**Notes Towards a Formal and Social Poetics of Television**

**James Zborowski**

**ABSTRACT:**

This article seeks to build a bridge between approaches to television drama that explore form and style, and those that explore realism and representation. It proposes questions which can be applied to any television drama, and reveal meaningful distinctions. The argument is developed through comparative analysis of Sally Wainwright’s *Happy Valley* (2014-) and long-running British soap opera *Coronation Street* (1960-).

**KEYWORDS:** British soap opera, *Coronation Street*, form, *Happy Valley*, realism, style, television aesthetics.

**Introduction**

Television studies has over the past few decades devoted a great deal of attention to questions of aesthetics and style. This has yielded much valuable scholarship, theory, and criticism. There remains space, however, for further tools which help us to account for television form and style as synthetic, holistic phenomena. Monographs which explore television style have often elected to structure their explorations around a list of stylistic devices or formal properties, worked through sequentially and exemplified by vivid case studies (or perhaps by a single case study approached from a range of perspectives). For example, Karen Lury’s *Interpreting Television* (2005) is structured into four chapters: ‘Image’, ‘Sound’, ‘Time’, and ‘Space’. Robin Nelson’s chapter ‘Technique, Technology and Cultural Form’ in his book *State of Play* moves through ‘Visual style’; ‘Soundtrack’, ‘Narrative forms and devices’; ‘New forms: new dispositions’; and ‘Split screens’ (2007: 109-29). The first main chapter of Jeremy Butler’s *Television Style* takes us through sub-sections ‘Soap Opera *Mise-en-scène*’; ‘Soap Opera Videographic Properties’; ‘Visual Style and Editing’; ‘Soap Opera Time and Rhythm’; and ‘Soap Opera Sound’ (2010: 26-69). All of these books are by distinguished television scholars, and all contribute greatly to our understanding of television, and particular programmes. But the way in which their accounts are structured means that the treatment of form and style remains somewhat atomistic. Perhaps style is a good servant but a terrible master. Perhaps it is a relief and a blessing that style is now firmly and explicitly ‘on the agenda’ in television studies, but a disappointment that there appears to be some difficulty in attending to style in a way that goes beyond cataloguing devices, describing moments, or explicating particular programmes. This article proposes that we can usefully supplement our understanding of how television drama works by adopting an approach that shifts the attention from individual stylistic elements to some key elements of overall form, and by blending an attention to form with a sensitivity to the social world that television drama depicts and which its form configures.

Before we commence the work of close analysis, let us briefly explore the name of the approach I offer here: a ‘formal and social poetics’. When we study the ‘poetics’ of an artistic medium (or mode, or genre), we explore its general principles of construction: the ways in which it is made, and made to make sense. My choice of the term ‘poetics’ conveys my aim to propose general analytical categories which can form the basis for subsequent acts of interpretation and criticism. To borrow Jonathan Culler’s helpful formulation, ‘Rather than a criticism which discovers or assigns meanings, […] a poetics strives to define the conditions of meaning’ (1975, viii). ‘Social’ is a shorthand indication of the fact that the analytical tools that will be offered all focus on a theoretically-neglected but experientially-fundamental aspect of television drama: the social interactions it depicts. In short, what do we see characters do, with whom, and where? These questions (which will be developed further towards the end of this article) give us things to focus on in our analyses of individual scenes; by asking them of a television drama across its entire duration, they help us to notice which species of social interaction are readily or only rarely accommodated by its particular configuration of people and place.

One intention behind offering this particular brand of poetics is to bridge a gap between more formalist and more realist approaches to television drama. The formal and social poetics proposed here does not inquire after shot lengths or staging schemas (though, as we shall see, it can draw such data into its analyses), but it does rely upon an awareness and exploration of the construction, the ‘poesis’, of the object explored. It is not a procedure, as quantitative content analysis is, for measuring how closely events in television drama approximate events in the real world, in terms of details or relative frequency, but it does offer helpful ways of getting at why particular types of dramas might be better able than others to satisfactorily depict certain dimensions of experience.

