

Death of a matriarch: soap opera aesthetics, space and memory

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Woods, F. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8901-6524>
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Death of a matriarch: Soap opera aesthetics, space and memory

Faye Woods 
University of Reading, UK

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Abstract

The deaths of long-running, elderly characters offer up a chance to consider the ebb and flow and circular nature of soap narratives. This article uses the deaths of three of *EastEnders*'s matriarchs to think about the soap opera's use of aesthetics and space, alongside its layering of memory. Pat Butcher, Peggy Mitchell and Dot Cotton's deaths – two on screen and one off – saw the programme intensify and disrupt its aesthetic and narrative conventions to signify these deaths as intensely emotional 'events'. These endings were moments of pause in the ever-onwards flow of soap narrative. Long-running elderly characters embody soap memory, and through these deaths *EastEnders* revisited deep layers of its past to pay tribute to departing iconic characters by employing 'practices of self-citations and self-referentiality' (Holdsworth, 2011: 37). Here, objects and spaces, remembrances and returns are used to enrich the experience of long-time viewers. This article considers the use of Albert Square as a 'time-rich' (Lury, 2005:16) space and presents these episodes as examples of how the programme can shift its aesthetic conventions and unsettle its spatial dynamics for affective impact.

Keywords

Soap opera, death, memory, space, television

Introduction

Endings produce moments of closure and pause within the ever-ongoing flow of soap opera narrative. They can draw out the expressive potential and emotional complexity of

Corresponding author:

Faye Woods, University of Reading, Minghella Studios, Whiteknights, Reading RG6 6BT, UK.
Email: f.woods@reading.ac.uk

the genre's storytelling. Here, I explore how British evening soap *EastEnders* (1985-) marked the deaths of three iconic, long-running characters by intensifying and disrupting its conventional storytelling choices. In these episodes, the programme speaks directly to long-time viewers by drawing on narrative memory to pay tribute to these characters and their performers. I analyse how these televisual moments deploy the soap's visual storytelling, its spaces and deep narrative history for affective impact.

The British evening soap is a critically undervalued genre in a televisual and academic landscape more invested in global prestige TV. In addition, the genre's aesthetics and spatial dynamics are too often ignored in favour of discussion of its narrative and representations. The few recent analyses of *EastEnders* that have emerged are primarily focused on socially conscious representations (Franco, 2013) and links to public service and citizenship (Lamuedra and O'Donnell, 2013). There is limited analysis of aesthetics in *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street* (1960-) (Geraghty, 2006; Zborowski, 2022); however, when space and place are discussed, it is largely to frame the worlds of British evening soaps as detached from the now, as 'nostalgic' communities with few links to the contemporary cities and regions they are set in (Newland, 2008).

Airing four thirty-minute episodes a week and produced on a tight production schedule, *EastEnders* eats up narrative, so the fictional London neighbourhood of Albert Square has seen more than its fair share of deaths and funerals. The programme functions as a prime example of television's value as a 'cultural forum for working through or worrying at the impacts of death, or depicting death and the rituals that surround its mourning as an ongoing part of life' (Wheatley, 2024: 132). Soap moves ever onwards, but deaths create moments of pause. Some are given more weight than others, as when *EastEnders* said farewell to its three longest-serving elderly matriarchs: Pat Butcher, Peggy Mitchell and Dot Cotton. These character deaths and funerals were given narrative prominence as soap 'events' scripted by prominent *EastEnders* writers. Pat's death and funeral was chronicled by then lead writer and series consultant Simon Ashdown, and Peggy's demise by Sarah Phelps, a former *EastEnders* writer who returned from a career in prestige drama for the key episodes. Arcing across a week or more of episodes, they drew together present and returning family and community members. The impact of these deaths on the community and viewers was signified by intensifications and disruptions of the soap's storytelling and aesthetic conventions. I focus here on the building of deep multi-layered narratives, together with the affective use of space and aesthetics, deployed to draw out the emotional impact of these deaths.

