses are often linked to moments of spectacle — the moments where villains are revealed or when past characters are brought back decades later — the scenes that *EastEnders* chose to cite are quite mundane, matching with the genre's focus on telling personal narratives. They are small, domestic instances that focus on familial bonds amid of storylines which are intended to have a dedication to realism. Family is at the centre of these “notable ‘moments’” of *EastEnders* (Hills, 26). Therefore, these scenes go beyond simply fulfilling the narrative purpose of showing the various impacts of bipolar disorder. In a way, they are unnecessary for the plausible representation of the actual social issue in question; the effects of bipolar disorder could be communicated without resorting to historical replications. However, instead, these scenes utilise with the programme's history to create something that is emotionally meaningful and momentous as a way of exploring the relationships between three generations of Slater women. Therefore, they demonstrate the duality of the genre. British soap operas are dedicated to realistically exploring social issues, but British soap operas are also concerned about their own histories and capitalising on their sense of continuity, with these interests converging when social issue storylines are repeated through generations.

4. Case Study: Kathy Beale and Ben Mitchell's Rape Storylines in *EastEnders*

This case study involves how Ben Mitchell's male rape storyline functions as a narrativisation of a working-through process, and how this narrative is structured around intratextual references to past rape storylines involving the character's mother. Additionally, consideration is given to how this sense of generational continuity allows for scenes to function simultaneously as plausible representations of trauma and images of familial intimacy.

Combining a dedication to telling realistic stories, a prioritisation of familial relationships and an interest in issues of continuity, inter-generational storylines are a complex site that testifies to the varied focuses of the British soap opera genre. As established, they are attempts to replicate the socially conscious, serious ethos of social realism within a genre preoccupied with the bonds between characters. This complexity is exemplified in *EastEnders* rape storylines involving Kathy Beale (played by Gillian Taylforth) and Ben Mitchell (played by Max Bowden).⁸

4.1 An Overview of Kathy Beale's Rape Storylines

In 1985 — the year the programme was first broadcast — Kathy was extorted after her medical records were stolen, with these records revealing that she had been raped when she was fourteen, fell pregnant and gave the baby up for adoption. This storyline involves

⁸ Although both storylines are fundamentally rape storylines and thus involve the same general social issue, Ben Mitchell's plot was promoted as specifically as a male rape storyline in the press, and *EastEnders* consulted with charities that specifically help male survivors. Therefore, it will be referred to as a male rape storyline going forward to acknowledge the specific social issue, which has its own cultural associations and stigmas.

Kathy having to tell those close to her, mainly her husband Pete Beale (played by Peter Dean), about her past. However, this is not the only rape storyline involving the character. In 1988, Kathy had another rape storyline. To summarise, during this narrative, Kathy begins working as a hostess in a bar named The Dagmar. Late one night, Kathy agrees to stay and have a drink with the owner James Willmott-Brown (played by William Boyde) (Episode 357).⁹ They go upstairs together to talk. However, as the night progresses, Willmott-Brown tries to seduce Kathy. She rebuffs his attempts and tries to leave. However, he does not let her and ultimately rapes Kathy. Given broadcasting regulations and the fact *EastEnders* airs in a pre-watershed timeslot, little sexual violence was shown on-screen. While standing facing one another, Willmott-Brown grabs Kathy by the waist and the back of the neck, pulling her close to him. He says that he knows “what she came up here for” and that she is only resisting because she feels guilty about cheating — this dialogue is later paralleled in Ben’s storyline — as she struggles in his grip. The scene then cuts to a shot of a television set playing a scene of a man roughly grabbing a woman. In her research about audience responses to childhood sexual abuse storylines in soap operas, Henderson found that many viewers saw the genre’s ability to capitalise on the “power of suggestion” as a significant strength (142). That same principle applies here. The dialogue and staging establish that Willmott-Brown is expecting sex and is uninterested in whether Kathy consents. Following this scene of Willmott-Brown’s forcefulness with further images of violence, then suggests that there is meant to be sexual violence occurring off-screen. When the episode returns to Kathy, she is crying on the floor of the flat, with this being the episode’s cliffhanger. For any viewers unable to insinuate what has occurred, the next episode features Kathy telling her sister-in-law that she has been raped again (Episode 358). The resulting storyline follows Kathy’s experiences reporting Willmott-

⁹ In *EastEnders*, this character is only ever referred to by his last name. Thus, this is the approach taken when writing about the character going forward.

Brown to the police, Willmott-Brown being trialled and sent to prison and an exploration of how the assault eventually led to the breakdown of Kathy's marriage as her husband still thought Kathy was partly to blame for being attacked.

In terms of reception, some criticised the social issue storyline for being inappropriate viewing, a complaint that was later levied against Ben's male rape storyline as well. Mary Whitehouse, who was the president of the National Viewers and Listeners Association, argued the storyline was "totally unsuitable for family viewing" ("Whitehouse in Call to Ban TV Rape Incident" par 2). This is not an indictment on soap operas' ability to address social issue like those of Longhurst, but rather an example of evangelical conservatism. Whitehouse was a staunch Christian, had a long-standing distaste for the BBC and routinely called for texts to be banned, including condemning social realist texts, such as Ken Loach's *Up the Junction* (BBC, 1965), for their depiction of social issues such as abortion (Mangan, par 5). However, while some denounced the storyline, it also received a great deal of praise.

Metropolitan Police Commander Thelma Wagstaff publicly claimed that the storyline, with its depiction of Kathy being interviewed by police officers, "was very realistic" (quoted in "Police Back Rape Scene", par 5).¹⁰ In 2008, *The Guardian* published an article deliberating the appropriateness of television covering (female) rape as a subject matter, in which Kathy Beale's storyline was positioned as one of two examples where the social issue was represented "remotely realistically", with the other example being a storyline from *Brookside* (McLean, par 5). Further emphasising its significance, *EastEnders* periodically returned to Kathy Beale's rape storyline. In 1992, *EastEnders* had what is colloquially known as a 'three-hander episode' following Willmott-Brown's release from prison (Episode 733). This is an

¹⁰ Admittedly the day before this comment was published, the Metropolitan Police criticised the show, as the portrayal of Kathy's initial consultation showed the police to be insensitive ("Police Back Rape Scene, par 3). However, this criticism was potentially more a matter of publicity, given they were condemning the unfavourable representation of the police, rather than a question of whether the behaviour depicted was realistic.

episode where the only characters featured are Kathy, Pete, and Willmott-Brown, with these types of insular episodes being a privilege *EastEnders* gives to particularly important storylines. In 1994 there is a story surrounding how Kathy's trauma impacts her new relationship with Phil Mitchell, with whom she would later have a son, Ben Mitchell. In 2017, a long-running storyline saw Willmott-Brown return to the show as he tried to buy properties in the community. During the course of this storyline Kathy confronts Willmott-Brown and tells Ben about her past. Thus, *EastEnders* has a prolonged interest in examining the far-reaching impacts of its seminal storyline, fully employing the genre's potential for longevity. In 2022, then, *EastEnders* once again returned to this storyline, as Kathy proved to be the main supporting character in Ben Mitchell's male rape storyline, with Kathy's history informing how Ben's storyline progresses thirty-four years later.

4.2 An Overview of Ben Mitchell's Male Rape Storyline

In 2022, *EastEnders* portrayed its first male rape storyline, centred on the character of Ben Mitchell.¹¹ The storyline was created in consultation with Survivors Manchester, an organisation dedicated to helping male and non-binary survivors of sexual violence, along with Survivors UK and the Male Survivors Partnership. The basic narrative beats include Ben befriending the new bar manager of The Albert, Lewis Butler (played by Aidan O'Callaghan) while facing difficulties in his marriage. After a fight with his husband, Ben seeks out Lewis at the bar, gets drunk, and suggests they go upstairs with the intention of having sex (Episode 6490). However, after receiving a message from his husband, Ben realises that he does not want to have sex and repeatedly withdraws his consent. Lewis ignores Ben and rapes him.

¹¹ When Bryan Kirkwood was the executive producer of *EastEnders* (2010-2013), he pitched a male rape storyline. However, his pitch was rejected by the BBC for being "too controversial for mainstream pre-watershed TV" (Lindsay, *EastEnders to Air Devastating Male Rape Story*, par 1).

Compared to its 1988 predecessor, this scene is far more graphic, with more physical actions being shown. During the scene, which was choreographed by intimacy coordinator Joshua Okpala, Lewis pushes Ben onto a sofa as he tries to leave the room, climbs on top of him and repeatedly kisses Ben despite Ben telling him to stop. Lewis then unbuttons Ben's shirt and physically forces Ben to turn over to lie on his stomach. The scene then ends with a close-up of Ben's face, with Lewis' hand pinning him down by the back of the neck. More violence is shown here than in 1988, indicating Britain's changing broadcasting sensibilities. While the scene drew some criticism for being inappropriate for family viewing — the BBC received 353 official complaints in the aftermath — it was still ultimately deemed acceptable for early evening viewing and allowed to be broadcast (Lindsay, *Ben Mitchell's Rape Storyline*, par 5).

At a textual level, this more overt depiction of sexual violence also works to make unequivocally clear that what is happening is rape. Given that the storyline specifically involves the withdrawal of consent, it must be explicit, not suggested, that despite Ben's earlier proposal what happens by the end of the scene is not consensual. So, time is taken to show Ben revoking his consent multiple times, both through physical actions, such as trying to leave the room, and through the dialogue, with the line "I said no" being repeated three times. However, this increased level of sexual violence also means that, visually, there are no parallels to the 1988 scene. It is the same general narrative event, but the filming of that event is completely different. Nevertheless, there are some subtle similarities despite the lack of visual resemblances. In particular, Lewis' dialogue recalls the scene from 1988. At various points, Lewis tells Ben to "ditch the guilt" and that "you don't get to light a fire if you're not going to put it out." Although this is not exactly the same dialogue, these sentiments are the same as Willmott-Brown's. Both Lewis and Willmott-Brown believe they are entitled to sex as Kathy and Ben agreed to spend time with them and dismiss Kathy and Ben's refusals as

being the result of guilt. These parallels are the basis for the inter-generational links that are explored during the storyline.

As an overview, the immediate aftermath of the rape then includes Ben's husband leaving him, Ben being tested for HIV,¹² and Kathy finding out, which proves the first significant development in the storyline as it allows Ben to begin talking about what happened. As the storyline progresses, *EastEnders* then explores subjects such as hypersexuality being a trauma response to sexual violence and issues surrounding chem-sex, as Ben starts getting high and having a sexual relationship with an old friend to prove that being raped has not affected him. Dr Gillian O'Shea Brown, a complex trauma specialist, claims with trauma-induced hypersexuality "the urgency to soothe these trauma-related psychological and physiological symptoms can lead to risky behaviours, a lack of discernment around choice of partners, and a dismissal of your own needs for safety and respect" (quoted by S Ellis, par 12). This type of unsafe behaviour can be identified in the way Ben has to get high before sleeping with people, and a later episode reveals that he is unsure whether his partner used protection (Episode 6524). A paramedic also took to Twitter to praise the storyline's bravery, writing that chem-sex "is a huge issue amongst the LGBT+ community in our cities" (@ItsMattAkinson). As with *EastEnders*' bipolar storylines, there is a commitment to exploring the plausible effects of the social issue in question. This part of the narrative then culminates with Ben overdosing on Gamma Butyrolactone, a drug that increases libido. This overdose proves to be the final turning point in the storyline. After this, Ben openly accepts that being raped has impacted him, reports Lewis to the police, and tells his estranged husband what happened. The storyline's tentative ending then involves the police informing Ben that the charges against Lewis are not being upheld due to a lack of evidence and Ben

¹² During one of these tests, *EastEnders* represents the testing process in real-time in another example of the affinity between the temporality of British soap operas and audiences' experiences of time (Episode 6524).

reuniting with his husband (Episode 6581).¹³ The storyline lasted six months, airing from May 2022 until October 2022, as *EastEnders* worked to realistically represent the process of Ben coming to terms with being raped.