The structure of what follows approximates the structure of the thinking process which produced it. I present a series of scenes from the British television drama *Happy Valley* (2014-), and compare and contrast those scenes with similar scenes we might encounter in contemporary British soap opera – if indeed there are similar scenes; in the instances where I argue there are not, I reflect upon why this might be. This comparison arose from coincidence: I happened to be working on *Coronation Street* (1960-) and the television drama of Sally Wainwright separately, and found that the two sets of viewing started to inform one another in interesting ways. It is worth at least briefly mentioning that there are several overlaps between *Coronation Street* and Sally Wainwright’s work. Early in her career, Wainwright was a *Coronation Street* scriptwriter. Various *Coronation Street* stars have gone on to have significant roles in Wainwright dramas (Sarah Lancashire, Suranne Jones and Julie Hesmondhalgh). Most of Sally Wainwright’s dramas are, like *Coronation Street*, set in the north of England – though more typically in West Yorkshire than Greater Manchester (the setting for *Coronation Street*) – among communities that are predominantly (though not exclusively) white.

In what follows, the reader should be warned, soap plays a supporting role to *Happy Valley*, rather than being a joint lead. Elsewhere, I have explored and celebrated the particular formal possibilities and achievements of soap (Zborowski 2016a, Zborowski 2019). In presenting my arguments here, I have elected to pair closer analysis of sequences from *Happy Valley*, my principal case study object, with a more general sense of, and gesturing towards, how British soap opera works, based mainly upon my recent focused viewing of *Coronation Street* for other projects. Readers well-informed of British soap operas will be able to identify exceptions to the general rules I suggest. However, I invite such readers to treat my soap-related descriptions as relating to how soaps *generally* function, rather than as exception-free rules. ‘Stunt’ episodes of soaps are ripples on the surfaces of very deep lakes; the features I am mainly interested in exploring here are more cumulative and in-built premises, and therefore less susceptible to short-term alteration.

**Scene One: Character Walks into a Bar**

Towards the end of the first episode of *Happy Valley*’s second series, there is a scene where a character (played by Shirley Henderson) walks into a bar. At this point in the drama, the main thing we know about this character is that she has a romantic attachment to the main antagonist of series one, the kidnapper, murderer and rapist Tommy Lee Royce (James Norton), whom we have seen her visit in the London prison where he is serving a lengthy sentence. Now, in this twenty-second, four-shot scene, we see her checking into an inn in Hebden Bridge, the series’ principal location.

The first shot is an establishing shot: at the left of the frame, the bar, with its gleaming row of pumps, makes clear that we are in a pub. At the rear of the frame, we see a bedraggled and beladen figure bumble through the entrance. A cut in confirms that this is indeed the same luggage-encumbered woman who travelled to London to visit Royce. The cut is timed to coincide with the moment she negotiates, with her large suitcase, the small step down into the main bar area, which causes her to stumble slightly. Next comes a brief long-lens panning shot that tracks the character across the bar, keeping the other planes out of focus, and comes to rest as she announces to the woman behind the computer terminal (who also has her back to us) that she has a reservation. She is asked for her name, and a slightly sinister note is struck as we cut in to a medium shot and watch this woman, with her undisclosed agenda, from behind her fogged-up spectacles, and in her warbling but precise tone, provide it: ‘Frances Drummond’.

British soap operas include plenty of scenes in bars and pubs, which often feature entrances and/or exits by various characters. How is the scene just described different from these scenes? We might begin with a formalist answer, focused on visual style. A lot of the compositional choices are motivated by a decision to funnel our attention almost exclusively towards Frances, to the exclusion of the other personages in the bar, who are not, never have been, and, as it turns out, never become individuated characters. The framing is Frances-centred. The editing is in step with her gestures and responses. Shots are composed to keep other characters anonymous. Lenses are chosen to keep Frances in focus and other things out of it.

Scenes in the Rovers Return, the Queen Vic, the Woolpack, and so on, do not tend to be shot this way, and this formal distinction is the surface manifestation of some of the different possibilities that are available to soap operas and other dramas for presenting characters. The public spaces that appear in soap operas are, for the most part, places where most (if not all) of the characters know each other, and we as viewers know most (if not all) of the characters. There is familiarity all round. One important consequence of this is that focusing on an individual character to the extent that the scene from *Happy Valley* described above does is not a ready option. Individual shots in soap scenes will of course frequently favour individual characters, or pairs. But it would feel strained and odd to show us one soap character enter a location filled with other regular cast members, and withhold entirely, through framing and staging, a proper view of those cast members.