In 2012, Pat Butcher's death was presented as a familial and communal event, where remembrances of her long life displayed soap's facility with density of narrative. Although Peggy Mitchell's death in 2016 was a solo act, she was accompanied by a vision of Pat, a marked non-naturalistic device that drew on memories of the women's lengthy antagonistic friendship. Dot's off-screen death in 2022 (as June Brown the actress who played her had died earlier that year) resulted in a stronger focus on her funeral as the central narrative event, with her voice making a ghostly return to the Square through the memory object of a tape recording.

The family is soap opera's key organising structure with the mother as its lynchpin, carrying the moral and practical burden of supporting family members and sustaining the

unit through moments of crisis (Geraghty, 1990). So, the matriarch is perhaps the central figure in British evening soap storytelling. These three characters headed biological and found families across their long tenures on the soap. Each married – Pat many times – but I refer to each by their most resonant surname in popular culture. All began their soap life in middle-age and transitioned through different stages of womanhood whilst entangled in complex, at times challenging relationships with their families. They reached the soap-respected position of grandmother – literal and symbolic – at the time of their death. Their death arcs sought to streamline the messy, entangled, narrative breadth of these long-serving characters into clearly arced character touchstones.

The deaths of elderly, long-running characters foreground the ebbs, flows and circles of soap narrative (Holdsworth, 2011: 3). Unlike ‘event’ episodes built around a jagged, sharp shock – a burning building, a car crash, a murder or the revelation of an affair – episodes built around the deaths of elderly or chronically ill characters are slow and contemplative, yet no less affectively drenched. Deaths of long-running characters offer space for contemplation and character returns, a resurfacing of the deep narrative memory that powers soap storytelling. Here, *EastEnders* creatives employed ‘practices of self-citation and self-referentiality’ (37) that prompt long-term viewers to read soap memory onto present events, producing the emotional richness that is a feature of the genre.

Soap aesthetics, melodrama and emotion

The deaths of these matriarchs are given event status, but they do not offer the production spectacle of anniversary live episodes or stunt-based catastrophes. Instead, they produce emotional spectacle by intensifying and disrupting *EastEnders*’s conventional aesthetic and storytelling practices in service of affective impact. The programme conventionally uses realist storytelling, offering verisimilitude in setting and costume. Its relatively unobtrusive visual style is shaped by continuity editing and a time-efficient production process with minimal rehearsal. It uses multi-camera shooting on three-walled domestic sets and a compact and visually rich exterior set, combined with Steadicam for mobile exterior sequences. These techniques facilitate the soap’s fast-paced production schedule whilst also foregrounding the genre’s primary pleasures of writing and performance. A British evening soap grounds itself in the local, familiar everyday of domestic space and the bounded exterior space of its neighbourhood. Compared to the hyper-stylised worlds of many prestige TV series, the production design and visual style of soap presents its spaces as background for performance, interaction and conversation: so familiar to viewers, they become almost invisible, ingrained in the everyday experience of characters’ lives.

However, *EastEnders* regularly uses moments of visual or verbal flourish to accentuate narrative moments. This makes British evening soap opera distinct from the visual dynamics of US daytime soap that Jeremy Butler (2010) reductively defines as ‘zero-degree style’. Analysing ITV’s *Coronation Street*, James Zborowski identifies the ‘periodic use of expressive or even downright flamboyant camerawork’ that ranges ‘from simple but effective moments of psychological expressivity ... to the use of mobile long takes to survey large ensembles’ (2019: 104). In *EastEnders*, moments of visual flourish

draw attention to themselves, although not as the visual spectacle familiar from prestige TV, but as an expressive device in service of affective impact. Christine Becker argues that regular viewers of a soap are so attuned to its 'formal patterns and story rhythms' (2021: 204) and the pleasures these bring that they can recognise any minor deviation as significant. A sudden track in, a Steadicam shot used in interior space, a room shot from an angle that deviates from the expected spatial grammar or the use of montage or non-diegetic music can signal a weight of meaning to regular *EastEnders* viewers. Narrative time can also be manipulated, shifting from the format of 1 day per episode that features multiple storylines to focus a week's episodes on 1 day or night, or telescoping time and storytelling down to almost real time for a single episode. This enables the programme's usually swift narrative movement to linger on and intensify the meaning of an individual storyline.