4.3 Television and the Working-Through Process

As previously mentioned, British soap operas' suitability for addressing social issues stems from the genre's ability to represent characters "coming to terms" with social issues (Henderson, 174). This idea parallels the concept of working-through. Media scholar John Ellis conceptualised the medium of television as enabling a "working-through process" (55). Ellis claims that "television can be seen as a vast mechanism for processing raw data of news reality into more narrativised, explained form" (55). This ability "can be likened to the process of 'working-through' described by psychoanalysis, a process whereby material is not so much processed into a finished product as continually worried over until it is exhausted" (J Ellis, 55). The basic premise is that various television programmes all feature the same issues or socio-cultural questions. This persistent exposure allows audiences the opportunity to grapple with their own understanding of those issues or questions. Ellis believes that citizens are aware of monumental amounts of information, "but we have very little idea how to come to terms with what we know" (58). With the popularisation of the internet, social media and the twenty-four-news cycle, there is an overwhelming amount of knowledge available to people, including knowledge about social issues. Television texts such as news media introduce, or reintroduce, issues to audiences. As audiences continue to watch television, they see these issues featured in different programmes, including "chat, soap, documentaries, and

¹³ As of June 2023, Ben's character is currently in the midst of a bulimia storyline, which is building on the 2022 storyline as it concerns the long-term effects of rape.

relatively rarely, the devices of the fiction movie” (J Ellis, 56). As these issues reappear in various forms, from the informal communication of talk shows to the fictionalised social issue storylines of British soap operas, audiences are continually made aware of the issues.¹⁴ This continued awareness allows viewers to work through their own complex thoughts and feelings about those issues. It is about repeated acknowledgement prompting reflection on behalf of audience members. However, while Ellis argues that the overall medium of television can help audience members in their working-through processes, individual television programmes can also represent characters undergoing their own working-through processes. It is about depiction rather than causation.

In their article “‘Working Through’ As Ideological Invention’, media scholars Draper and Lotz analyse how a working-through process can be represented in television series rather than focusing on the way television, as a medium, may impact viewers. Draper and Lotz state that they “invoke working-through to name as textual process [...] that involves the depiction of ideological struggle at a narrative level” (521). Here working-through refers to how characters are shown to process their own complex thoughts and feelings about selected issues in serialised narratives. They base this analysis on how the American drama series *Rescue Me* (FX, 2004-2011) deals with the issue of homophobia. Surrounding a New York City firehouse, the programme depicts characters confronting their homophobic beliefs in narratives such as the firehouse learning that numerous firefighters who died in 9/11 were likely gay; probational fireman Mike Silletti (played by Michael Lombardi) realising he is bisexual; and the long-running narrative involving fire chief Jerry Reilly’s (played by Jack McGee) relationship with his gay son. For Draper and Lotz analysing these storylines reveals a “depiction of non-idealised, non-static characters that struggle to reconcile their outlooks

¹⁴ Ellis acknowledges that British soap operas specifically are “particularly adept at incorporating social issues of current public concern” (60).

with those of their community” (523). Characters like Jack Reilly or series protagonist Tommy Gavin (played by Dennis O’Leary) are shown to be homophobic, making off-colour jokes, using slurs, and generally viewing the presence of LGBT+ firefighters as a threat to the comradery of the firehouse (Draper and Lotz, 527). However, when repeatedly faced with storylines involving homosexuality like those mentioned, they must work through their feelings towards the LGBT+ community. However, crucially, they never become fully accepting of that community. These characters are able to accept that Mike is bisexual and that his sexuality does not alter their social bonds, yet they still stop him from talking about his relationships with men (‘Head’ 2011). Thus, there is no definitive conclusion when all characters see the error of their ways, but rather their views on homosexuality remain a site of struggle and compromise (Draper and Lotz, 530). Like with Ellis’ argument that television enables a working-through process, there is no point where all issues are resolved; casual homophobia in the firehouse is never eradicated. In their article, then, Draper and Lotz acknowledge the work of their academic predecessor. They claim that the conceptualisations of televisual working-through that both they and Ellis offer “are complementary although somewhat differently focused: his theory [...] focuses on how news and the cumulative telling of news items through more issue-based cases may function for audiences, while we attend to how narratives depict characters working-through contested belief structures” (523). Draper and Lotz adapt Ellis’s theory to focus on television’s content rather than television’s uses. However, their conceptualisation can itself be adapted to acknowledge the working-through process that *EastEnders* depicts during Ben Mitchell’s male rape storyline.

4.4 The Male Rape Storyline as a Narrativised Working-Through Process

As alluded to, the main story component of Ben Mitchell's male rape storyline is the character having to process his own thoughts about the fact that he was raped, as he is shown to struggle with feelings of shame. These ideas that Ben cannot talk about what happened and that he is somehow at fault are examples of "contested belief structures" that the character continually works through during this narrative (Draper and Lotz, 523). Social issue storylines such as this one align with Ellis' original conceptualisation of televisual working-through, as it is a narrativisation of a highly stigmatised social issue that forms part of a network of content that allows audience members to sort through their feelings about the subject of male rape. However, the subject matter of this thesis is the construction of social issue storylines in British soap operas rather than the effects these storylines may have on audiences. This means that Draper and Lotz's ideas about television's ability to represent working-through processes are more relevant here. However, while Draper and Lotz position working-through as a process where characters must grapple with their ideological attitudes towards social issues, with this social issue storyline, *EastEnders* works to represent a working-through process based on being able to talk about a traumatic event. However, much like Draper and Lotz's conceptualisation of working-through, this is shown to be an uneasy process, with Ben consistently cycling between being able to accept that he was raped and falling into states of denial and self-blame.

The episode following the rape opens with Ben walking home (Episode 6491). After beginning with a bird's-eye-view shot of the square, the camera pans to the door of the bar as Ben exits The Albert and trips over the doorway. A few seconds later, he stumbles when walking down the stairs. There is then a tracking shot that lasts for just over a minute as Ben wordlessly walks home, with his crumpled shirt serving as a physical reminder of Lewis'

actions. The bird's-eye-view shot establishes a sense of community, with multiple extras seen opening their market stalls. What follows is a depiction of a character who cannot respond to that community. When his aunt tries speaking with him, Ben says nothing, failing even to glance at her in recognition. In his analysis of the genre, Newcomb states that soap operas feature a "world of words" as much of the storytelling of soap operas relies on dialogue (169). In a genre where dialogue is crucial, a character's silence proves meaningful. In this case, that silence punctuates the character's traumatised state. The cinematography, blocking and absence of dialogue all indicate that the character is existing in a state of isolation and dissociation. This can be considered as the prelude to Ben's working-through process, showing that initially, the character cannot fully comprehend the events of the night before. Later in that episode, Ben tentatively confronts Lewis. Although there is a definitive and noticeable pause before Ben says the word 'raped', the term is still explicitly used as Ben is able to identify what happened to him. However, Lewis is dismissive and proceeds to gaslight Ben, repeatedly mentioning that Ben contacted him first and saying, "You like it rough; you've woken up guilty. It happens to the best of us." Left disorientated after this manipulation, this is the last time Ben admits that he was raped for many episodes. Ben's understanding of his own experiences becomes contested, although this is the result of an outside influence. A later scene shows that, when confronted with the issue of where he spent the night, Ben can only say Lewis' name in a shaky whisper. Likewise, in the following episode, Ben cannot talk about his trauma when explicitly asked by a nurse at the sexual health clinic (Episode 6492). It is established that Lewis did not use a condom and has not been recently tested for HIV. This means Ben must get a prescription for Post-Exposure Prophylaxis to prevent any possible transmission, as, again, *EastEnders* represents the realistic details related to the social issue in question. The scene begins with Ben standing in front of a poster which reads 'Consent. If it isn't an enthusiastic yes, it's no.' The same poster

appears on the wall behind the nurse, and another copy can be seen behind Ben once he sits down. This means no matter which character is on screen — with the scene consisting mainly of shot/reverse shots — there is a reminder of the social issue storyline’s central message. However, as a character, Ben is still unable to talk about how that poster relates to his experiences. When met with Ben’s blank stares and mention that “none of this was meant to happen”, the nurse asks Ben whether his sexual encounter was consensual. Ben replies, panicking, “I wasn’t ... wasn’t raped.” Part of the working-through process involves contradiction and struggle as it is a non-linear phenomenon (Draper and Lotz, 522). These scenes portray the complex path to acceptance. Going from incomprehension to tentative admittance and back to confused denial suggests that Ben is finding it difficult to come to terms with being raped. While viewers are aware of the truth, they are witnessing a character who cannot yet fully admit both to himself and others that he is a victim of sexual violence, with this pattern of uncertainty continuing as the storyline develops.

When faced with accusations that he cheated on his husband, in five separate scenes, Ben replies with some version of the line, “It wasn’t like that.” When his brother sees him rereading the messages he sent Lewis arranging to meet up, Ben replies, “It ain’t like that” (Episode 6491). Later in that same episode, when his husband confronts him about spending the night with Lewis, Ben says, “It wasn’t like that.” That specific line is repeated in the following episode in two separate scenes where his husband and brother accuse him of cheating (Episode 6492). Finally, that line is repeated in an episode that originally aired a week later, when Ben’s husband mentions the supposed “pillow talk” Ben and Lewis engaged in (Episode 6496). Thus, there is a repeated narrative motif of Ben being unable to verbalise what happened to him as he struggles to process the events of that night signified through the recurrence of dialogue. He is at the point where he can allude to the fact that something is wrong but cannot tell anyone exactly what happened. In press for the storyline, actor Max

Bowden spoke about how with “any essence of trauma, there's a massive element of confusion – confusion around what happened the night before, confusion about whether it's his fault” and that “It takes [Ben] a while to realise that he is a victim” (par 11/12). Those scenes address this, as bewilderment and inarticulateness are all part of the slow-moving working-through process that *EastEnders* is representing. However, this changes once Ben and Kathy are able to bond over their similar experiences.

4.5 A Close Analysis of the Scene Where Kathy Finds Out

The first turning point in this narrativized working-through process — when Ben moves on from his confused state — comes when his mother realises that Ben has been raped (Episode 6501). Two weeks after the assault, Kathy confronts Ben over his troubling behaviour. The camera focuses on Ben in a close-up as off-screen Kathy berates him for behaving selfishly. Tension builds as Ben’s distress escalates, with the close-up meaning the audience is fully aware of the character’s agitated state. Ben cries, breathes heavily, repeatedly clenches and unclenches his jaw, and his hands shake as Kathy continues to scold him, an indictment that the audience knows is undeserved. That tension reaches its climax as Ben explosively yells at her to “shut up” after she says Lewis cannot be blamed for anything that has happened before quietly saying she does not know what she is talking about. Faced with her son’s turmoil, Kathy asks for confirmation that Ben had sex with Lewis, to which Ben replies, “No, he had sex with me. I didn’t want to.” The episode ends with the cliffhanger of Kathy realising that her son has been raped. It is a scene of “dramatic disclosures” that possesses a sense of melodrama (Henderson, 106). Building off the work of Peter Brooks, Johnson claims that “melodrama brings to the forefront characters’ emotions and ideas that are so often left silent [...] All is spoken, no secrets remain” (420). This sentiment has clear

resonances with this scene. Not only is it a confession where a secret is revealed, but this confession is depicted in such a way that makes something of a spectacle out of emotions, with its intimate framing and images of anguish. The body, with all its visceral reactions, is on display. Bowden's face is visibly covered in tears, snot, and spit. Thus, it can be considered a melodramatic image, but this does not mean that it is an unrealistic narrative beat. Johnson points out that it is difficult to categorise these types of moments of heightened emotions as strictly melodramatic or realistic because people do get emotional at times of great stress or catastrophe (431). It would be presumptuous to declare this scene, where a character is upset when talking about a great trauma, as being implausible. Instead, it may be better to consider it a plausible scene that is presented in a melodramatic fashion, with an immense focus on grand bodily reactions. Thus, much like the scene of Jean Slater wading into an ocean, this is a moment that demonstrates how tempestuous social issues storylines' relationship with realism can be. It is never as simple as stating social issue storylines are consistently, wholly realistic. Instead, storylines may be melodramatic in moments that require dramatic impact while still being dedicated to exploring issues and their effects plausibly, with *EastEnders* retaining this dedication throughout the narrative of Ben working through his trauma.

Ben telling Kathy is a significant development in the storyline as it marks the first point where Ben is able to freely admit what happened. However, admittance is not the same as acceptance, as *EastEnders* continues to highlight the non-linear quality of the working-through process. The following episode picks up directly from this moment of admission, and Ben tries to deny that he was raped and saying, "If anything, it was my fault. I started it" before leaving the room (Episode 6502). He later tells his mother that he "lead Lewis on" and "deserves it." Again, there is a cycle of verbalisation followed by retraction. Draper and Lotz considered working-through processes as "a component of the narrative that allows for

contradiction and instability as an aspect of ideology that is conceivably being “worked through”” (521). From Ben being in a state of profound uncertainty to explosively admitting the truth to Kathy before returning to a state of repression, *EastEnders* is telling a narrative based on the unstable path to accepting a great trauma. However, acceptance does come once Kathy and Ben both speak about their traumas, as the programme emphasises the inter-generational parallels the more this working-through process is explored.