**Scene Two: Homes, Intimacy, and Privacy**

The scene that immediately follows Frances’s arrival in Hebden Bridge takes us back to an established location: the house of Detective John Wadsworth (Kevin Doyle) and his family. Note that this is an appropriate way to describe the setting, whereas in a soap opera it would usually be more appropriate to refer to a home using the family surname, or the names of all the people who live there, because soap does not, in the long run, make any of the members of its cast more or less ‘main’ than others. In *Happy Valley*, though, it is John and not his wife or children that we follow out of the house, to work, to his extra-marital affair, and so on, and this affects how scenes featuring him and his family are constructed, and how we react to them. After an establishing shot of the exterior of the house, the scene takes place in a living room, unlike the majority of the scenes in John’s house throughout the series, which take place in the kitchen, often at breakfast time. We join the action in the middle of a conversation between John and his wife Amanda (Julie Hesmondhalgh), which concerns John’s whereabouts the night before.

Details of performance and of set design add a little more texture to the sketch of the couple’s marriage we have been given so far. We already know John is having an affair, but also that he has, so far, neither confessed nor been caught, and indeed has now sought to break the affair off. So, this is a marriage which has not been entirely given up on, but one in which intimacy and openness have decayed. This state of affairs is captured from the moment we enter the scene, by the postures of the couple. Neither is relaxed; both appear poised to leave the room at short notice, especially Amanda, who is perched on the arm of a sofa, right next to the door. Is this a room where intimacy and good company are sometimes enjoyed, or used to be? It is hard to say, but the lack of a warm glow, of instruments of cosiness (beyond a couple of cushions), and of family photographs in the small corner of the room that we are shown suggest perhaps not. Amanda listens sympathetically to John’s account of how he passed out (which, as we know, is the truth, but not the whole truth), but only moves from her perching position to go and make coffee for the two of them, a gesture of care that at the same time is a way of leaving the room, and avoiding the intimacy of touch.

Is it easier to shape domestic interiors to the emotional demands of a particular scene when, as is the case here, that interior is a single-use set, never to appear onscreen again? Quite possibly. Another distinction from soap opera that can be found in this scene is its handling of the possibility of a character achieving privacy, or more pointedly, concealment, in her or his home. After Amanda leaves the room, John receives a call from his jilted lover Vicky (Amelia Bullmore), who proceeds to blackmail him. Adultery and blackmail, separately and together, are common plot devices in soap opera. However, unlike in soap opera, John is able to carve out for himself, and the episode is able to carve out for the viewer, a moment of privacy within his own home, where it does not feel like a pressing possibility that this explosive conversation might be overheard. John pushes the living room door ajar, and we know that Amanda is engaged in coffee making. We are drawn into John’s experience of the situation through close-ups, cuts to Vicky on the other end of the phone, and building dramatic music. There is also the crucial matter of layout. Domestic settings in soap operas are often highly permeable spaces, with a single group of adjoining rooms usually standing in for the house as a whole. For example, in *Coronation Street*, the original (and still-present) houses – like the Barlows’ – have a kitchen to one side of a central room (often through an archway, not a door) and a hallway to the other. The newer flats and houses tend to be open-plan, and in a house like the Platts’, a small entrance hall opens straight out onto the main living area, which isn’t separated from the kitchen by a wall, and which has a staircase at the back of the same single space. The result: just as there is precious little anonymity in soaps’ public spaces, there is not much privacy in its domestic ones.

**Scenes three and four: Character hierarchies and professional identities**

A pair of consecutive scenes near the beginning of the second episode of *Happy Valley*’s second series provides a useful example of the patterns of character alignment (Smith 1995: 142-86) that the series employs, and how these differ from those of soap opera.