This article highlights *EastEnders*' use of selective breaks with aesthetic and narrative convention to create emotional impact through moments of expressive *mise-en-scène* and subjective aesthetics. The starkest formal disruption of recent years was the funeral episode of Shakil Kazimi, a teenage victim of knife crime. Becker positions this as a 'very special episode' due to its links to campaigns against knife crime and its startling break with soap form. Here, fictional scenes tracking the preparations for the funeral were intercut with documentary interviews with real-life family members bereaved by knife crime, echoing the experience of Shakil's family. This episode is an extreme example of how soap can depart from its naturalistic conventions in service of emotional expression. Whilst Shakil's funeral pushed the audience out of the fictional world to directly consider real-life victims, the deployment of more minor shifts of *EastEnders*' formal and aesthetic rhythms do not use this disruption to push its audience to a distanced position. Instead, the soap unsettles with the aim of pulling them closer, to connect to characters' emotional instability and rupture.

Christine Geraghty analysed one such week of episodes broadcast in 2001, arguing they illustrate a post-millennial intensification in *EastEnders*'s use of the melodramatic mode (2006: 227). Melodrama has long been a frame for discussing the structures and investments of soap opera, intertwined in the UK with a core of social realism (Geraghty, 1990; Levine, 2018). Ien Ang notes that soap opera draws from melodrama a focus on the personal as the key narrative problematic, a centring of the emotional impact of an intensified plot structure, and lives shaped by contradictions and unsolvable conflicts (2008: 238–39). Geraghty positioned this week of episodes as offering a starker vision of moral and familial conflict than soap's everyday contradictions and conflicts. The programme employed a notable shift in its aesthetic conventions to intensify the emotional impact of the reveal of Zoe Slater's true parentage and Kat Slater's historic childhood abuse by her uncle. Geraghty suggested that the use of the melodramatic mode for such high-impact stories of family fracture reflected the wider social precarity and uncertainty represented by these more challenging storylines. The emotional and familial stakes of this storyline could not be adequately expressed in the programme's conventional realist style that continued on around it. The storyline employed elaborate camerawork, unusual devices such as voice-over and extreme close-ups of eyes and the use of closed doors and doorways to separate and frame characters, emphasising isolation. These episodes

illustrate how British evening soaps blend realist storytelling with moments of aesthetic disruption or intensification in service of affective impact, using a combination of expressive *mise-en-scène*, performance and spatial dynamics. This is mobilised in a range of ways across the deaths of the three elder matriarchs.

Slower and more meditative than the Slater episodes, these ‘event’ deaths illustrate how *EastEnders* produces affective impact by capitalising on the ‘layers of affect’ (Warhol, 2003: 113) built up over a soap’s long run to connect its audience to characters’ grief, sorrow and humour. As Kristyn Gorton notes, ‘long-running story arcs may deliver emotional cues along the way, but only a faithful viewer will experience the full emotional impact of a well-crafted story arc’ (2009: 151). For Robyn Warhol, soap’s ongoing serial structure and lack of final closure produces a structure of affect that follows ‘a “wave” pattern of represented emotion, building to affective peaks that are followed by an “undertow” of reaction’ (116). This ‘undertow of emotional repercussion’ (117) drives the narrative forwards, following climaxes that rupture or resolve ongoing narratives. Whilst death does provide closure to the narratives of Pat, Peggy and Dot, their deaths carry other characters onwards on the ‘wave of intensities’ (119) that are one of the structuring principles of *EastEnders*.

Soap memory and death

This trio of deaths draws on the structuring of ‘resonance, associative possibilities and allusive meanings’ (Holdsworth, 2011: 34) that are part of *EastEnders*’s emotional undertow. Soap storytelling is skilled at using dialogue for efficient exposition and narrative recall, yet it also relies on the memory of experienced viewers. They are encouraged to read unspoken narrative information and character depth onto a glance, a pause, an offhand remark, with ‘the accumulation of knowledge of those emotive details ... add[ing] layers of affect to each new episode’ (Warhol, 2003: 113). This ability to interpret the layering of memory strengthens the audience’s bonds with the programme by enhancing the affective richness of its storytelling.