This episode’s final scene, which is ten minutes long, surrounds Ben and Kathy talking about their respective experiences and how they both struggle with blaming themselves. Befitting Newcomb’s conceptualisation of soap operas featuring a “world of words”, much of this process is indicated through dialogue, which is supplemented by other textual elements (Newcomb, 169). Whereas, once the character was noticeably silent, throughout this episode, especially this final scene, Ben speaks about his thoughts and feelings about being raped. The fact that this scene is dominated by Ben talking, no matter how contradictory and hesitant that talk is, is a significant progression of the storyline when compared to Ben’s trauma-induced speechlessness in earlier scenes. Taking place in a range of domestic spaces — moving from the kitchen to the dining table and finally into the lounge area — each change in space indicates a slight change in the scene’s subject matter as various elements of the trauma of sexual violence are discussed. In the kitchen, the narrative focus is on Ben’s feelings of disbelief. In a monologue, Ben says,

“I never, never, not for one minute, even when I was locked up inside, and people were giving me the look in the food queue, I never, never thought that it would happen to me. Cause I’m the hard man who lashes out first. I’m Phil Mitchell’s son. I’m a bloke who takes control in bed, and men like me; we don’t get raped.”

As previously mentioned, Henderson claims that social issue storylines use the characterisation “built over previous storylines” (106). This monologue demonstrates how this occurs. There is an explicit reflection on past storylines, namely Ben going to prison for manslaughter and the character's general characterisation as a ‘hard man.’ Beyond this, there is specific attention given to Ben’s family legacy; he is Phil Mitchell’s son, and this is contributing to his struggle to accept that he was raped. This is direct acknowledgement of precisely what is hindering the character’s ability to come to terms with being raped. However, in the case of this storyline it is not only the central character’s past that characterises the storyline but his mother’s past as well.

The pair then move to the dining room as Ben grieves the loss of his marriage, with the focus of the scene shifting again when Ben asks Kathy about her own experiences. Having gotten upset while talking about his husband, in a mid-shot, Ben is shown to be hunched over the back of a dining room chair, with his head bowed. The scene then cuts to a close-up, as Ben pauses a moment before looking up at Kathy and asking how she coped with being raped, with this dialogue being the first instance where the connection between this storyline and Kathy’s past storylines is commented upon within the text. The combination of the noticeable pause that creates suspense, body movement that directs the viewer to consider Kathy just as Ben is and change in shot punctuates a change in the scene’s subject matter, as this moment leads to Kathy reflecting on her own experiences. This shift in focus subsequently allows the programme to reflect on its history. While Ben moves to sit in the lounge — another change in space that further emphasises an evolution in the scene’s primary topic — Kathy remains standing at the table and reminisces on her own working-through process. The character talks about how it took her years to realise she was not to blame for being raped when she was fourteen, only processing what happened after she was raped again. The camera lingers on Kathy as she monologues about her experiences, with the scene briefly cutting to Ben’s

reaction shots at the points where her dialogue clearly links to Ben's storyline. Ben is shown when Kathy talks about being too ashamed to tell anyone, which parallels Ben's inability to verbalise what happened to him. There is later a cut to Ben when Kathy talks about how, during the 1988 storyline, she was made to feel like it was her fault for "staying after hours with the boss", a detail which has clear resonance with Ben's storyline, given this social issue storyline began with Ben sharing a drink after-hours with Lewis. This pattern of editing works to emphasise the parallels between mother and son, with the placement of each reaction shot visually reinforcing the inter-generational narrative connections. Thus, *EastEnders* is conscientiously strengthening the textual kinship between contemporary social issue storylines and past social issue storylines by making visual affiliations.

4.6 A Scene of Familial Bonding

Much like the scene between Stacey and Jean in the caravan, then, this overall conversation between Ben and Kathy features a comprehensive exploration of a social issue as characters share their experiences in detail. Kathy is describing her working-through process, which in turn helps Ben with his working-through process, with the end of the scene seeing Ben openly acknowledge that he was raped and begin to come to terms with his trauma. That is about honestly representing the social issue in question. However, this conversational exploration is grounded in notions of family reinforcing the genre's primary preoccupation. This scene simultaneously serves as an emotional moment between mother and son that emphasises the importance of familial bonds. The scene ends with Kathy apologising for not always being a present mother but stressing that she is proud of Ben. Throughout the scene, Ben calls Kathy 'Mum,' with one of the final lines being, "He just carried on, Mum. He just carried on." This dialogue is a description of the sexual violence

Ben endured that concurrently emphasises that Ben is specifically talking to his mother. The last image of the episode is a high-angle shot looking down at the Beale's living room. Made to appear small and vulnerable in the vast expanse of the room, Ben and Kathy are together on the sofa as she holds him as he cries, with his head resting on her shoulder and his hand on her knee. It is a portrait of familial intimacy, as a mother comforts her child. In terms of lighting, the scene is intended to look as though it is naturally lit, given the naturalistic filming style of the soap opera genre. However, the light coming through the nearby windows fundamentally functions as a spotlight on the pair, further emphasising their bond. Familial relationships are quite literally being illuminated. It is also worth noting that structurally, this is both the final scene of the episode and, subsequently, the final scene of that week's set of *EastEnders* episodes, a critical site meant to keep viewers interested over the three-day broadcasting break. This is the privileged parting image. The fact that it is a mother and son sharing these experiences is consistently underscored. Thus, as much as this scene is about the trauma of sexual violence, it is also a scene about family. This familial link was also a narrative element frequently highlighted in the press. When asked about the storyline's ties to the past, Bowden talked about the "obvious commonality" between storylines (par 20). Multiple news outlets such as *Digital Spy* and *Radio Times* also released articles for the episodes involving Kathy finding out about the rape that stressed this commonality, with *Radio Times* highlighting how Kathy "is all too aware of what her son is going through" (Denby, par 8). Both textually and paratextually, the inter-generational component of the social issue storyline is centred, as *EastEnders* emphasises the ways family is crucial to the construction of this storyline. To return, then, to Brunsdon's claim that soap operas feature "personal life in its everyday realisation through personal relationships", what is occurring here is the realisation of the effects of a particular social issue through familial relationships (4). The established relationship between these characters functions as the foundation of these

conversations that go on to interrogate the effects of rape and the working-through process that Ben is shown to undertake advances because of his ability to relate to his mother. However, crucially, this is not the end of this working process, as these processes have no clear endings and as mentioned, after this narrative beat the story progresses to involve issues of hypersexuality as Ben tries to prove that being raped has not changed him. However, this conversation between mother and son remains a significant narrative development. It is the first time Ben is shown to freely speak about being raped, as he can once again engage in the programme's "world of words" (Newcomb, 169). And it is a development spurred because of the relationship between mother and son and the way it recalls Kathy's past.

4.7 Intratextuality in Ben Mitchell's Male Rape Storyline

Despite *EastEnders*' male rape storyline featuring no exact re-enactments of scenes, various intratextual references are still being used as history gets repeated along family lines. Beyond general descriptions of past storylines, there is the use of repeated dialogue. While talking about her experiences, during that ten-minute scene Kathy has lines that repeat, nearly verbatim, dialogue that occurred twenty-five years earlier. In an episode that originally aired on 18th February 1997, Kathy and Pat Butcher (played by Pam St Clement) discuss their experiences with men (Episode 1412). During this conversation, Kathy talks about the aftermath of the first time she was raped, including when her school's headmaster berated her for being pregnant. This discussion includes the dialogue "He said to me, 'Katherine Hills, there are nice girls, and there are not nice girls, and you are not nice.'" In 2022, Kathy recalls this experience with the headmaster in an effort to sympathise with Ben's feelings of shame. She tells him that "I'll never forget what he told me: 'There are nice girls and there are not nice girls, and you, Katherine Hills, are not nice.'" With the exception of when she says her

maiden name, this is an exact replication of her earlier dialogue that works to bring the programme's past into its present. Visually, the scenes where this dialogue occurs are different. In the scene from 1997, Kathy and Pat are sitting together around a dining table in a kitchen framed via a two-shot, emphasising the sense of friendship present in the scene. When Kathy repeats the dialogue in 2022, the character is standing behind a table in a living room and framed in a mid-shot. Yet, despite these visual dissimilarities, this repeated dialogue is another way that British soap operas repurpose the past. *EastEnders* is embracing its potential for textual continuity to reward what Geraghty refers to as "the committed audience" (The Continuous Serial, 16). In Geraghty's view, soap operas must appeal to two audience types, those who have limited knowledge of the history of the text and "the committed audience" who have extensive memories of a programme's past, including seemingly minute details, who are rewarded when those details get mentioned (The Continuous Serial, 16). This can be taken to include specific lines of dialogue. Much like the trio of re-enacted scenes in *EastEnders* bipolar storylines, this recited dialogue is not strictly necessary for the representation of the social issue in question, nor do viewers have to know that it is repeated for its content to make sense. Rather, it is an intratextual element of the narrative which honours aware viewers who can tap into its emotional meaning and boast about their own knowledge. For example, on Twitter, user @odessie83 tweeted a video combining the two scenes, which the unofficial *EastEnders* podcast *Walford Weekly* retweeted. There is a specific cultural capital that comes from being able to identify obscure intratextual references. Thus, this recited dialogue functions as a bonus for those dedicated viewers that simultaneously demonstrates how inter-generational social issue storylines feature a textual infatuation with the past.

The other way Ben Mitchell's male rape storyline works to recall Kathy Beale's rape storyline is the setting where the assaults occurred. As mentioned, Kathy was raped in a room

above The Dagmar, the bar where she worked. In the intervening decades, that bar was rebranded as The Albert, meaning Ben was raped in the same building as his mother. *EastEnders* never makes this intratextual connection explicit; at no point in Ben's storyline does any character mention that both characters were raped in the same location. Rather it is an implicit connection that long-term viewers are likely to be aware of that works to link the two storylines further. As soap operas continue for years, the spaces of soap operas acquire their own extensive histories. This is why the *EastEnders* official YouTube account can post compilations such as *The Queen Vic: Best Moments | EastEnders* as summations of the history of its pub setting. These spaces do not necessarily bear any noticeable marks of time, as suggested by Bakhtin's conceptualisation of spatiality. Certain sets will have photos commemorative of the programme's past. The Beale living room has a sideboard decorated with photos of past characters relevant to the family as remnants of *EastEnders*' textual history. This mise-en-scene is an instance of time impacting space. However, in the case of The Dagmar/Albert, the building's history has no physical manifestation as the set has been completely replaced and redecorated. The actual rooms where the respective rape scenes take place are vastly different in appearance. In 1988, the room was a small flat consisting of a living room and kitchenette, decorated with a mainly pink and brown colour scheme and floral patterns. In 2022, the room above the bar was a smaller room for private events, consisting of a bar, a green sofa, and walls painted to look like clouds, lit by bright pink and blue neon lights. These spaces share no physical resemblance to one another, yet there is a conscious recollection of the past being made through the repeated use of a particular setting. Despite the visual discontinuity the building still has a historical significance for viewers who remember Kathy's storyline, with fans recognising this oblique intratextual reference. When the episode where Ben is raped aired, one fan took to Twitter, writing, "Ben gets raped the same place where his mum Kathy got raped by James Willmott Brown. The parallels" along

with a crying face emoji (@mishybabez_). The *EastEnders* official YouTube account reposted the scene of Kathy's attack in 2009, and in 2022, a fan commented that "Fast forward 34 years, and the very same thing has now happened to Kathy's son Ben in the very same room" (@H0Jack00). Bowden has also confirmed that the location was a deliberate parallel on the writers' part, stating that the reference "keeps the show at its roots and about family" (par 22). Much like the re-enacted scenes or repeated dialogue, this locational parallel is not strictly necessary for the representation of the social issue in question. Rather, like those re-enacted scenes, this repetition of setting adds an additional layer of emotional meaning to the storyline for particularly invested fans, those of "the committed audience", to decode (Geraghty, *The Continuous Serial*, 16). What happened to the mother has now happened to the son in the same room.¹⁵ It is another means of establishing a sense of a past that is repeated across family lines, as, once again, *EastEnders* foregrounds its representation of social issues in the history of the family unit.

From inferred references, such as the repetition of location, to more overt connections, such as the way the narrative is constructed so that Kathy recounting her experiences guides Ben's working-through process, Ben Mitchell's male rape storyline is thoroughly linked to Kathy Beale's 1988 rape storyline. These connections then reveal the way a desire to capitalise on the past shapes the progression of inter-generational social issue storylines. The narrative of Ben Mitchell's storyline was constructed to continuously exploit those inter-generational links. By fully engaging with notions of continuity in this manner, then, *EastEnders* is able to foreground family while remaining dedicated to telling socially conscious narratives.

¹⁵ From a narrative standpoint, it does make logical sense that the rape occurred in The Albert. It is a place both Ben and Lewis have access to, as Lewis' character was the bar manager there. Additionally, the character had no household set, and the majority of his scenes leading up to this storyline took place at that bar. Therefore, it is not implausible that the rape occurred in The Albert, and the storyline's sense of realism and narrative coherence has not been diminished for the sake of an intratextual reference.

