

## **‘Representing the everyday in *Coronation Street* (1960 and 2013)’**

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(Accompanying powerpoint available on request: J.Zborowski@hull.ac.uk.)

Today I’m going to be talking about representations of the everyday. This is a topic that I seem to keep returning to. I’ve previously written work about the representations of leisure time and details of domestic interiors in UK property programmes, and about the presentation of detail and the organisation of time in the UK sitcom *The Royle Family*. I also teach an undergraduate module called ‘Television, Radio and the Everyday’. I say all this not in order to establish any credentials, but more to indicate where I’m coming from, and to indicate, most importantly, that ‘the everyday’, like many of the most interesting intellectual topics, is a topic that cannot be resolved, only returned to. I haven’t settled on any one method, or genre, for approaching the everyday, so I’m open to suggestions, and hope that people may have words of guidance for me.

One of the particular challenges of attending to the everyday, a challenge brought out especially well by the writings of Ben Highmore, is the need to balance empirical data and theoretical constructs. It seems to me that we must continually strive to do justice to the notion of the everyday as being, in Highmore’s words, ‘a plethora of irreducible particularity’. However, if we want to be more than mere chroniclers (and I’m not saying we necessarily should, but I, like many others, do), then some form of generalising has to occur somewhere. As it turns out, and it came as a bit of a surprise to me, the main theorist whose work my own method kept wanting to loosely approximate when researching this paper was Roland Barthes. In a way, though, this is appropriate and fitting, given Barthes’s joint attention to what

we might call ‘everyday culture’, the poetics of representational forms, and to close reading.

The main thing I’m going to present today is an analysis of two five episode ‘snapshots’ of *Coronation Street*. I have analysed episodes 3 to 7, from December 1960, and episodes 8174 to 8178, from July 2013. This ‘snapshot’ method, by the way, has precedents in the work of Jeremy Butler and Christine Geraghty, and I’ve also found Geraghty’s distinction between the predominantly ‘realist’ mode of old soap opera and the ‘melodramatic’ mode of new very useful. When I sent him a version of this paper, Billy Smart also drew my attention to a piece he has written about how the style of *Coronation Street* changed at the end of the 1980s, which has also been helpful.

I’m going to start with some comparative statistics relating to scene and shot durations and numbers of locations in each episode. I’ll then put some flesh on those bones by considering some potential explanations for the differences I highlight. Finally, with the help of a clip from episode 7, I’ll try to address the central issue of the representation of the everyday.

So, the first part of my analysis was to watch each episode and note scene durations and locations, thus allowing me to calculate for each episode the number of scenes, average scene length, the length of the longest and the shortest scenes, the number of *different* locations used in each episode, and the number of exteriors. So here, briefly, are the stats for the first five episodes:

Episode	Number of scenes	Mean length	Longest	Shortest	Number of different interiors	EXTs
3	8	177 secs	<b>332 secs</b>	43 secs	4	1
4	11	130 secs	153 secs	79 secs	5	0
5	11	128 secs	184 secs	75 secs	5	1
6	15	94 secs	261 secs	18 secs	4	1
7	16	88 secs	245 secs	<b>7 secs</b>	5	1
<b>Overall</b>	12.2	123 secs	<b>332 secs</b>	<b>7 secs</b>	4.6	0.8

and for five recent episodes:

Episode	Number of scenes	Mean length	Longest	Shortest	Number of different interiors	EXTs
8174	18	72 secs	102 secs	31 secs	11	4
8175	20	62 secs	<b>151 secs</b>	<b>19 secs</b>	8	3
8176	20	65 secs	113 secs	20 secs	11	1
8177	18	72 secs	114 secs	38 secs	12	1
8178	15	85 secs	133 secs	43 secs	5	3
<b>Overall</b>	18.2	71 secs	<b>151 secs</b>	<b>19 secs</b>	9.4	2.4

These statistics become more interesting and revealing when you average them out for each of the two five episode snapshots and compare them.