These deaths are examples of television’s ‘milestone moments’ that bring *EastEnders*’s ever-present memory to the foreground and function ‘as reflective and self-reflexive spaces within serial drama that “reference back” on their own long perspectives’ (Holdsworth, 2011: 36). Discussing the death of Hayley Cropper in *Coronation Street*, Helen Wheatley highlights how soap opera’s expansive narrative world provides space and time to explore and work-through the complexity of death and the frequently messy ongoing experience of grief and bereavement. The loss of characters lived alongside for decades enables viewers to rehearse and work-through feelings of grief. Compared to the wrenching, violent or tragic deaths of younger soap characters, which can shatter individuals and create rupture in families and the community, the deaths of elderly long-running characters create moments of pause and reflection. Here, serial drama’s multiple narrative strands and ensemble storytelling ‘allow for an examination of grief from multiple points of view, with multiple characters reacting in a variety of ways to the same death’ (Wheatley, 2024: 132). These endings can also be catalysts, with grief or the return of long-absent characters developing further narratives.

My analysis of these death arcs shows how soap memory can be layered to conjure the audience's long relationship with a character whilst using aesthetic, spatial and narrative devices that disrupt and intensify soap opera conventions to produce intimate affective connections. I explore the use of spatial disruption and mobilising of deep narrative memory in Pat's death, the use of subjective aesthetic and non-naturalism in Peggy's and show how space and memory objects are used to return Dot to the Square after her death.

Pat Butcher – deep narrative and soap memory

Pat Butcher's death took place in her family home, shortly after a pancreatic cancer diagnosis. In this episode and the week that followed, Pat's tangled soap web of relatives, friends and foes produced an intensification of the soap's familiar family melodrama. Emotional resonance was drawn out through the construction of a layered narrative of her life that recalled events previous to her arrival on the soap along with key narrative memories. Her death pulled together strands of Butcher and Wicks family histories, catalysing character returns, rekindling both romance and conflict long past to cause fresh pain.

In the wave pattern that Warhol uses to describe the unique emotional work of soap's serial narrative, 'no subplot is ever really resolved, as the undertow of emotional repercussion after the crisis keeps the pattern of affect constantly moving' (2003: 117). Pat's death offered finality and closure for her own narrative, but its rippling waves of emotion spread outwards across her extended family's storylines, climaxing in her funeral episode. These affective waves crested in the scenes that surrounded her death and left little morsels of memory for viewers behind in their wake. Soap memories were prompted by her family's fond interactions with her gaudy costume jewellery and ex-husband Frank Butcher's spinning bow tie. Pat's soap life is recalled through these memory objects, illustrating Holdsworth's description of 'the television viewing experience as one of accumulation, where viewing experiences and references are built up over time' (2011: 34). These trigger for audiences 'the memory of "afterimages" and "moments" ... accumulated over a life lived across television' (34). The waves of emotion continued to softly ripple across the episodes that followed: grief over the loss, fond remembrances of Pat's youth, rekindled romance in the reuniting of Pat's estranged son David (who returned to the Square to be at her deathbed) with his childhood sweetheart Carol Jackson, and stark melodrama in Carol's brother Derek's violent resentment of David. These ebbed and flowed in bursts of affect between other ongoing storylines on the Square until they crested again in a tempest of emotion in the climactic episode that included Pat's funeral, Derek's confrontation of Carol and David's tearful abandonment of her at the episode's close.

As soap opera has a place in viewers' weekly domestic routines its spaces become as familiar to long-term viewers as their own homes. The realist mode of British soap opera presents domestic and public space as easily comprehensible and familiar, shaped through a largely unobtrusive visual style. So the use of composition and editing practices less familiar to audiences can make a space 'difficult and uncomfortable' (Lury, 2005: 149). Switching from multi-camera to Steadicam in interior space, seeing a room from an

unfamiliar angle, revealing a rarely seen ‘fourth wall’ or entering a previously unseen room in a house can produce a sense of the uncanny, unsettling the audience or signalling emotional turbulence.