5. Case Study: Luke and Ollie Morgan's Sexual Trauma Storylines in *Hollyoaks*

This chapter begins by considering the historic nature of Hollyoaks' renown male rape storyline, before moving on to analyse how by paralleling this storyline Hollyoaks was able to renew the storyline's legacy. It is about how this narrative echoing allows Hollyoaks to extend its seminal storyline, bringing the past to the present again through the use of replicated narrative contexts.

Beyond solely referencing previous storylines, inter-generational social issue storylines also can actively continue the narratives of past storylines while reinforcing their long-term legacy. This is the case of the storylines centred on the characters of Luke and Ollie Morgan from the British soap opera *Hollyoaks*. In 2000, the programme proved itself to be a socially conscious soap opera by featuring the genre's first male rape storyline. Eighteen years later, the show took the opportunity to mirror this pivotal storyline by creating a grooming storyline centred on the character's son, Ollie Morgan (played by Aedan Duckworth), another young football prodigy. Analysing how this social issue storyline intersects with the past, including Luke's role in the storyline, reveals how paralleling the past allows *Hollyoaks* another means of continuing one of its most significant narratives.

5.1 An Overview of Luke Morgan's Male Rape Storyline

A comparatively recent addition to the canon of British soap operas, *Hollyoaks* began airing in 1995. The programme was created by Sir Phil Redmond, an icon of British television responsible for the creation of both the teen drama *Grange Hill* (BBC, 1978-2008)

and *Brookside*, which, as mentioned, helped popularise social issues storylines within the British soap opera genre. However, despite this prestigious lineage *Hollyoaks* was regarded as lesser than its counterparts. In 1995, a commentator for *The Guardian* condemned *Hollyoaks* as a show where “The characters are beautiful, hateable and appallingly acted; the dialogue thinks it’s smart and funny but actually is dumb and annoying” (RJ, B70, par 1). Critic Stuart Jeffries also referred to the show as “inept” (quoted by Kalia, par 2). The show was routinely viewed as substandard and frivolous when compared to prestigious soap operas such as *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders*, which were staples of British culture. Although this sentiment is still prevalent twenty-eight years later — it is common for *Hollyoaks* to be criticised on social media as being inferior in quality — *Hollyoaks* eventually also garnered a reputation for featuring a diverse cast of characters and frequently addressing social issues before other British soap operas. The programme’s achievements include featuring first teen self-harm storyline in a British soap opera in 2002, the first time a character dies from an eating disorder in British television in 2007, and the romance between Craig Dean (played by Guy Burnet) and John-Paul McQueen (played by James Sutton) from 2007, which is an early example of an LGBT+ relationship reaching supercouple status. However, *Hollyoaks*’ seminal social issue storyline occurred in 2000, when the programme addressed the issue of male rape, with Henderson referring to this as a confrontation of the “‘final’ soap taboo” (21). A first in British soap opera history, this representation of such a highly stigmatised social issue cemented *Hollyoaks*’ status as a socially mindful soap opera with the potential to rival its peers and would go on to have an extensive legacy.

To understand the storyline’s revered nature, it is important to contextualise the era in which this storyline was first broadcast. When the narrative began, male rape had only been a legally recognised crime in the United Kingdom for six years under the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 (Survivors UK, “Male Sexual Abuse and the Law”, section 2). While

by 2000, female rape storylines were commonplace in British soap operas — Kathy Beale’s storyline occurred in the 1980s, as did Sheila Grant’s storyline from *Brookside* — there remained a persistent hesitation to address the issue of male rape. Not only the television industry, but mainstream British society in general was reluctant to truly consider the subject matter. *Hollyoaks*’ storyline challenged this culture of ambivalence. For several months leading up to the rape, Luke had been involved in a storyline where he was bullied by his football rival Mark Gibbs (played by Colin Parry). However, this bullying soon escalated, with Mark ultimately raping Luke. The attack was shown during the special late-night episode *Hollyoaks: Breaking Boundaries* (henceforth referred to as *Breaking Boundaries*), which originally aired on 15th March 2000. At the beginning of the episode, Mark once again torments Luke, urinating on his belongings and physically assaulting him. This mistreatment, however, soon escalates with Mark ordering his friends to hold Luke face down against the hood of his car while Mark rapes him. As the episode was broadcast at eleven o’clock at night, *Hollyoaks* was not beholden to pre-watershed broadcasting regulations, meaning unlike other scenes involving sexual violence in the genre, this scene does not rely on the power of suggestion but rather includes graphic representation. The camera is often positioned on the hood of the car, capturing both Luke’s face and Mark’s movements. As the attack occurs midway through the episode, *Breaking Boundaries* also includes the immediate aftermath, including Luke getting back into his car and showering in the locker room, with the episode ending with a close-up of Luke sobbing. The episode succeeding *Breaking Boundaries*, which aired at *Hollyoaks* regular 6:30 pm timeslot, then sees Luke immediately begin to distance himself from his friends and family, unable to confide in them about what happened (Episode 430). The storyline continues as Luke struggles with his trauma, becoming depressed. This eventually leads to the character attempting to commit suicide. In the aftermath, Luke confesses to his brother that he was raped. The storyline progresses to include the rest of

Luke's family finding out, Luke reporting Mark to the police, the resulting trial, and the impact this has on Luke's family, including the strain it puts on his relationship with his father, who is uncomfortable with people knowing his son has been raped. The storyline's tentative ending involves Mark being found guilty of rape and sentenced to eight years in prison (Episode 528). However, *Hollyoaks* remained committed to addressing the effects the rape had on Luke, including the ways he felt isolated from his peers and mocked by some in the community, with this leading to the character's exit in December 2001, as Luke moves to Canada to teach football in search of a fresh start.

5.2 Criticisms of Luke Morgan's Male Rape Storyline

As happened twelve years before with Kathy Beale's rape storyline, the representation of such a sensitive subject matter led to *Hollyoaks* being denounced by many in the press for being unsuitable family viewing. The National Viewers and Listeners Association condemned the storyline for being inappropriate (Spavin, par 5). Likewise, the Church of Scotland Board of Social Responsibility claimed the storyline was trivialising the issue (Spavin, par 6). Whereas scholars such as Longhurst and Cooke find fault with the way social issue storylines do not consider the political sphere, these religious groups critiqued *Hollyoaks* for merely representing the issue, with no regard for the specifics of that representation. Additionally, the storyline had not yet reached its tentative ending when these statements were released, meaning they are judgements made against a narrative which had not yet fully aired. Thus, these can be considered reactionary statements against the idea of *Hollyoaks*, or any programme, exploring the issue of male rape. However, it was not only groups with known histories of criticising representations of social issue who felt the need to speak to the narrative's impropriety. *Breaking Boundaries* spurred investigative journalist Jacques Peretti

to write an article for *The Guardian* where he argued against the rise of “message telly”, which he saw as a site for “cheap voyeurism” (par 2). Peretti is dismissive of television’s ability to address serious subject matters. The journalist does concede that occasionally message-driven television can be successful, citing *Brookside*’s representation of domestic violence (par 5).¹⁶ However, ultimately Peretti argues that efforts to attract new viewers and continuously create material means that television “has been forced to go sexy with its problems” with his argument extending to a range of genres, including talk shows and soap operas (6). When writing about the Luke Morgan storyline specifically, Peretti describes the escalation of a bullying storyline, stating, “The impulse to glamorise is simply too great for a scriptwriter to miss” (Peretti, par 12). Peretti does not view the storyline as having the potential to sincerely engage with the issue.¹⁷ The use of terms such as ‘go sexy’ and ‘glamorise’ indicate that the journalist sees social issue storylines solely as a means of titillation. Scholars like Ellis and Henderson offer the viewpoint that the narrativisation of social issues in television fiction is ultimately beneficial in helping audiences better understand and empathise with complex issues (Ellis, 66; Henderson, 174). Peretti’s view is that programmes can only attempt “crude social tinkering”, a comment suggesting a lack of faith in television’s potential to help enact meaningful change (par 14). However, Peretti’s problematisation of the storyline is less interesting than how the article underscores how this social issue storyline became a national talking point in the United Kingdom. Despite its disparaging tone, Peretti’s article reinforces the idea that for all its supposed flaws, Luke Morgan’s male rape storyline is still a noteworthy moment in British television.

¹⁶ Peretti only mentions that the issue was domestic violence, not what specific storyline he thought to be successful. Nor does he clarify how he qualifies success in this context.

¹⁷ Peretti’s background as a journalist may be influencing his opinion about whether other mediums can adequately address social issues.

5.3 Luke Morgan's Male Rape Storyline as a Television Moment

When writing about the concept of television being made of moments, Fiske argues that viewers' understanding of television is influenced by more than just the content of programmes. Fiske states that the "two intertwined sets of determination are the social and the textual, the one working upon the subjectivity of the viewer, the other upon the textuality of television" (57). Fiske uses the term textuality to refer to a version of a text's "meaning-making potential" that relies on more than just its construction (56). While textual elements such as the filming style or narrative structure code a particular meaning within a text, other factors, such as a viewer's personal experiences and any intertextual objects they encounter, also contribute to how they make sense of those meanings. Thus, this is a concept that resonates with Hall's encoding/decoding theory. There are outside forces that influence how audience members decode the messages present in a text. Articles such as Peretti's constitute what Fiske refers to as "secondary relations", which are media objects which directly address primary texts, and thus those primary texts "are their sole *raison d'être*" (65). Peretti's article's reason for being is to comment on *Breaking Boundaries*. Within this "secondary relation" category, then, exists various subcategories of intertextual objects, including those created by critics. Ultimately, Fiske is dismissive of this subcategory, claiming professional critics "purport to speak for viewers but generally fail because the discourse of formal criticism originates at a social point occupied by only a minority of viewers" (65). Peretti's article attempts to argue that the Luke Morgan storyline is an exercise in meaningless titillation, yet there is no guarantee that viewers agree this reading. However, the practice of publicly dedicating an entire article in a well-respected newspaper to that specific late-night special signifies that this controversial text still deserves interest. There is a meaning being activated, potentially unintentionally, here that *Breaking Boundaries* is worthy of being talked

about no matter that content of that talk, or else why would such an article exist. Thus, regardless of the substance, Peretti's article is still intertextually heightening the occurrence of a male rape storyline as a moment in British television, for better or for worse.

The production staff at *Hollyoaks* were seemingly aware of this social issue storyline's potential significance. The reasons behind the storyline's creation were varied. Before *Breaking Boundaries* aired, those involved stressed the fact that there was a genuine desire to highlight an often-under-discussed issue. Redmond stated that "male rape is where female rape was 20 years ago. Very few people talk about it, it is an unreported crime. Yet figures suggest that as many as 25 per cent of all rape is male rape" (quoted by Carter, par 8).¹⁸ Keith Greenaway, a coordinator at Central Birmingham Victim Support, expressed similar sentiments, stating that "if we can get [the subject] out in the open, on TV and in the papers, we can show victims it is not something to be ashamed of and it wasn't their fault", a statement which presents a far more positive view of social issue storylines potential uses (quoted by Miles, par 32).¹⁹ However, the storyline was not born out of purely altruistic intentions. From a production standpoint, the creation of the storyline coincided with wider in-house conversations about the future of *Hollyoaks* (Carter, 9). Social issue storylines, especially controversial ones, tend to attract more viewers (Henderson, 40). Likewise, the overall idea of a late-night episode predates the idea of a male rape storyline, with the commissioner of drama at Channel 4, Jonathan Young, stating that "It's an experiment to see how far we can stretch [*Hollyoaks*] outside of its usual 'happy slot'" (quoted by Carter, par 9). Peretti also referred to the programme as "happy-clappy *Hollyoaks*" (par 13). By 2000, *Hollyoaks* had featured what may be deemed 'gritty' subject matters. Sexual violence was

¹⁸ Redmond does not state what source this figure came from.

¹⁹ The storyline did seemingly achieve this with actor Gary Lucy stating that *Hollyoaks* received many letters from viewers talking about how the narrative helped them work through their own experiences (Lindsay, *Hollyoaks* Star Gary Lucy Defends Coronation Street, par 5).

already a topic generally covered by the show, with one storyline surrounding Mandy Richardson (played by Sarah Jayne Dunn) being raped by her father. However, these statements from both critics and production staff indicate that despite forays into serious storytelling, *Hollyoaks* remained to be seen as a predominantly frivolous soap opera. The intent was always to capitalise on the freedom offered by a post-watershed timeslot to rebuff the show's "happy-clappy" descriptor (Peretti, par 13). By featuring British soap operas' first male rape storyline the programme could take the show in a darker direction while simultaneously asserting its credentials as a socially conscious soap opera on par with the likes of *Brookside* and *EastEnders*. The soap opera industry seemed to recognise this, with the storyline also leading to *Hollyoaks*' first ever award, with Lucy winning best newcomer at the 2000 British Soap Awards. Thus, Luke's storyline speaks to the complexities of social issue storylines in British soap operas, whereby intentions to meaningfully highlight under-discussed issues converge with business incentives, as taboo storylines garner significant amounts of press, attract new viewers and in this specific case work to shift perceptions of the entire programme.