	Number of scenes	Mean length	Longest	Shortest	Number of different interiors	EXTs
<b>1960</b>	12.2	123 secs	332 secs	7 secs	4.6	0.8
<b>2013</b>	18.2	71 secs	151 secs	19 secs	9.4	2.4

So we can see that compared with today, the very early episodes of *Coronation Street* had fewer scenes across fewer different locations. Logically, fewer scenes means that each one is longer, almost twice as long on average as a contemporary scene, but note also how the *range* of different scene lengths in the early episodes is

so much greater. The longest scene in the early episodes is more than twice as long as the longest in the contemporary ones. Perhaps slightly more surprisingly, the shortest scene in the early episodes is nearly three times as short as that in the contemporary ones.

So what we can see here is the two moments of *Coronation Street* exhibiting two different kinds of variety. In the contemporary episodes, a main source of variety is to move quickly between a large number of different locations (though not actually that many more *storylines*, it should be said). In the early episodes, variety is provided instead by scenes of differing lengths.

I'll have more to say about these macro-level statistics later, but for now let's turn our attention to something a bit more fine-grained. From within my five episode samples, I chose one episode, and counted the number of shots in each scene.

	Number of shots	Duration	Average shot length
<b>Ep. 6 (1960)</b>	112	1353 secs	<b>12.08 secs</b>
<b>Ep. 8176 (2013)</b>	319	1312 secs	<b>4.11 secs</b>

For the 1960 episode, the average shot length was 12.08 seconds, and for the 2013 episode it was 4.11 seconds.

David Bordwell makes use of average shot length data in his work, particularly that on Hollywood cinema. In a very useful article 'Intensified Continuity', Bordwell links the dropping average shot length of Hollywood movies to a range of other 'stylistic tactics', the most germane of which for my purposes today is 'more close framings in dialogue scenes'. Comparing the visual styles of my two sets of five

episodes, it's true that one finds close-ups in the early episodes and some limited staging in depth in the contemporary episodes, but overall it is true to say that contemporary *Coronation Street* is heavily built around shot-reverse shot medium close-ups, whereas the early episodes often favour frontal long two shots as a default staging schema. In fact, even when the staging set-up means that a long take would be possible as long as the actors were careful with their heads, contemporary *Coronation Street* still opts for analytical editing.

It makes sense that shorter shots and closer framings go together as a rule, because if the viewer has less time to decide what to look at, the thing that they need to see had better be right there in front of them. Although the more flexible editing procedures of contemporary soap opera compared with early soap opera filming *facilitate* lots of cutting, the shooting procedures in no way *necessitate* it. It seems rather to be a way of doing things that stems from a perceived need, in a highly competitive television environment, to keep things moving.

However, the persistent pursuit of such stylistic options have their costs, as Bordwell notes.

In intensified continuity, the face is privileged, especially the mouth and eyes. [...] Eyes have always been central to Hollywood cinema, but usually they were accompanied by cues emanating from the body. Performers could express emotion through posture, stance, carriage, placement of arms, and even the angling of the feet. Actors knew how to rise from chairs without using hands to leverage themselves, to pour drinks steadily for many seconds, to give away nervousness by letting a fingertip twitch.

Physiques [...] are more frankly exposed than ever before, but they seldom acquire grace or emotional significance.

Moving back across to my case studies, I would note that the default framing choices of contemporary *Coronation Street*, along with the accelerated dramatic pace that accompanies them, work together to largely preclude the representation of leisure and other everyday activities. A scene in contemporary *Coronation Street* will often begin with a bit of 'business'. For example, the scene between Eileen and Paul shown on a previous slide begins with him polishing his shoes. However, once the dramatic business of the scene gets underway, which usually happens very quickly, we move in to medium close-ups, and aside from taking sips of a drink or bites of a biscuit, or wiping down a table or passing a plate over a counter, the characters will tend to cease other activities and just talk.

In contrast to all this, here is a two and a half minute passage from the seventh episode of *Coronation Street*, broadcast on 28 December 1960.

**[Show clip, beginning - roughly ten and a half minutes into the Network DVD - with the end of Ena's outburst, ending when we cut back to the inside of Elsie's house after the scene with the carol singers.]**

I should admit that this passage is *somewhat* exceptional even for *Coronation Street* of this period. The scene in the pub where Ron Bailey holds forth is exceptional for the fact that it does not advance the plot at all; it is a scene in which a character, for the benefit of his audience, spins yarns about unnamed, offscreen characters. To use Barthes's terminology, we might say that the hermeneutic code is, temporarily, entirely suspended. The same thing happens again with the carol

singers. Note also the stylisation that occurs in the scene in Elsie's parlour. We can see Linda and Ivan, and see their lips moving, but we can't hear what they're saying. This is because what they're saying is not, at this moment, important, and would detract from the point of the scene, which is to offer us a moment of absorption in a banal domestic task: the fixing of a lamp.