The first of these two scenes shows the series’ main protagonist, Sergeant Catherine Cawood (Sarah Lancashire), descending the stairs of the police station on her way to make an arrest. She is first stopped by her immediate superior, Inspector Mike Taylor (Rick Warden), and then passes and begrudgingly acknowledges DSI Andy Shepherd (Vincent Franklin), and almost completely ignores DI Jodie Shackleton (Katherine Kelly). (As we understand from the previous episode, this is because Catherine has been questioned by the detectives and asked to provide an alibi so that she can be ruled out as a suspect in the investigation into the murder of Tommy Lee Royce’s mother.) Unlike the scene where Frances checks in at the bar, the characters Catherine encounters are characters we have seen before and will see again – and moreover, especially in the cases of Shepherd and Shackleton, they are characters we often see in scenes that do not even feature Catherine. Nevertheless, they do not vie for prominence with Catherine. This hierarchy of character prominence can prove dramatically useful. If we try to imagine a soap scene where one character treats others brusquely, it would be hard to avoid that scene being ‘about’ everyone, almost equally. In the scene under discussion, we see and understand the reactions of other characters, but Catherine is very much in the spotlight of our attention and our empathy, and it is she that the scene is largely constructed around – the camera follows her as she descends the stairs.

Soaps give every character a private life, and are not necessarily always the better for it. Having a hierarchy of primary and secondary characters can often better serve the demands of structure, realism and identification. Structure: if a character has a sharply defined and delimited function in a larger drama, their traits can more easily be made a perfect fit (or an interesting misfit) with that function. The function of *Happy Valley*’sMike, which actor Rick Warden captures perfectly, is to be the one whose job is to wearily but doggedly make Catherine abide by procedures. To follow Mike home would be to dilute this function. Realism and identification: a differentiated structure of closeness to a drama’s characters embraces more of the spectrum of intimacy we experience in our own lives. There are some people we go home to, others we only know professionally, and still others whom we see once, and never again. Soap democratically – and in many ways wonderfully – embraces all its characters equally. Other types of television drama are more able to cast their spotlight more selectively.

In the scene that follows, Catherine marches a handcuffed school student to her police car. The student is a one-scene criminal, and therefore this scene focuses exclusively upon Catherine’s professional identity; it features no ongoing relationships.

Do characters in British soaps have professional identities? Yes and no. The particular personae of soap characters can make them good fits with their jobs: bar staff need to be gregarious most of the time and able to take charge when necessary; market stall owners and shopkeepers will be well served by a silver tongue, and so on. However, it is very difficult for a soap opera to make a character’s professional identity stand above and apart from the web of personal relationships that are the soap’s central concern. Typically, a soap character’s job will not take them away from the soap’s principal location; it will entail interactions principally or exclusively with other residents of that location (ie. other core cast members); and during those interactions, the key topic of conversation will be personal relationships, while the pint gets pulled, or the food served, or the hair cut, or the underwear sewn. Similar points concerning British soap’s difficulty in incorporating what we might term a ‘public sphere’ have been made by Jordan (1981), Dodd and Dodd (1992), and Geraghty (1992).

**Scene five: Two old acquaintances bump into each other**

The final scene to be analysed comes early in the first episode of the second series, and shows Catherine’s sister Clare (Siobhan Finneran) bumping into an old school friend, Neil (Con O’Neill) outside a convenience store in Hebden Bridge.

The pertinent point of contrast with soap opera here is that the situation the scene depicts depends on a differently-drawn geography from that of soaps. *Happy Valley* uses a slightly broader geographical action space, still focused enough for characters to share points of reference (a shared school, the ability to quickly name and point to nearby roads and districts, and in this case, a passing familiarity with one another’s biographies), but large enough that regular encounters are not guaranteed. What this configuration of the space of the drama permits, in this scene, is an exchange in which the two characters try to balance the demands of politeness, honesty, and circumspection during the process of offering accounts of themselves to one another. Clare obeys courtesy’s demand that she recall details of Neil’s biography – married, good job, living in a nearby well-to-do area – but this leads to Neil briefly reporting a string of setbacks: divorce, the loss of his job, and of his house. The potential awkwardness is overcome, though, with euphemism, self-effacement, and shared goodwill. The two are clearly taken with one another straight away. Reciprocal smiles quickly kick in, and soon tip over into shared moments of delight, first when Clare lands on, and places in verbal quotation marks, the word ‘entanglements’ to describe her romantic history. Neil’s fondness for Clare is disarming: he tells her ‘I’ve often thought about you’; ‘Have you?’ she responds with surprise; ‘occasionally wondered what you were up to’, he quickly responds, putting on a voice for the ‘occasionally’, sending himself up and reaffirming his sincerity at the same time (another moment of shared delight). Geography becomes dramatically useful once again as the conversation draws to a close. Clare, wanting Neil to visit, tells him where she lives – and his disarming response is to immediately make plans to stop by that very afternoon!