Luke Morgan's male rape storyline has then continuously been championed as a historic moment for both the programme and the genre. *The Guardian* listed it as one of *Hollyoaks*' "most memorable moments" in 2020 (Kalia, par 24). The BBC ranked it as number one in terms of *Hollyoaks*' most memorable storylines (Holden, par 5). Additionally, the storyline has been credited in the press for the male rape storylines that came after it (Kilkelly, par 21; Brown, par 6).²⁰ Lucy was also asked to comment about claims that *Coronation Street* had gone "too dark" with their male rape storyline, with this article again reinforcing that his own

²⁰ Admittedly, in the wake of the Luke Morgan storyline, British soap operas remained hesitant to address the topic of male rape. In the in the sixty-nine years that British soap operas have been on television — and in the four decades since the genre began focusing on social issues — the subject of male rape has only been represented four times: Luke Morgan and John-Paul McQueen's storylines in *Hollyoaks* (2000; 2014), David Platt's storyline in *Coronation Street* (2018), and Ben Mitchell's storyline in *EastEnders* (2022).

character's storyline is "one of television's most important and remembered pieces of drama" (Lindsay, *Hollyoaks Star Gary Lucy Defends Coronation Street*, par 1). Channel 4 also honoured the storyline by including the three episodes surrounding the trial of Mark Gibbs as part of their *Hollyoaks Favourites* omnibus, where notable episodes of the programme were broadcast again during the Covid-19 pandemic. In press for the omnibus, Johnathon Hughes, for *Radio Times*, described the storyline as "the moment *Hollyoaks* went from being perceived as a fluffy drama about pretty teens to a brave, modern soap willing to tackle hard-hitting topics other shows were too afraid of", as well as a "watershed moment in British TV" (par 2/3). It is widely accepted that the storyline was a pivotal point in the history of British broadcasting, with this view consistently being espoused decades later. Fiske claims that "Television's textuality is not bounded by the title and the credits of a programme [...] and similarly viewing television cannot be confined to the periods when the set is switched on" (74). Likewise, when writing about paratextuality, structuralist literary critic Gérard Genette states that paratexts "surround [a text] and prolong it, precisely in order to *present* it [...] to *make it present*, to assure its presence in the world" (261). These paratexts — the top ten lists and articles — are prolonging the presence of *Hollyoaks*' first male rape storyline years after it aired. They work to keep it in the consciousness of British soap opera fans and corroborate its continued cultural relevancy by bolstering its pioneering status. The storyline's legacy is not only produced by its quality but also because of how it has been continually positioned in soap opera publications. Criticisms such as Peretti's have long been forgotten, and time has been favourable to the seminal social issue storyline.

It is also worth noting that it is the overall storyline that is being valued as a significant moment in television. These paratexts are not talking about the isolated rape scene or *Breaking Boundaries* specifically; they are talking about an entire narrative. Often the television moment is thought to involve a singular instance. The moments that Hills discusses

in his analysis of *Dr Who* include spectacular reveals of antagonists or particular emotional beats, such as characters departing (27/28). These are specific scenes, brief but impactful. Likewise, the television moments discussed earlier in this thesis — namely, the re-enactments from *EastEnders*' bipolar disorder storylines — involve specific, singular scenes. Yet within these paratexts, the television moment is conceptualised not as some special occasion that takes place within a narrative; rather, an entire narrative is explicitly acknowledged as a television moment. In his analysis, Hills claims that the moment “constitutes an important industry and (fan) audience category” (26). Taking this into account, we must understand the whole male rape storyline to be a moment. The rape scene from *Breaking Boundaries* can be understood to be a sort of moment on its own due to its uncharacteristically shocking and graphic nature. However, culturally, it is the entire storyline of a young football player coping with sexual trauma that is considered a pivotal moment not just in *Hollyoaks*' history but in the history of British television. These paratexts speak to a conceptualisation of a television moment that encapsulates an entire storyline. It is then this all-encompassing moment that *Hollyoaks* shows a pattern of attempting to preserve and prolong, firstly through the storyline surrounding Luke's return to the titular village and then through the grooming storyline centred on the character's son.

5.4 Luke Morgan's Return to *Hollyoaks*

The foundations for Ollie Morgan's grooming storyline began in 2017 when Luke Morgan returned to *Hollyoaks*. Despite having only been on the programme for a little over two years, Luke remained one of *Hollyoaks*' most iconic characters because of the male rape storyline's notoriety. Thus, the return was heavily publicised, as once again the character spurred an influx of paratextual objects. In the weeks leading up to the character's re-

entrance, multiple soap opera press outlets, including *Metro* and *Digital Spy*, published press releases and Lucy appeared on talk shows, including *This Morning* (ITV, 1988-present), to discuss the circumstances of his character's return. Lucy told the show that the character's returning storyline sees that the rape has a "definite legacy" and that "it's the story that he hasn't dealt with those things." These paratexts are what Fiske refers to as "intertextual enablers" in that they "work to activate and often extend the meanings of the primary texts" (65). These interviews and articles not only further stress the legacy of the male rape storyline, but they also help explain that history for newer fans of the programme. Thus, they enable audience members to understand the character's history, as well as the significance of that history. Although more contemporary fans may not have watched previous episodes featuring the character, they still have the potential to be aware of past details thanks to the press that was done to create anticipation for Luke's return. This then leads to a reconsideration of Geraghty's conceptualisation of "the committed audience" (The Continuous Serial, 16). While Geraghty sees "the committed audience" existing apart from "newcomers", with the help of paratexts there is still potential for newer viewers to possess a detailed knowledge of that aspect of the programme's past without having seen any episodes from the seminal social issue storyline (The Continuous Serial, 16). Thus, during Luke Morgan's reintroduction 2017, when he responds to an old friend reminiscing on their time in high school with the dialogue "Wasn't always rosy", newer viewers have the potential to be rewarded by understanding that allusion without having seen *Breaking Boundaries* (Episode 4696). However, Luke's return to the show does not just recall the past but rather actively works to continue that history, as suggested in Lucy's interviews.

Luke Morgan's return to *Hollyoaks* sees the character struggling with alcoholism as, off-screen, he began drinking to cope with the trauma of being raped. This is the programme actively continuing the male rape storyline through the depiction of the possible long-term

effects of sexual violence, illustrating Jordan's claim that soap operas can only feature "minor conclusions" (28). The male rape storyline was not resolved when Mark was sentenced, or when Luke left the show in 2001. Instead, nearly two decades later, it became a part of textual fabric of *Hollyoaks* once more. The programme's dedication to continuing the past is exemplified in a subplot where Luke has a trial as a physical education teacher at the local high school, which represents the extent of Luke's trauma through repeated dialogue and flashbacks. While Luke is coaching a football game, an argument breaks out between two students, with one student repeatedly goading another into fighting him (Episode 4766). The dialogue "I want you to fight me" triggers flashbacks to an early scene from *Breaking Boundaries* where Luke tells Mark, "I don't want to fight you." Footage from 2000 is being replayed and repurposed. In the present, another teacher stops the altercation, asking Luke, "How did you let that happen?" This is followed by audio from 2000 of Luke's father asking him the same thing. Later in the episode, the flashbacks continue. Intercut with mid-shots of Luke crying whilst clutching a bottle of vodka to his chest is more footage from 2000, including scenes of Mark berating Luke while they play football, a scene of Luke's father during the trial, and the moments that immediately precede and succeed the rape from *Breaking Boundaries*. Unlike Kathy Beale's repeated dialogue in *EastEnders*, where viewer is left to recognise the links to the past on their own, *Hollyoaks* uses audio doubling and flashbacks to represent trauma by replaying rather than referencing previous scene. Geraghty claims that typically with soap operas, "little attempt is made to bring the audience up-to-date with events it may have missed" (The Continuous Serial, 16). However, these scenes — along with previous references and intertextual objects — showcase concerted efforts to reestablish that past, as *Hollyoaks* quite literally presents its textual history again. Thus, there is a move from media objects intertextually prolonging the male rape storyline's legacy, to *Hollyoaks* doing the same thing intratextually. This is not an inter-generational storyline but

showcases *Hollyoaks* identifiable fixation on one of its most important storylines that helps contextualise Ollie Morgan's eventual storyline. The following episode further explores the links between Luke's alcoholism and the male rape storyline, as Luke confides in a friend about how he moved to Canada hoping to leave his past behind him, in reference to the character's original exit (Episode 4767). However, when that proved impossible, he took up drinking. Luke then reveals that he has a son named Oliver, who he has not seen since he was five after Oliver's mother left due to Luke's addiction. Thus, ideas of sexual trauma, alcoholism and fatherhood become narratively intertwined, with this scene setting the precedent for the storyline that occurs the following year as Luke reconnects with his son whilst still struggling with his trauma.

5.5 An Overview of Ollie Morgan's Grooming Storyline

The character of Ollie Morgan was introduced to *Hollyoaks* in January 2018. While the character's entrance in the show involves him reconnecting with his father, the character's first social issue storyline began a few weeks later, as Ollie is groomed and sexually abused by his football coach, Buster Smith (played by Nathan Sussex). This social issue storyline was partially inspired by the real-life trial of Barry Bennell, a football coach imprisoned in 2018 on fifty counts of child sexual abuse. The storyline was also created in consultation with Steve Walters, a survivor of Bennell's, along with *Survivors Manchester*. To summarise, in early 2018, Ollie was enrolled in Buster's football training programme. Feeling estranged from his father amidst Luke's battle with alcoholism, Ollie dedicates himself to being Buster's prodigy, with Buster taking advantage of Ollie's rootlessness to endear himself to the teenager. Given the storyline involves themes of sexual trauma within the context of football culture the storyline shares clear resonances with Luke's male rape storyline. However, the

grooming storyline was also narratively intertwined with a historic sexual abuse storyline involving the character Brody Hudson (played by Adam Woodward), as Buster sexually abused him when he was a teenager. In an episode from May 2018, there is a scene of Brody telling a partner that “something bad” happened to him as a child (Episode 4888). The episode immediately cuts to a close-up of Buster touching Ollie’s knee, coding that touch as something bad. Additionally, this close-up marks the end of the episode, with the image’s cliff-hanger status further creating a sense of foreboding, as soap opera conventions dictate that this is a site of significance. By June, this predatory behaviour progresses as Buster offers Ollie a leg massage but closes and locks the door to the locker room, with the camera staying on the shot of the door (Episode 4931). As with Henderson’s previous findings, this scene relies on the “power of suggestion” as the audience is left to infer the sexual abuse that is occurring behind closed doors (142). In August, Buster promises Ollie a role as a model for a promotional campaign, which leads to Buster taking photos of Ollie partially undressed (Episode 4969). Luke eventually finds these photos leading to the truth being revealed, and the storyline continues with others in the community — particularly Brody — finding out about the abuse and supporting Ollie as he reports Buster to the police. In an episode airing 11th January 2019, Buster is found guilty of sexual assault and sentenced to six years in prison, with this being the storyline’s tentative ending (Episode 5080). Admittedly, this is not an exact replication of Luke’s storyline. Grooming and sexual abuse are different issues than male rape. However, both storylines involve characters in their late teens dealing with sexual trauma within the specific context of football culture.²¹ That is a considerable number of intentional similarities. Additionally, there were other male teenage characters who could have been in the centre of the storyline. The character of Imran Malik was also enrolled in

²¹ Luke Morgan’s sister Beth (played by Kate Baines) also had a storyline where she was raped by a football player in 2001, in another example of the same social issue storyline occurring within the same family unit.

Buster's football programme. Yet the production team at *Hollyoaks* chose a character whose father had been in one of the show's most celebrated storylines that also involved sexual violence and football.²² Creative choices were made so that *Hollyoaks* could mirror its own past. However, beyond these contextual parallels, the progression of Ollie's storyline is thoroughly tied to Luke's original storyline, as the development of the grooming storyline runs alongside and often intersects with the long-term continuation of the male rape storyline. Whereas other inter-generational social issue storylines such as *EastEnders*' bipolar storylines reference the past, Ollie's storyline fundamentally functions as an avenue of continuing that past.

5.6 Intratextuality in Ollie Morgan's Grooming Storyline

At every stage of Ollie's social issue storyline connections are made to Luke's history, as there is a pattern of narrative cause and effect. Buster preys on Ollie's feelings of confusion and heartbreak after discovery that his father had been raped. After accidentally learning about his father's past, Ollie is then seen reading an old article titled "Football Team Rocked by Rape Allegation," emphasising that the male rape storyline was firmly linked to the game and reminding audiences that the sport connects father and son (Episode 4865). Left upset about this revelation, Buster seemingly comforts the teen. Later, after Luke denies being raped, Buster makes sure Ollie knows that he is trustworthy, even if his father is not. From a narrative perspective, this is a significant development in Ollie's social issue storyline as Buster works to isolate Ollie from Luke. Yet, it also functions as a significant development in Luke's original social issue storyline. Part of the long-term aftermath of that narrative is

²² Given the social issue storyline began shortly after Ollie Morgan entered the show, it can be speculated that the character may have been introduced specifically with the intention of creating a storyline that parallels Luke's past.