I would also note that this passage is somewhat exceptional in presenting a series of single-shot scenes. However, I would immediately add that early *Coronation Street* was better able to accommodate such stylistic *variation* than contemporary *Coronation Street* is. This sequence is exceptional, but early *Coronation Street* was more full of exceptions.

Something that is very common in early *Coronation Street* is for scenes to have developed beginnings, middles and endings. One effect of the greater number of scenes in contemporary *Coronation Street* is that by comparison they feel truncated. There may be, as already mentioned, a token initial phase, but very soon the characters and their dialogue focus entirely upon dramatic problems, and there are rarely the grace notes at the end of scenes that were one of the great pleasures of early *Coronation Street*.

A good example of the earlier approach to scene construction is the first scene of the sixth episode. It begins with Christine Hardiman sitting down doing a bit of sewing. Then her mother, May, comes home along with Esther and Lucille. There is an argument about the garment, ending with Christine throwing it in the fire and storming out. Esther tells May that she will arrange to borrow Ida Barlow's stole for Christine's date. Esther leaves Lucille with May. From behind, we see May stagger, then the screen goes blurry as she is afflicted by head pain. She asks Lucille to stop

her pacing. Lucille kicks off her borrowed heels and sits down, peeved; the scene ends.

Within this rise and fall of dramatic action we get much more than the stand and deliver, or sit and deliver, dialogue that typifies the contemporary programme. Many scenes in early *Coronation Street* will begin with characters alone and doing something for a good few moments until someone enters the room or knocks on the door. Later in the episode we will see May, in the same location, play on the piano for a good while before Esther knocks. Often, a prop will be carried through a fair duration of the scene too, giving the actor a prop to engage with and adding texture and rootedness to the scene. Here, that prop is the garment Christine is sewing.

The final analytical procedure I subjected the episodes to, and the final thing I'll talk about before concluding, was to go through one episode from each set of five and, for each scene, come up with somewhat Barthes-like 'codes' for what was going on in each scene. I'll show you what I mean in a minute. The purpose of this was to try to substantiate and further flesh out my sense that early *Coronation Street* not only finds more time, and space, for the representation of moments of leisure, pause, and domestic labour, but also that it possesses not only a slower dramatic pace, but a lower dramatic pitch. It is probably something of a critical commonplace that soap operas nowadays have more conflict and antagonism on display than they used to, but I still found it revealing to use tools of close analysis to develop this intuition. So here are my unscientific but detailed 'tags', to use a contemporary term, for the two episodes in turn.

**[Circulate handout - see pages 11 and 12 of this document]**



There's too much for me to address in what I say, which is why I've drawn out some key tags and their frequency at the bottom. I should say that although the statistics for conflict and misanthropy are not as different as I thought they would be, we need also to distinguish between the severity and distribution of these things, which the tagging system cannot do. Some of the conflict in the 1960 episode revolves around Lucille messing around in Christine's frock, and it's resolved by the end of the episode. By contrast, in the 2013 episode, the conflict is generally much more acrimonious. Indeed, conflict and misanthropy are generally much closer to the surface, and spread across many more characters, and it apparently takes very little to draw these things out. Tracy and Rob are, of course, villains, and constantly needle everyone they encounter. However, in the cafe, Roy, Anna and Sylvia very quickly start squabbling. Sally uses Paul's *laughter* as a pretext for attacking him in the pub, and is soon offered a 'bed in A and E' by Eileen for her trouble. Although Nick and Leanne and Peter and Carla have a history, it seems simply mean-spirited for Leanne to say 'Looks like the alkies are getting spliced' and for Nick to add 'At least they'll be out of our hair.'

This difference in emotional tenor, if we can call it that, is, I think, heightened by the fact that in contemporary *Coronation Street*, characters barely pause for breath before talking about their problems and each other - and nothing else. Early *Coronation Street* made the time and the space to show us its characters reading, sewing, playing the piano, ironing, waiting, pacing, fixing a lamp, twirling, and singing. And all of this in just one episode. Often, characters would do these things *alone*, at least for a few moments.