Pat’s death episode compounded its affective impact through such moments of spacial disruption, drawing on melodrama’s use of location and setting to carrying meaning (Mercer and Shingler, 2004: 53). Pat’s rarely seen bedroom was the episode’s central space, its unfamiliarity creating an undertow of unease in viewers, lacking the comfort of the well-worn ground-floor spaces of her home. In contrast to the conventional simple lighting of the programme’s domestic spaces, Pat lay under a key light with the rest of the room in shadow, the family crowded around her bed’s perimeter. The confining nature of her death was compounded by the use of all four walls of the set, with a ‘fly wall’ employed to allow the room to be shot from all angles. The large floral-patterned wallpaper signified Pat’s flamboyant sense of style but also acted as oppressive and confining, as she struggled for breath. The emotional significance of her reconciliation with stepdaughter Janine – a complicated, tempestuous relationship – was signalled through a break from spatial conventions, using an overhead shot that showed the usually guarded and manipulative Janine curled like a child against Pat on the bed. The emotional release of this reconciliation was compounded by this unusually artistic composition that highlighted Janine’s submission and grief.

Pat’s deathbed conversations, along with her friends and family’s reminiscences after her death, refined the complex expanse of her 30-year tenure on the soap into a clear character arc that reached back into the pre-narrative past to incorporate her youth long before her entry onto Albert Square. This character arc presented the root of Pat’s perpetual family troubles as an unresolved tension between sexuality and motherhood. Her early years on the Square positioned her as ‘the tart’ archetype, who ‘represented unease about how far female characters should assert their autonomy, particularly in the sphere of sexuality’ (Geraghty, 1990: 104). Initially a figure of threatening temptation and conflict, Pat’s outsider status was later partially resolved through a move into ‘respectable monogamy’ (105) with third husband Frank Butcher and taking on the mantle of the Queen Vic landlady. By her death she had long-since aged into matriarch status whilst retaining her edge, as well as her fur coat and flashy earrings. After her death the memories and handed down stories shared by friends and family refined Pat’s complex romantic life and tempestuous past – including a period of sex work, four marriages, and multiple affairs – to a narrative of Frank as her ‘true love’.

EastEnders does not use flashback, although rare single episode ‘soap bubbles’ can dig into a character’s pre-narrative past, such as the 1960s-set episode *Mo and Pat: Ashes to Ashes* broadcast in 2004. Pat’s past was instead shaped by the reminiscences of family and friends, built through conversation and monologue rather than by restaging past events. This layered four eras of Pat: her death in the present; her previous soap life involving her various lovers and extended family; David’s perception of her as a ‘bad’ mother during his childhood (alluding to her sex work); and her first meeting with Frank as a teenager in a seaside resort town. At Pat’s wake, David presents the family story of this holiday romance as a star-crossed love, destined to be despite Frank returning to his pregnant girlfriend. This story is a stark contrast to viewers’ soap memories of the couple’s

passionate but turbulent middle-aged relationship, troubled by adultery and mental illness.

Here, *EastEnders* echoed the soap storytelling practice identified by Geraghty where ‘familiar material was made a story that layered past on present, creat[ing] precarious understandings between characters that were immediately challenged’ (2006: 222). The soap built a narrative spectacle by layering the present, the narrative past and character memory, all interwoven across 2 weeks of episodes to memorialise Pat’s impact on the Square. Refining down 30 years of complex character history, this patchwork of memories centred on her restlessness, vibrant sexuality and her youthful love-match with Frank. This layering of narrative brought ‘emotive details that add layers of affect’ (Warhol, 2003: 113) to Pat’s death and its narrative reverberations, accumulating new connections and deepening audiences’ existing relationships.

David’s return also prompted a separate, layering of intertwining narratives. This focused on his 1990s narrative past with Carol Jackson and their 1970s pre-narrative teenage relationship, which had left her pregnant at 14 and catalysed her brother Derek’s vendetta against him. The layering of pre- and narrative past drew out Carol’s own relationship history, shaping this as bad decisions driven by desire, and positioning her as an echo of Pat’s self-destructive femininity. This illustrates serial drama’s cyclicity, its rhythm of movement and stasis (Holdsworth, 2011: 34), where new storylines can unearth and echo the past.