The key ingredient of drama is interaction – of characters with their world, most prominently other people in that world – and different facets of a character will be revealed by placing that character in different types of interaction. *Happy Valley*, the product of one of contemporary British television’s very best dramatists, deploys the formal possibilities of television drama to wring maximum eloquence out of a series of different configurations of people, place and action. We are shown a character venturing into anonymous territory and interacting with people she doesn’t know. A scene, made to stand out from other scenes in the same house due to the location chosen and the absence of children, offers a vivid sketch of an ailing marriage. Catherine’s interactions with secondary characters who are colleagues and not friends, with the criminals she deals with, and with the members of the public she assists show us her professional identity. A chance encounter between two old acquaintances marks the beginning of a relationship, and also provides an occasion for characters to provide to the viewer information not only about their life histories, but about the stories about those histories they are able and willing to tell (this being one of the key preoccupations of Wainwright’s drama in particular).

**Questions worth asking of television drama**

If we try to take a step backwards in the analyses offered above, and formulate a set of general questions that would invite the observations and points made, the following questions would cover a lot of the relevant ground. They focus on character interactions and experience, and move from the general to the specific. (The questions below, and my whole approach, possess affinities with Babette B. Tischleder’s excellent Bakhtinian analysis of ‘serial chronotopes’ and ‘thickening seriality’ in her 2017 article, but a crucial difference is that characters are given a much more central place in my focus and organisation.)

1. Over how large a space does the drama’s onscreen action unfold? How permeable is that space?

2. Is there a structural hierarchy of characters? Two sub-questions which might help answer this question are:  
i) Are some characters shown only in certain contexts/locations/roles, or only when other more central characters are present, whereas others are followed wherever they are going and whatever they are doing?  
ii) Does the drama use single-scene or single-episode speaking characters?

3. Does the drama’s sphere of action and structural hierarchy permit the depiction of characters’ professional identities separate from their personal identities?

4. What kinds of other characters along the following spectrum of familiarity do the main characters encounter?

i) Family members.

ii) Friends.

iii) Colleagues.

iv) Clients, customers, etc.

v) Neighbours.

vi) Strangers.

5. Does the drama include encounters that permit characters to reflect upon and articulate their experiences and understandings of their own lives?

We might note that, with the exception of question 2ii), these questions are not television-specific. They apply without modification to other types of screen fiction, including narrative fiction films, and can also be applied, perhaps with minor modification, to theatre, and even to prose fiction. However, they may achieve their fullest effectiveness when used for the analysis of serial screen drama, including soap opera. One of the key facts about long-running serial dramas, which television scholars are still trying to find good ways of dealing with, is that they unfold over a long duration. At its most elementary, analysis simply uses duration as a proxy for depth of characterisation. At its worst, such analysis draws unexamined parallels with novels. The problem is a real one: how do we avoid overwhelming and exhausting our readers with an abundance of detail? How do we best cut through to revealing overall patterns? The categories proposed by Jason Mittell in *Complex TV* (2015) offer a range of excellent ways of parsing the structures of long-running serial dramas. But there remains room for more entry points and hooks that will allow us to clearly describe to our readers, and to ourselves, some of the most important aspects of the patterns of interaction and the realms of experience revealed over time by different television dramas.

Another way in which the proposed questions might prove television-specific, or at least particularly useful for television criticism, is that they may offer tools for an historical poetics of television – that is, ways of exploring how the structures and possibilities of television drama have evolved over time. The questions posed above drive revealing wedges between dramas that unfold in a single location and those that incorporate multiple ones, and between dramas that are studio-bound and those that include location shooting. Such distinctions are especially pertinent in the analysis of the historical development of television.