Luke coming to terms with his son finding out, and *Hollyoaks* emphasises that this is also an important moment for Luke's character. That episode's tag is a close-up of Luke crying while staring at an unopened bottle of vodka and in the following episodes he confides in a friend about his inability to cope with the thought of Ollie knowing (Episode 4866). There is an identifiable narrative thread of Luke having to work through his discomfort at the thought of his son wanting to talk about his past. This thread is returned to later in Ollie's storyline. Being left uncomfortable with Buster taking photos of him, Ollie tells Luke about the photoshoot. Unfortunately, Luke is intoxicated and subsequently forgets the conversation the following morning. Angered, Ollie admits that he knows that Luke lied about the rape, forcing Luke talk about what he went through as a teenager (Episode 4970). This scene takes place in the characters' living room, one of British soap operas' sacred domestic spaces. Once again, the home, with its connotations of familial unity, proves the place where these confessions can take place, as Luke finds himself being honest with Ollie. However, Luke ultimately grows uncomfortable with Ollie's questioning, telling Ollie he is too young to know about these things. Again, this is a scene that serves two narratives. It continues the male rape storyline with Luke beginning to discuss his experiences, while being a development in the grooming storyline. Audiences can understand the tragic irony that Ollie is all too aware of the type of things Luke is talking about. However, it is only after Luke learns that his son has been sexually abused that he then begins to talk to Ollie openly about his past.

Like with the Ben and Kathy scenes in *EastEnders*, ultimately, Luke uses his experiences to help Ollie come to terms with his trauma. However, unlike Kathy in *EastEnders*, Luke is also shown to be continuing his own working-through process. It is the knowledge of what his son has been through that spurs this character development, as the character processes his own trauma without relying on alcohol. Away from Ollie, Luke expresses his feelings of parental

failure. He asks his partner, “How did I not see the signs? Me, of all people” in reference to Ollie becoming isolated and standoffish, behaviours which recall Luke’s characterisation in the aftermath of the rape (Episode 4989). Luke then mentions his own father, with the scene ending with Luke admitting that experiencing his father’s unsupportive reaction was one of the worst moments of his life. Again, this scene has dual functions, as a singular narrative beat traverses two social issue storylines. Primarily this scene represents the wider effects of sexual abuse, as it is a parent dealing with the knowledge that their child has been hurt. However, once more, it is also a continuation of Luke’s original male rape storyline, as he acknowledges the additional trauma of not having the support of his father. Luke’s return storyline is about how he suppressed working through his experiences. Yet, over the course of Ollie’s storyline, Luke learns to openly acknowledge his past. Thus, through Ollie’s storyline, *Hollyoaks* is able to preserve, if not actively extend, the television moment that is Luke Morgan’s male rape storyline.

5.7 A Scene of Familial Bonding

The parallels between father and son continue as later in that same episode Luke finds Ollie drinking. Given the grooming storyline occurs within Ollie’s first year on the show, the character has no individual history to build his trauma response around. There is no established characterisation that could be used to create a specific central theme (Henderson, 82). Stacey Slater’s fear of turning into her mother was based on her early storylines. Likewise, Ben’s shame was based on his well-established relationship with masculinity. As a new character, Ollie has no such past to structure his response around. However, there is Luke’s past. The “previous storylines” being utilised are not Ollie’s; they are Luke’s (Henderson, 82). This mimicry of trauma response is a choice that stresses the parallels

between father and son, which are further bolstered when Luke uses his own experiences to help Ollie realise that drinking is not a healthy coping mechanism. The character talks both about the temporary relief alcohol provides and how he knows the courage it took for Ollie to tell people what happened to him. Additionally, every time Luke is on screen he is shot via a two-shot, meaning Ollie can be seen as well. This intimate framing signifies the connections between the pair. Luke and Ollie are not isolated in their experiences, nor are they isolated in the frame. The final couplet of dialogue in this scene is Ollie saying, “I’m sorry, Dad”, and Luke replying, “Let’s go home, Son.” Thus, this scene concerns the effects of a particular social issue that simultaneously emphasises notions of family. It is a scene about sexual trauma. Luke talks about the desire to “blot out the pain” with alcohol, a desire Ollie now understands. Ollie confides in Luke about his feelings of shame and inability to tell people, feelings that Luke can sympathise with. Yet the scene consistently highlights the fact this pair are father and son. The final dialogue stresses the relationship between the characters. The final visual is Luke hugging Ollie to his chest in another portrait of familial intimacy with connotations of tenderness and fatherly protection being inherent in the gesture; Luke figuratively shields his son from the harsh world around them. Much like Ben breaking down in his mother’s arms, or the conversation between Stacey and Jean at the caravan park, this is a scene that features two characters with a common past discussing a particular social issue, yet more than that, these are scenes of familial closeness. There is a recognisable trend in inter-generational social issue storylines where discussions about the effects and emotions associated with various social issues are grounded in scenes that simultaneously emphasise the relationships between parents and their children.

5.8 Ollie Morgan’s Storyline as an Avenue of Continuance

The primary principle of the soap opera genre is its longevity. As Ang claims, it is the genre of “steady continuance” (57). This is not only true of the programmes themselves but also the storylines within those programmes. The first of its kind, Luke Morgan’s male rape storyline proves a pivotal point in *Hollyoaks*’ broadcasting history, functioning as a moment the teenage soap demonstrated its potential to rival its more prestigious peers. Through the programme’s longevity, then, *Hollyoaks* was able to continue its seminal social issue storyline nearly two decades later, shifting from intertextually prolonging the storyline’s legacy to intratextually continuing the storyline. Within Ollie’s storyline there is a recognisable character arc of Luke working through confiding in his son about his past. Luke goes from lying to Ollie about being raped, to admitting it but avoiding any further conversations, to finally learning to be honest with his son. Ultimately, then, Ollie Morgan’s grooming social issue storyline can be considered another way of *Hollyoaks* capitalising on and continuing its momentous storyline. It is not only that the grooming storyline features identifiable parallels to the past, as again, a promising young football player within the Morgan family must deal with sexual trauma, but the storyline spurs significant and identifiable developments in Luke’s character as he reflects on what happened to him as a teenager and must process his concerns about confiding in his son. On its own, Ollie’s grooming plot is a fully developed, well-rounded storyline exploring how grooming occurs and its effects. The primary narrative focus is on Ollie’s character. Yet it is also a storyline that serves as another avenue for the continuance of Luke’s male rape storyline because of the choice of central character, further emphasising *Hollyoaks*’ dedication to the storyline that help prove its status as a reputable British soap opera.

6. The Metatextual Mapping of British Soap Operas' Extensive Histories

This chapter begins by considering the troubling nature of British soap operas' extensive textual histories, before moving on to examine how inter-generational social issue storylines borrow from the conventions of metafiction as programmes decipher what television moments merit having a continued presence. To conclude, I then return to the issue of realism, as metatextuality is thought to be realism's antithesis.

6.1 The Burden of Soap Opera Histories

British soap operas, and soap operas in general, prove to be complicated texts to study. Within the field of soap opera studies, there is an academic fascination with the longevity of programmes, evidenced by how often the genre is defined by terms such as 'continuance' (Ang 57; Geraghty, *The Continuous Serial*, 9; Hobson 35). Continuity, seriality, and coherence are frequently points of concern. Yet that longevity creates complications when it comes to analysing programmes, especially programmes' narratives. The near-overwhelming amount of content available causes difficulties when it comes to understanding a text as a unified whole. Thus, what helps make the genre unique simultaneously is a hindrance to inquiry. Television scholar Elena Levine describes this problem, stating that "the size of the text alone makes studying it in any comprehensive way an impossibility" (175). Likewise, in her account of the academic history of soap opera studies, Geraghty refers to soap operas as "exhausting texts" because of the wealth of content associated with programmes (*Exhausted and Exhausting*, 91). Geraghty goes on to state that in comparison, soap operas make narratively complex, serialised programmes such as *Lost* (ABC, 2004-

2010) seem “manageable” (Exhausted and Exhausting, 91). Given episodes air multiple times a week, all year round, often for decades, truly knowing a British soap opera in all its history proves difficult. However, it is not only scholars and general audiences that must cope with comprehending and managing vast amounts of televisual content. British soap operas themselves must contend with their own long histories. In her article on soap opera continuity, Geraghty states that “If the serial has to carry the heavy weight of its own past it would not be able to carry on” (The Continuous Serial, 18). Thus, characters may be feuding one year yet suddenly friends the next. Death threats do not stop characters from sharing a drink in the pub a few months later, and adultery does not preclude relationships from beginning again in the future. If characters in British soap operas were to hold grudges against anyone who wronged them, there would be no potential for future plots as the social bonds that made up the soap opera community would cease to exist. Thus, the long-term impacts of every narrative detail in programmes’ decades-long histories cannot all be taken into account. With British soap operas, then, a show’s textual history becomes something that must be negotiated. Some moments must be considered significant, yet others must be moved on from with ease. Some storylines must be positioned as pivotal, and others must be allowed to slip into relative obscurity, only existing in viewers’ memories.²³ Inter-generational social issue storylines can then be considered a way of British soap operas managing their extensive pasts. Purposefully recalling historical moments and making them a part of contemporary storylines is a way of ascribing further significance to those moments signifying that they should not be forgotten about. Employing techniques of self-referentiality allows soap opera

²³ It is important to note the difference between past storylines not influencing contemporary storylines and past storylines being discredited. Dedicated fans will notice discontinuities ranging from characters’ birthdays changing to significant events being seemingly erased from the narrative canon. In 2015, *Coronation Street* had to issue an apology after an episode featured Kevin Webster (played by Michael LeVell) speculating that it “must be hard, burying one of your kids” (Episode 8658). Fans were disappointed with this dialogue, as in 2000, a storyline involved Kevin’s infant son dying. Thus, Kevin should not need to speculate about that grief, given the character was meant to have first-hand experience.

programmes to map their own extensive histories via metatextuality while ensuring that despite the socially conscious subject matter, the programmes retain their primary interest in familial relationships.

6.2 Self-Citation and Metafiction

Metafiction, a term frequently used in conjunction with metatextuality, was coined by William Gass in the 1960s when writing about literature. Gass was concerned with the constructed nature of a text, writing that,

“The esthetic [sic] aim of any fiction is the creation of a verbal world, or a significant part of such a world, alive through every order of it Being. [...] The story must be told and its telling is a record of the choices, inadvertent or deliberate, the author has made from all the possibilities of language” (7).

Thus, Gass focuses on the ontological status of narratives. Parallels are drawn between storytelling and philosophy as Gass writes about a version of literature not interested in realism or being perceived as ontologically pure, but rather a version of fiction that highlights its form and the relationships its form has to other narratives (Schlick, 3). Rather than a text’s constructed nature being obscured, metafiction is about celebrating the deliberately constructed nature of a text. Since Gass’s original conceptualisation, the precise definition of metafiction and metatextuality has been a topic of much academic interest, with there being identifiable trends in the term’s conceptualisation. Literary critic Mark Currie, who is especially concerned with the relationship between narratives and time, states that in the 1970s, metafiction was defined as “fiction with self-consciousness, self-awareness, self-knowledge, [and] ironic self-distance” (1). To return to Gass, it is a fiction that is hyper-aware of the creative choices that were made in service of its being. In 1984, literary critic Patricia

Waugh defined metafiction as “a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact” (2). Likewise, in 2014, historian Ruth Mackay claimed that metatextuality “denote[s] a group of associated characteristics that draw attention to a text’s status, working together to self-consciously expose its means of representation” (66). Decades apart, these definitions centralise the idea of attention being purposefully directed to the means of a text’s construction, with ‘self-conscious’ being the repeated term. In a recent addition to the canon of scholarship about metatextuality and metafiction, English scholar Yaël Schlick argues in her 2022 book *Metafiction* that “metafiction is ultimately better understood by its effects than by its essence, but what it does rather by what it is” while accounting for the history of the term’s definitions (2). However, Schlick also states that, generally, metafiction is considered “a kind of literature that integrates commentary into its own structure” (8). Metatextuality and metafiction are about a text knowingly and purposefully speaking to its nature as a text.