Peggy Mitchell – subjective aesthetics

Pat’s death and its aftermath were largely constructed as a spectacle of narrative through the complex layering and revelation of familial melodrama. Four years later, *EastEnders*’s farewell to Peggy showcased the programme’s ability to disrupt its aesthetic conventions in the service of emotional impact. Here, subjective aesthetics were employed to align viewers with Peggy’s perspective and pain. Peggy Mitchell returned to the Square (as Barbara Windsor had retired in 2010) to face a terminal cancer diagnosis and asked her sons to help end her life on her own terms. After they refuse, she chooses to complete the act herself, planning to overdose on her medication. Across their decades on the programme, Peggy and Pat had evolved into a deep love/hate friendship after their lives were entwined in a love triangle with Frank Butcher in the late 1990s. Peggy’s death brought them back together. This death episode used subjective techniques to present a self-conscious break from the soap’s conventional naturalism, which paved the way for the return of Pat from beyond the grave.

In analysing Peggy’s death episode, it is important to note how *EastEnders* occasionally produces expressive aesthetics to disrupt its formal conventions in moments of crisis. This can be small moments such as diegetic sound dropping out to communicate Carol Jackson’s shock as she walks across the Square after being informed of the sudden death of her teenage son, or Mick Carter experiencing a panic attack in extreme close-up with muffled sound. Very occasionally entire episodes can be given over to this. Stacey Slater’s bi-polar breakdown was tracked across a week of episodes through momentary slips into a subjective aesthetic and climaxed with an episode fully tied to her subjective

experience. An episode presented through the compromised auditory perspective of partially deaf Ben Mitchell used silence and fractured sound to communicate his sudden complete loss of hearing after a head injury.

The first two thirds of Peggy's death episode used an increasing number of shots taken from or indicating her point of view as she moves through the time-rich spaces of the Square, saying her silent goodbyes. In physical pain from the cancer that had spread through her body and her brain, she walks unsteadily, in a series of Steadicam shots, across the Square's small central garden, her eyes locked on her former home The Queen Vic pub. To Peggy the building glows with a golden light, its diegetic karaoke a ghostly echo. She is later left alone by the pub's back stairs, distraught by a confrontation with her sons in its cellar. The softened glow that has indicated her subjective experience is here combined with an aesthetic rupture to express her emotional and physical pain. A sudden stab of pain makes her wince, motivating a dolly zoom in as she doubles over, followed by a swift circular track behind her as she reaches up. These unusual visual devices signal her subjectivity and intensify the affective experience of this moment, with the shock of the disruption aligning viewers with the intensity of Peggy's pain.

These moments of non-naturalism position the audience within Peggy's skewed perspective and prepare them to accept Pat's seeming return from beyond the grave. Peggy sits alone at dusk at the Mitchell family's kitchen table in a bathrobe, the armour of her make-up and classic beehive hairstyle removed. The subjective glow and unsettling camerawork featured elsewhere are absent. Pat's voice first appears entirely unexpectedly, asking 'Are you alright girl?'. This is sonically keyed to sound like voiceover and Peggy replies naturally as if in conversation, explaining her fear. A long-time viewer recognises Pat's voice instantly, its appearance a shock in both its non-naturalism and hearing a character dead for 4 years. Peggy then realises she is speaking to no-one, wandering out into the Square, searching for the voice's source. She had earlier smelt smoke, suggesting an unsettled mind or the effects of her cancer on her brain. But shuffling through the house in search of its source she sees a clear cloud of cigarette smoke emanating from the staircase. Pat is revealed sat on the stairs, a delighted expression on her face. However, Peggy is not shocked at the appearance of her dead friend, instead reacting fondly 'I might have known it was you, with your earrings rattling like Marley's ghost'. Pat is shot in plain naturalism, not signalled as a subjective ghostly spectre. However, she is absent when the camera moves to an objective long shot of Peggy climbing the stairs. This suggests she is a figment of Peggy's imagination, later indicated by Pat herself in response to Peggy's fearful questioning of the plan she has made to die, asking 'what are you asking me for? I'm not even here, am I?'. *EastEnders* has brought Pat back to support Peggy and the audience through her death, but self-reflexively positions this as an event that is beyond its naturalistic conventions, a subjective manifestation.