In recent years a lively and fascinating debate has unfolded regarding academic television criticism’s evaluative criteria – what they might be, or whether indeed they and the whole enterprise of television criticism are theoretically possible or ideologically desirable (Geraghty 2003, Hills 2005 and 2011, Jacobs 2001 and 2006, Piper 2016, Zborowski 2016b). I am inclined to defer the question, and pursue instead not criteria for excellence (or opprobrium), but further-refined analytical tools. The questions proposed above cannot be made to act in any straightforward way as evaluative criteria. It is no contradiction to this, by the way, that I have ended up having a few semi-sharp words to say about the limits of soap opera representation. The tools do not come with a requirement that those using them can draw no conclusions or make no judgments, and indeed the tools can help to point their user in those directions. The point is that soap opera is not simply being judged against the criteria imposed wholly from the outside, as it were, but in terms of the overall effects revealed when we use the criteria together to help build a picture of what kind of a thing soap opera is, coupled with our sense of what kind of a thing it aims to be. In this case, my evaluative comments were informed by my sense that one important aspiration of British soap opera is to represent the realities of the lives of its characters. At this point in the life of soap opera studies, we do our object of study no favours by deciding in advance that we are only going to celebrate its achievements, or by pretending that it is capable of doing everything. In deferring the evaluative question, and focusing our attention instead upon detailed, careful, reflexive analysis, we may find that when we return to the evaluative question, it has already been answered.

**References**

Butler, J. (2010), *Television Style*, London: Routledge.

Culler, J. (1975), *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Dodd, K. and Dodd, P. (1992), ‘From the East End to *EastEnders*: Representations of the working class, 1890-1990’, in D. Strinati and S. Wagg (eds), *Come On Down? Popular media culture in post-war Britain*, London: Routledge, pp. 116-32.

Geraghty, C. (1992), ‘British soaps in the 1980s’, in D. Strinati and S. Wagg (eds), *Come On Down? Popular media culture in post-war Britain*, London: Routledge, pp. 133-49.

Geraghty, C. (2003), ‘Aesthetics and quality in popular television drama’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6:1, pp. 25–45.

Hills, M. (2005), ‘Who wants to be a fan of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* Scholarly television criticism, “popular aesthetics” and academic tastes’ in C. Johnson and R. Turnock (eds), *ITV Cultures: Independent Television Over Fifty Years*,Maidenhead: Open University Press, pp. 177–95.

Hills, M. (2011), ‘Television aesthetics: a pre-structuralist danger?’, *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 8:1, pp. 99–117.

Jacobs, J, (2001), ‘Issues of judgment and value in television studies’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4:4, pp. 427–47.

Jacobs, J. (2006), ‘Television aesthetics: an infantile disorder’, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 3:1, pp. 19–33.

Jordan, M, (1981), ‘Realism and Convention’, in R. Dyer, C. Geraghty, M. Jordan, T. Lovell, R. Paterson and J. Stewart (eds), *Coronation Street*, London: British Film Institute.

Lury, K. (2005), *Interpreting Television*, London: Hodder Education.

Mittell, J. (2015), *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, New York: New York University Press.

Nelson, R. (2007), *State of play: Contemporary ‘high-end’ TV drama*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Piper, H, (2016), ‘Broadcast drama and the problem of television aesthetics: home, nation, universe’, *Screen*,57:2, pp. 163-83.

Smith, M. (1995), *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Tischleder, B. B (2017), ‘Thickening Seriality: A Chronotopic View of World Building in Contemporary Television Narrative’, *Velvet Light Trap*,79, pp. 120-25.

Zborowski, J. (2016a), ‘Representing the everyday in *Coronation Street* (1960 and 2013)’, *British Television Drama*, <http://www.britishtelevisiondrama.org.uk/?cat=474>. Accessed 24 August 2018.

Zborowski, J. (2016b), ‘Television aesthetics, media and cultural studies and the contested realm of the social’, *Critical Studies in Television*,11:1, pp. 7-22.

Zborowski, J. (2019), ‘Performance in contemporary *Coronation Street* (1960-)’, in L. Fife Donaldson and J. Walters (eds), *Television Performance*, London: Red Globe Press, pp. 102-116.

**List of Television Programmes**

*Coronation Street* (1960-, UK: ITV)

*Happy Valley* (2014-, UK: BBC)