Before considering the specific ways elements of metatextuality can be identified in inter-generational social issue storylines in British soap operas, it must first be acknowledged that these definitions of metafiction are largely based on written narratives rather than audio-visual narratives. Scholars such as Gass and Currie are concerned with literature, not television. Yet metafiction is an idea that spans storytelling mediums. Television fiction is, after all, a type of fiction, and it is well established that an integral aspect of the medium is its ability to be self-referential, a trait with strong links to the metatextuality given that concept involves a purposeful sense of self-awareness. Media scholar Amy Holdsworth, who is concerned with issues of television and memory, claims that “the television viewing experience is one of accumulation, where viewing experiences and references are built up over time, and the memory of ‘afterimages’ and ‘moments’ is accumulated over a life lived across television” (34). Thus, in Holdsworth’s estimate, “Remembering and reflection

become central to television's defining characteristic of repetition" (35).²⁴ Television is a pervasive presence in the lives and minds of its audiences, creating a wealth of content that allows the medium to repeat itself and thereby cite its own past. This self-citation exemplifies television's ability to be aware of its own form. Likewise, Patricia Mellencamp, who is also concerned with the relationship between television and time albeit with a focus on television news, claims that "TV triggers memories of TV in an endless chain of TV referentiality" (242). Thus, scholars such as Holdsworth and Mellencamp actively position television as a medium with the potential to be thoroughly aware of itself and its history.

Additionally, this idea of television being self-referential is crucial to the idea of television being comprised of moments. Holdsworth claims that so-called "memorable moments" are often "moments of or about memory" (35). Instances from texts are elevated because of the ways they draw on the past. Holdsworth goes on to analyse a range of moments in serialised dramas that gain their momentous status because of how they constitute "moments of repetition and return", including flashbacks, finales which mirror their show's pilots and instances of thematic parallelism (36). These are all examples of programmes deliberately drawing on their own textual histories to create something particularly noteworthy. However, Holdsworth's analysis could not exist if it were not for the work of her academic predecessors, including scholars such as Fiske and Ellis, the latter of which Holdsworth directly credits as someone who "opens up some additional lines of inquiry into the idea of the 'moment'" (35). Fiske's original chapter 'Moments of Television' focuses on the way that a programme's messaging is the result of more than just its textual elements, paying attention to the "correspondence between subjectivity and textuality" (57). Hills then took this idea of

²⁴ Notably, here Holdsworth is considering television holistically, whereby all programmes contribute to a monolithic 'television', meaning citation can traverse the boundaries of individual programmes. However, later in the chapter, Holdsworth does consider programmes as individual units of content which can cite themselves through intratextual reference rather than intertextual reference.

television programming being comprised of moments, rather than sequences of scenes, as the basis for his analysis of how specific parts of a television text may be exalted. This includes moments that are elevated because of how they are self-reflective (28). Hills goes so far as to refer to the scene from the 2007 *Dr Who* Children in Need special where David Tennent's version of The Doctor speaks to a past version of the character as a "self-conscious moment", an example of the lexicon of metafiction being used to explain how television moments are created (29). The emotional resonance of a moment can be increased because of how its construction — ergo its textuality — purposefully plays on viewers' subjective memories of the programme. This is then the mode of elevation that Holdsworth focuses on with her analysis of the way serial dramas return to instances from the memorable past through the use of flashbacks and parallels. Instances are identified by programme-makers as integral, and thus returned to. Crucial to this practice, then, are ideas such as "self-awareness" and "self-knowledge," concepts which prove foundational when considering metafiction (Currie, 1). Television programming is able to draw on the conventions of metafiction to produce moments through reflecting on what past televisual instances can be considered significant and referencing them again. This is a practice of self-aware self-citation that aligns with definitions of metatextuality set forth by scholars primarily concerned with the written word.

6.3 Inter-Generational Social Issue Storylines as Metafiction

Soap operas, then, have specifically been highlighted as featuring a sense of accumulation which allows self-aware self-citation to occur. When analysing the continuity of soap operas, Geraghty states that programmes specifically possess an "accumulated past" (The Continuous Serial, 16). Additionally, although Holdsworth pays particular attention to television dramas, the scholar does credit soap opera scholarship as providing the basis for

her conceptualisations, stating that “work on soap opera reminds us how repetition and recapitulation operate as a way to remind viewers of narrative events” (54). Thus, with their longevity and ability to be self-reflective, British soap operas function as a microcosm of serialised television, with its ability to create metatextual moments. Inter-generational social issue storylines, then, possess this sense of metatextuality. They are grounded in notions of self-conscious self-citation. It is not an accident when British soap operas repeat the same — or substantially similar — social issue storylines within the same family unit. It is not a coincidence that all three bipolar storylines in *EastEnders* feature scenes of characters getting their hair washed with the same framing or that Kathy Beale repeats nearly verbatim dialogue from two decades earlier. Nor is it a coincidence that another young football prodigy within the Morgan family had their career derailed by sexual violence. *Hollyoaks* directly recognises the parallels between Luke and Ollie’s storylines during Buster’s trial. The defence council attempts to discredit Ollie’s testimony by arguing that Ollie “manufactured a story that mirrored [Luke’s] past” (Episode 5077). While Ollie, the character, did not manufacture any story within world of the programme, the production team creating *Hollyoaks* certainly did, and this dialogue draws attention to that fact. To return to Gass’s conceptualisation, of all the possible textual choices, *Hollyoaks* chose to parallel the past when creating the grooming storyline, and openly appreciates this aspect of the narrative’s being, with this explicit acknowledgement highlighting the storylines status as a constructed form (7). By recalling the past and employing techniques of intratextuality, repetition and return, inter-generational social issue storylines engage with notions of metatextuality. Programmes must be aware of their own pasts and their construction as texts in order to successfully recall that past through the reconstruction of historical narrative elements. Thus, inter-generational social issue storylines function as texts of self-aware self-citation.

It is then the writing of semiotician Winifred Nöth that offers further insight into the self-reflective workings of inter-generational social issue storylines. Nöth claims that in terms of metafiction, “there are two major sources of (intra)textual self-reference, poetic features and metatextual passages of a text about the text” (18). It is that category of poetic features that is more relevant to this discussion. Nöth defines poetic features as “devices [that] evince ironic self-reference since they are based on similarities and forms of sameness” (18). Textual elements from these inter-generational social issue storylines such as re-enacted scenes, repeated dialogue and replicated narrative contexts are all based on the principle of recognisable sameness. These elements are not explicitly speaking about the hows and whys of British soap operas’ construction, but rather engaging in practices of knowing self-quotation. Admittedly, programmes seemingly approach these similarities with more sincerity rather than irony, given that social issues storylines comply with the ethos of social realism and are meant to represent sensitive subject matters. Yet, that baseline of self-aware adherence to principles of sameness remains relevant. If then, inter-generational social issue storylines thrive on the use of poetic features, it is a question of what the purpose of this implementation of self-quotation is. As established, none of the inter-generational social issue storylines discussed require these moments of recapitulation to function as social issue storylines, so why are they placed at the forefront of narratives? Nöth further explains that “Examples of metatextual self-reference are comments on the text, its narrative form, its contents, its structure, its plot, previous or subsequent chapters, its beginning and its end” (18). This idea of self-references serving as comments then relates to the definition of metafiction that most closely aligns with the workings of inter-generational social issue storylines. While all the definitions mentioned involve a text highlighting its own artifice, Currie goes on to offer a more detailed conceptualisation, claiming that metafiction exists as “a borderline discourse, as a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction

and criticism and which takes that border as its subject” (2). Whether referred to as a comment or a discourse, Nöth and Currie both stress that metafiction is simultaneously concerned with presenting a narrative and not just acknowledging that narrative’s status as a created artefact but actively critiquing the choices that occurred in the service of its creation. It is this conceptualisation of metafiction that explains the metatextual elements of inter-generational social issue storylines in British soap operas. By utilising practices of self-citation, these types of storylines feature criticism in the form of emphasising what original storylines are important, retroactively ascribing further significance to past televisual moments.

Thus, inter-generational social issue storylines comment on what past storylines are worthy of being reincorporated into contemporary narratives. In the extensive history of social issue storylines in British soap operas, storylines such as Stacey Slater caring for her unwell mother, Kathy Beale’s rape and Luke Morgan’s male rape are deemed the ones that should be remembered going forward by programme-makers. These are the narratives that those who help create the programmes believe should not be delegated to events that exist solely in the minds of “the committed audience” (Geraghty, *The Continuous Serial*, 16). Instead, they are positioned as the ones that should be recalled again through the creation of televisual moments of memory. Analysing storylines such as *EastEnders*’ bipolar and male rape storylines, as well as *Hollyoaks*’ grooming storyline, prove that inter-generational social issue storylines go beyond merely repeating the same general social issues. Storylines such as Stacey’s own bipolar diagnosis, Jean Slater’s relapse, Ben Mitchell’s male rape storyline and Ollie Morgan’s grooming storyline are knowingly constructed in a way that brings the past to the present through a multitude of intratextual references. This replication of specific moments, then, indicates a recognition of significance. In order to continue every detail of a

British soap opera's past cannot be remembered, but these repetitions function as statements that these specific elements are worthy of remembrance.

It is important to note, however, that even before being intratextually referenced, storylines such as Stacey Slater's entrance to *EastEnders*, Kathy Beale's rape storyline, and Luke Morgan's male rape storyline were considered independently significant. As previously discussed, both at the time of being broadcast and in the following years, these storylines were considered highly noteworthy. For nearly two decades, Luke Morgan's storyline, in particular, has been hailed as a triumph of the British soap opera genre. Thus, intratextual references and inter-generational storylines are not a stamp of approval, suddenly declaring past moments important. Rather, being paralleled and cited works to reaffirm these older storylines' significance. Thus, inter-generational social issue storylines feature what Currie refers to as the "assimilation of critical perspective" (2). These storylines involve programmes looking back over their vast textual histories and making statements about which past social issue storylines remain worthy of being reincorporated into programmes. However, it is a critical perspective that focuses less on actively critiquing a text's construction and more on managing those extensive histories that British soap operas produce. This sense of metatextuality then allows for programmes to negotiate the burden of their pasts through self-citation. Geraghty claims that a soap opera cannot "carry the heavy weight of its own past" (*The Continuous Serial*, 18). Yet inter-generational social issue storylines showcase that continuance can occur through acknowledging aspects of that past and employing techniques of metatextuality. It is about managing the past through the identification of what should be repeated and filtering the extensive histories that British soap operas produce.

6.4 Returning to the Question of Realism

As inter-generational social issue storylines feature a sense of metatextuality, this again raises the issue of realism. Metatextual texts are often positioned as being uninterested in appearing realistic. Schlick refers to Gass' original conceptualisation of metafiction as a "repudiation of realism" (3). However, since the 1960s, the relationship between metafiction and realism has undergone further analysis. Waugh claims that "Metafiction explicitly lays bare the conventions of realism; it does not ignore or abandon them" (18). Mackay states that a core feature of metatextuality is "an anxiety about the relationship between fiction and reality" (66). Metatextuality is about exposing the means of a text's construction and a text revealing in its own status as a fabricated form. This is an engagement with artifice, and artifice is commonly viewed as the antithesis of realism. Yet, in Waugh and Mackay's estimation, this does not mean metafiction lacks a relationship with realism, but rather metatextual texts are acutely aware of that relationship, as they worry over and comment upon it (Waugh 18; Mackay 66). However, this does not mean that metatextual texts are primarily concerned with establishing a sense of verisimilitude; there is a difference between being aware of realism and strictly adhering to its principles. These scholars are seemingly appealing to the general meaning of the term realism, which is used to describe the perceivable similarities between the world of the text and the real world (A Hall, 624). However, as mentioned, Hall's argument is that there are various qualifiers of realism, and a key to both the overall conceptualisation of realism and social issue storylines is the category of plausibility (629). It is about the creation of a fictional world that looks, sounds, and feels like a credible mirror of the real world (A Hall, 629). This is about more than awareness; this is adherence to those principles of realism. While Hall's other categories, such as narrative consistency and perceptual pervasiveness, only require that texts obey their own intelligible

internal logic, plausibility is about bridging the distance between fiction and reality, as fiction should be a fairly exact representation of the real world.²⁵ However, to comment on a text's creation, as is the purpose of metatextuality, is to exploit that distance between fiction and reality as distance allows for self-awareness and reflexivity. Metatextuality is about exposing the means of creation and highlighting the fact that a text is ultimately just that, a purposefully constructed text, not a substitute for reality.

Thus, there exists something of a paradox when it comes to inter-generational social issue storylines' relationship with realism and plausibility. Social issue storylines, in general, strive for plausibility. They ideally involve detailed explorations of real-world problems because telling such narratives comes with a social responsibility to offer accurate representations. Yet the inter-generational aspects of inter-generational social issue storylines possess a sense of metatextuality and metatextual works are not necessarily concerned with appearing wholly plausible. However, this does not lead to an entirely irreconcilable contradiction. Inter-generational social issue storylines are not pure metafiction; they borrow from its conventions in service of telling socially conscious narratives that simultaneously engage in practices of self-citation. Thus, they do not have the same relationship with realism as metafiction or purely metatextual works. The storylines discussed showcase a genuine interest in being well-researched and credibly portraying the effects of various illnesses and traumas.