Of course, everyday life itself has changed significantly for working people in Manchester between 1960 and 2013. However, the thing that I've been focusing on in

this paper is that *Coronation Street*'s ways and means of *representing that everyday* have also changed. More specifically, they have narrowed quite substantially, and I take this to constitute a loss that is both aesthetic and social.

## Coronation Street, Episode 6 (28 December 1960)

Scene	'Actions'/[Staging/mise-en-scene]	'Codes'
1 (Hardimans') <i>Christine and May argue over a garment; May suffers with head pain.</i>	<b>sewing</b> , sitting, throwing a garment in the fire ['subjective' shot]	family, <b>conflict</b> , fashion, neighbourly support, borrowing, dressing-up
2 (Elsie's) <i>Dennis's recent trouble with the police is discussed.</i>	pouring tea, <b>reading</b>	family, <b>conflict, concealment, persecution, chat</b> , leisure, work
3 (Hardimans') <i>May leaves Lucille alone in the house; once the coast is clear, Lucille goes for Christine's dress.</i>	putting on a coat and hat, <b>reading</b> on the floor, looking in the mirror	family, reading, <b>chat</b> , fashion, domesticity, childhood, school
4 (Hospital) <i>Ena accuses Esther of trying to steal her job.</i>	[staging around a bed]	family, <b>conflict</b> , illness, <b>misanthropy</b>
5 (Rovers) <i>Ron Bailey holds forth about the life of an insurance salesman.</i>	[staging around a bar, single shot]	male camaraderie, tale-telling, drinking, <b>chat</b>
6 (Elsie's) <i>Elsie's is disturbed from her ironing by carol singers.</i>	ironing, fixing a lamp [single shot]	chores, <b>interruption</b> , domesticity
7 (Outside Elsie's) <i>She chastises them but gives them some coins anyway.</i>	[single shot]	children, Christmas, community, singing
8 (Elsie's) <i>Elsie worries about Dennis.</i>	[single shot]	family, chores, domesticity, worry
9 (Hardimans') <i>Lucille twirls in Christine's frock; Christine returns, berates Lucille, then bursts into tears when she sees dirt on the hem.</i>	sustained silent twirling	childhood, fashion, mischief, dressing-up, <b>conflict</b>
End of part one		
10 (Hardimans') <i>The dress has been cleaned and all is well. May, Esther and Lucille see Christine off when she is called on by Malcolm.</i>	<b>piano playing</b>	reconciliation, courtship, dressing-up, music, <b>interruption</b>
11 (Elsie's) <i>Dennis reveals that the police suspect him of a robbery and he has no alibi.</i>	[staging around a table]	<b>conflict, persecution</b> , crime, family, <b>waiting</b> , worry
12 (Rovers) <i>Esther gossips about Ena. Harry talks to Elsie and it turns out that he saw Dennis at the time of the robbery (elsewhere) so can act as his alibi.</i>	[staging around a table]	gossip, resolution, support, crime, <b>humour</b>
13 (Elsie's) <i>Ivan returns just in time to deliver the good news to Dennis and thus prevent him from eloping.</i>	[single shot]	<b>resolution</b> , support, family, <b>persecution</b>
14 (Hospital) <i>A nurse finds Ena's bed empty.</i>	[single shot]	illness, <b>humour</b>
15 (Outside hall) <i>Christine and Malcolm kiss and talk over their evening. Ena steps out of a taxi, berates the driver, and goes into the community hall.</i>		courtship, romance, <b>humour, misanthropy</b>

conflict: 5 (33%); misanthropy: 2 (13% - and one character!); persecution: 3 (20%); concealment: 1 (7%); humour: 3 (20%)