EastEnders' bipolar plotlines accurately depict the symptoms of bipolar disorder ranging from erratic spending to hallucinations. *EastEnders*' rape storylines represent the difficulties associated with working-through processes. *Hollyoaks*' sexual trauma storylines involve both

²⁵ As previously established, the other of Hall's qualifiers that has strong links to the soap opera genre is involvement, which surrounds how representations of recognisable emotions may overset any slights against a text's plausibility (Hall, 635). Inter-generational social issue storylines include representations of characters' emotional states, but these emotions — mania, fear, shame etc. — are meant to be credible reactions to plausible events rather than elements which make up for narrative implausibility. Thus, the concept of involvement is not particularly relevant to this discussion.

the short-term and long-term effects of sexual violence. There remains a fundamental concern with plausibility. However, as established, this concern does not preclude scenes from stepping away from being purely realistic. These storylines still have scenes where they appeal more to the melodramatic, including Jean Slater stepping into the ocean or Ben Mitchell's break down. These scenes demonstrate that realism is always something the text can negotiate with. These instances of metatextuality are no different.

Recognising the elements of sameness upon which inter-generational social issue storylines thrive — the re-enactments and repetitions — does mean stepping outside of the immediate, credible world of the text to recall the past. Intratextual references function as a knowing wink to audiences, working as a reward for a lifetime of viewing. Appreciating that wink means viewers cannot be fully immersed in the plausible world of a text because they must be reflecting back on the past and going through their own process of remembrance. It is only distance that allows for recognition and reflection. This is particularly noticeable in elements of the narrative that are meant to be read as in-world coincidences. This includes details such as the fact that in *EastEnders* both a mother and son are raped in the same building or that a father and son are both the victims of sexual violence while playing high-school football in *Hollyoaks*. These elements are not entirely implausible but perhaps read as improbable. Thus, these elements signify the creative teams behind these programmes having other concerns besides completely immersive verisimilitude, as these repetitions suggest a greater concern with utilising opportunities for self-citation and historical management. So rather than rejecting the representation of a credible world, inter-generational social issue storylines merely pause the prioritisation of completely immersing audiences in a plausible world. Thus, without completely rebelling against the genre's commitment to realism, inter-generational social issue storylines are able to manage the burden of British soap operas' long histories

through offering moments of self-citation that function as statements of what narrative elements are worthy of remembrance.

Conclusion

In her reflection on the state of the field, Geraghty states that “Opening up soap opera study to different methods and conceptual understandings is key to further work” (Exhausted and Exhausting, 93). This is what this thesis seeks to do by focusing on how British soap operas may borrow from conventions of metafiction to recall their own pasts. While embracing the traditional scholarly enthusiasm for matters of soap opera continuity and realism, considering how elements of intratextuality are incorporated into social issue storylines in British soap operas offers additional ways of understanding how the genre’s narratives function. Intergenerational social issue storylines — those narratives that involve the same social issues being repeated with characters from the same family unit in a way that explicitly refers to the past — epitomise the way programmes may merge their dramatic concerns while utilising British soap operas’ capacity for longevity. *Eastenders*’ three storylines involving bipolar disorder and the Slater family (2005;2009;2022) showcase how re-enactments of scenes help create a visual legacy of three generations of women stepping into a caretaking role. *EastEnders* rape storylines involving Kathy Beale (1988) and her son Ben Mitchell (2022) emphasise how the development of narratives involving working-through processes are shaped through familial interactions, and repeated dialogue and repeated settings can be used to help bring a programme’s textual past into its present. Likewise, *Hollyoaks*’ storylines involving sexual trauma within the context of football culture (2000;2018) demonstrate how contextual parallels made in contemporary social issue storylines can be used to further develop legacy storylines. These are narratives that thrive on being self-referential and hyper-aware of their construction as continuous texts. For inter-generational social issue storylines to properly function, programmes must be aware of what narrative beats from their decades-long histories are important enough to warrant repetition.

Subsequently, these repetitions then serve as declarations of what past television moments are worthy of being brought to the present again.

This analysis of how British soap operas master their own continuities is admittedly limited, given the focus is solely on how intratextuality can be recognised in social issue storylines. Although these serious narratives prove an essential element of the genre, often providing programmes with some of their most lauded content, crucially, they are not the only types of narratives featured in British soap operas. Nor are they the only type of narrative that allows for intratextual references and characters being put in positions where their actions parallel past storylines involving their parents. Thus, it may be useful to consider how programmes practice self-citation in other narrative forms. Additionally, performing audience research would grant insight into how these citations are received and what emotional responses they may trigger. Nevertheless, this textual analysis of the aforementioned storylines reveals how paying attention to how long-running British soap operas deliberately recall past television moments provides another avenue for considering soap opera continuity. Inter-generational social issue storylines at once demonstrate British soap operas' fixation on families, dedication to realistic representations of controversial subject matters, and ability to capitalise on the genre's pervasive sense of longevity to bring significant moments from the past to the present again, thereby negotiating with the burden of the extensiveness of British soap operas' textual histories.

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Filmography

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Cathy Come Home, directed by Ken Loach, BBC, 1996.

Coronation Street:

Episode 7484. *Coronation Street*, written by Joe Turner, produced by Phil Collinson, created by Tony Warren, ITV, 6 December 2010.

Episode 8658. *Coronation Street*, written by Mark Wadlow, produced by Kieran Roberts, created by Tony Warren, ITV, 10 June 2015.

Dallas, created by David Jacobs, TNT, 1978-1991.

Dr Who, created by Sydney Newman et al., BBC, 1963-1989; 2005-present.

EastEnders:

Episode 228. *EastEnders*, written by Gilly Fraser, produced by Julia Smith, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 17 November 1987.

Episode 357. *EastEnders*, written by Tony McHale, produced by Julia Smith, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 7 July 1988.

Episode 358. *EastEnders*, written by Tony McHale, produced by Julia Smith, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 12 July 1988.

Episode 733. *EastEnders*, written by Deborah Cook, produced by Helen Greaves, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 13 February 1992.

Episode 1412. *EastEnders*, written by Christopher Reason, produced by Miriam Segal, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 18 February 1997.

Episode 2826. *EastEnders*, written by Shaun Duggan, produced by Louise Berridge, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 1 November 2004.

Episode 2852. *EastEnders*, written by Jeff Povey, produced by Simon Winstone, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, 16 December 2004.

Episode 3057. *EastEnders*, written by Cary Andrews, produced by Kate Harwood, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 5 December 2005.

Episode 3058. *EastEnders*, written by Sarah Phelps, produced by Kate Harwood, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 6 December 2005.

Episode 3059. *EastEnders*, written by Sarah Phelps, produced by Kate Harwood, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 8 December 2005.

Episode 3060. *EastEnders*, written by Sarah Phelps, produced by Kate Harwood, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 9 December 2005.

Episode 3405. *EastEnders*, written by Matthew Evans, produced by Diederick Santer, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 24 July 2007.

Episode 3788. *EastEnders*, written by Jeff Povey, produced by Diederick Santer, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 14 May 2009.

Episode 3789. *EastEnders*, written by Simon Ashdown, produced by Diederick Santer, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 15 May 2009.

Episode 3827. *EastEnders*, written by Simon Ashdown, produced by Diederick Santer, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 21 July 2009.

Episode 3829. *EastEnders*, written by Julia Gilbert, produced by Diederick Santer, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 24 July 2009.

Episode 3870. *EastEnders*, written by Al Smith, produced by Diederick Santer, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 5 October 2009.

Episode 3873. *EastEnders*, written by Simon Ashdown, produced by Diederick Santer, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 9 October 2009.

Episode 6454. *EastEnders*, written by Natalie Mitchell, produced by Jon Sen, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 21 March 2022.

Episode 6455. *EastEnders*, written by Natalie Mitchell, produced by Jon Sen, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 22 March 2022.

Episode 6464. *EastEnders*, written by Carey Andrews, produced by Kate Oates, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 6 April 2022.

Episode 6477. *EastEnders*, written by Lauren Klee, produced by Kate Oates, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 28 April 2022.

Episode 6486. *EastEnders*, written by Gemma Copping, produced by Kate Oates, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 16 May 2022.

Episode 6489. *EastEnders*, written by Jamie Davis, produced by Kate Oates, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 19 May 2022.

Episode 6490. *EastEnders*, written by Pete Lawson, produced by Kate Oates, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 23 May 2022.

Episode 6491. *EastEnders*, written by Pete Lawson, produced by Kate Oates, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 24 May 2022.

Episode 6492. *EastEnders*, written by Richard Davidson, produced by Kate Oates, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 25 May 2022.

Episode 6496. *EastEnders*, written by Rob Gittins, produced by Kate Oates, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 1 June 2022.

Episode 6501. *EastEnders*, written by Daran Little, produced by Kate Oates, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 8 June 2022.

Episode 6502. *EastEnders*, written by Daran Little, produced by Kate Oates, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 9 June 2022.

Episode 6524. *EastEnders*, written by Pete Lawson, produced by Kate Oates, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 20 July 2022.

Episode 6530. *EastEnders*, written by Yasmeen Khan, produced by Chris Clenshaw, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 1 August 2022.

Episode 6537. *EastEnders*, written by Jamie Davis, produced by Chris Clenshaw, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 11 August 2022.

Episode 6554. *EastEnders*, written by Bryan Kirkwood, produced by Chris Clenshaw, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 12 September 2022.

Episode 6581. *EastEnders*, written by Lynne Dallow, produced by Chris Clenshaw, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 27 October 2022.

Episode 6607. *EastEnders*, written by Bryan Kirkwood, produced by Chris Clenshaw, created by Julia Smith and Tony Holland, BBC, 13 December 2022.

EastEnders. “The Queen Vic: Best Moments | EastEnders.” *YouTube*, BBC, 23 October 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3uOlfMxl7c>

EEVids. “EastEnders – Kat Looks After Jean During A Bipolar Episode, December 2011.” *YouTube*, BBC, 23 July 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McO0Q166uns&t=17s>

Emmerdale, created by Kevin Laffan, ITV, 1972-present.

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Guiding Light, created by Irna Phillips, CBS, 1952-2009.

“Head.” *Rescue Me*, written by Denis Leary et al., created by Denis Leary and Peter Tolan, FX, 10 August 2011.

Hollyoaks:

Episode 430. *Hollyoaks*, written by Neil Jones, produced by Sir Phil Redmond, created by Sir Phil Redmond, Channel 4, 16 March 2000.

Episode 528. *Hollyoaks*, written by Chris Parker and Anna Clements, produced by Sir Phil Redmond, created by Sir Phil Redmond, Channel 4, 26 October 2000.

Episode 4766. *Hollyoaks*, written by Kevin Rundle, produced by Bryan Kirkwood, created by Sir Phil Redmond, Channel 4, 30 October 2017.

Episode 4767. *Hollyoaks*, written by Kevin Rundle, produced by Bryan Kirkwood, created by Sir Phil Redmond, Channel 4, 31 October 2017.

Episode 4865. *Hollyoaks*, written by Anna Clements, produced by Bryan Kirkwood, created by Sir Phil Redmond, Channel 4, 16 March 2018.

Episode 4866. *Hollyoaks*, written by Richard Burke, produced by Bryan Kirkwood, created by Sir Phil Redmond, Channel 4, 19 March 2018.

Episode 4888. *Hollyoaks*, written by Tom Melia, produced by Bryan Kirkwood, created by Sir Phil Redmond, Channel 4, 18 April 2018.

Episode 4931. *Hollyoaks*, written by Heather Robson, produced by Bryan Kirkwood, created by Sir Phil Redmond, Channel 4, 18 June 2018.

Episode 4969. *Hollyoaks*, written by James Coleman, produced by Bryan Kirkwood, created by Sir Phil Redmond, Channel 4, 9 August 2018.

Episode 4970. *Hollyoaks*, written by Daniel Moulson, produced by Bryan Kirkwood, created by Sir Phil Redmond, Channel 4, 10 August 2018.

Episode 4989. *Hollyoaks*, written by Steven Fay, produced by Bryan Kirkwood, created by Sir Phil Redmond, Channel 4, 6 September 2018.

Episode 5013. *Hollyoaks*, written by Roanne Bardsley, produced by Bryan Kirkwood, created by Sir Phil Redmond, Channel 4, 10 October 2018.

Episode 5077. *Hollyoaks*, written by Roanne Bardsley, produced by Bryan Kirkwood, created by Sir Phil Redmond, Channel 4, 8 January 2019.

Episode 5080. *Hollyoaks*, written by Jonathan Larkin, produced by Bryan Kirkwood, created by Sir Phil Redmond, Channel 4, 11 January 2019.

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