## Coronation Street, Episode 8176 (24 July 2013)

Scene	'Actions'/[Staging/mise-en-scene]	'Codes'
1 (Croppers') <i>Hayley escorts a sleepwalking (sleep-cleaning) Roy back to bed.</i>	cleaning a table [single shot]	illness, caring for a loved one, relationships, support
2 (Eileen's) <i>Eileen and Paul talk over his disciplinary hearing.</i>	polishing shoes, putting shoes on [shot-reverse shot, MCUs]	work-related problems, persecution (perceived), relationships, <b>conflict</b> , support, advice
3 (Croppers') <i>Sylvia adopts some of Hayley's chores; Roy researches cancer on his laptop.</i>	laptop, dusting, putting kettle on [staging in depth]	illness, caring for a loved one, relationships, support, family
4 (EXT) <i>Carla, trying to motivate Peter, offers him work at the factory; Paul emerges from Eileen's house and there is a cross-street slanging match about his racist comment in the pub.</i>	[walk-and-talk staging followed by MCU SRS]	<b>conflict</b> , despondency, relationships, racism
5 (Croppers') <i>Roy tries to persuade Hayley to eat healthily and to rest.</i>	eating (minimal) [staging around a table]	conflict, illness, caring for a loved one, relationships, support, health, advice, support, family
6 (Shop) <i>Jason helps Tracy and Rob convert Peter's bookmakers into a pawn shop.</i>	'measuring up', petting [MCU SRS]	enterprise, <b>conflict</b> , <b>misanthropy</b>
7 (Factory floor) <i>Hayley persuades Carla to let her work and not let the other worker's know about Hayley's diagnosis.</i>	walking across a room, standing with a drink and a biscuit [SRS]	employer-employee relationships, female camaraderie, <b>concealment</b> , <b>humour</b> , solicitude, work, support
8 (Bar) <i>Leanne tries to help Nick figure out who has it in for him.</i>	getting off the phone, standing behind the bar [MCU SRS]	<b>persecution</b> , relationships, advice, support, work-related problems, work
9 (Deidre's) <i>Carla visits Deidre for advice about how to get through to Peter.</i>	visiting, sipping drinks [staging around a table, MCU SRS]	family, despondency, advice, support
End of part one		
10 (Cafe) <i>Frayed tempers in the cafe lead to Roy and Anna storming out on separate family matters.</i>	serving food, being served, laptop [staging around a counter]	employer-employee relationships, work, family, illness, family breakdown, <b>conflict</b> , <b>concealment</b>
11 (Shop) <i>Peter argues with Rob about the value of some assets; Tracy tries to mediate.</i>	disturbed by a phone call, standing and arguing [MCU SRS]	<b>conflict</b> , family, attempted mollification, enterprise, money, <b>misanthropy</b>
12 (Cafe) <i>Hayley arrives to collect Roy but he is still out.</i>	wiping menus	family, relationships, illness, work, support
13 (Anna's) <i>Tim tells Faye (his daughter) that he is leaving in search of work.</i>	[sitting on a sofa and chair; MCU SRS]	family, family breakdown, abandonment, fatherhood, <b>conflict</b>
14 (Bar) <i>Carla has two proposals for Peter, Nick laments his misfortune.</i>	eating a pasty [staging around a table, and a bar]	<b>conflict</b> , <b>concealment</b> , <b>persecution</b> , <b>deception</b> , relationships, romance, support
15 (Rovers) <i>Paul and Eileen's drink is disturbed when Sally verbally attacks Paul for his earlier behaviour; Eileen and Sally have to be restrained from hitting one another.</i>	near-physical violence	<b>conflict</b> , <b>physical aggression</b> , relationships, support, racism
16 (Bar) <i>Carla asks Peter to become her business partner and her husband.</i>	[staging around a table, MCU SRS]	relationships, proposal, support, marriage, romance, enterprise
17 (Rovers) <i>Tim shares his problems with Sally; she encourages him not to move away.</i>	[MCU SRS]	solicitude, support, advice, friendship, romance
18 (Hospital) <i>Hayley arrives at hospital; Roy too, just in time.</i>	[walk-and-talk]	relationships, support, health
19 (Bar) <i>Carla and Peter continue to talk; Nick et al look on and make off-colour remarks.</i>		relationships, proposal, support, marriage, enterprise, romance, <b>misanthropy</b>
20 (Hospital) <i>Roy and Hayley express different perspectives on Hayley's illness.</i>	[sitting next to each other]	relationships, support, health

conflict: 8 (40%); misanthropy: 3 (15% - and several characters!); persecution: 2 (10%); concealment: 3 (15%); humour: 1 (5%)