Like Pat's bedroom deathbed, the guest bedroom in the Mitchell household is not part of the communal family rooms in regular rotation, and is thus slightly unsettling in its unfamiliarity, a private space that is normally unseen. Sitting at its dressing table, finishing the restoration of her armour of hair and make-up, Peggy is cautiously watched by Pat as the pair reminisce over their friendship. Stating her desire not to die as a helpless old lady in bed, but to go as she lived 'straight back, head high, like a queen', Peggy methodically

but shakily begins to swallow her bottle of pills. Pat commits to never leave her as she performs this act, with the friendship presented as Peggy's most enduring love.

As with each of the three elderly matriarchs' deaths, Peggy's disrupts the formal convention of the *EastEnders* credits. The programme normally closes with drumbeats over a held reaction shot, and then the credits roll over an aerial map of the East End accompanied by a reprise of the theme tune. A variation on this is 'Julia's Theme', a slow gentle piano variation of the theme that weaves under an episode's final moments and rises in a crescendo into the credits. This is used for a 'happy ending' and signals closure, be it romantic or a departing character travelling out of the Square for good. Pat's death episode uses a fade to black, with white-on-black credits replacing the map, accompanied by 'Pat's theme', a rewritten Julia's Theme in a minor key (Peggy receives her own theme for her funeral episode). Peggy's death episode closes with another disruption to aesthetic norms as it cuts from the bedroom to an exterior crane shot outside the window, Peggy framed inside taking her pills. The camera arcs up into an extreme long shot that drifts above the Square at night-time as the credits play over low diegetic sound. A non-diegetic clock ticking over Dominic Treadwell-Collins' Executive Producer credit – held longer than usual to denote this as his final episode as showrunner – provides a sound bridge into an extremely rare sequence after the credits. Previously, I had only seen this used at the end of Pat's funeral episode, when her decades-absent son Simon came to lay flowers on her grave. Here, a short series of cross-fades, in the blue light of the moon, shows the empty pill bottle and Peggy's letter to her son Phil, tilting up to finish on a clock as it stops. It is a fittingly self-conscious, melodrama-laden signal of the end of Peggy Mitchell.

This episode uses subjective aesthetic techniques to disrupt the programme's conventional objective narrative style, aligning viewers with Peggy throughout. This serves to unbalance viewers from their narrative and emotional routines, preparing them to accept the non-naturalism of Pat's 'return', which is presented in a matter-of-fact form. Rather than Peggy's death itself – which occurs off-screen – the emotional spectacle of the episode is the programme's disruption of its verisimilitude to reunite the pair from beyond the grave. This stirs a complex mix of joy and grief for long-term viewers, prompted by the emotional resonance layered onto the pairing from their complex decade-plus relationship. But while Peggy's death was given additional resonance through this return, the programme had to deal with an absence at its centre for Dot Cotton's death.

Dot Cotton – absence, space and voice

Dot Cotton's death in 2022 saw *EastEnders* commemorate an elder matriarch without the character present, due to actress June Brown's death earlier in the year, having retired in 2020. Here, soap space and memory objects were used to embody an absent character, bringing emotional resonance through the triggering of audience memory. Viewers are prompted to interpret and participate in an episode's intensities, adding layers of affect to create narrative and emotional richness. As the last of the soap's long-serving elder matriarchs, Dot's death arc positioned the character as the last of a generation, a remnant of the 'old' East End. Just as Pat aged from the tart archetype into matriarchal power, Dot was long positioned as the outsider 'gossip' archetype. Her 'task of passing on

information and ferreting out problems is crucial to the community' yet frequently made her the 'butt of mockery and criticism' (Geraghty, 1990: 102). Yet her devotion to her villainous criminal son Nick could shift her into tragic motherhood. Dot evolved into a grandmotherly matriarch through a late-in-life second marriage to Jim Branning, who came with a large extended family.

Across its 40-year run *EastEnders* has produced rare 'two-hander' episodes, focused solely on two characters in conversation. These function as narrative and performance spectacle and are used to bring long-running storylines or character conflicts to a head. In 2008, Dot featured in the programme's only single-character episode which press coverage aligned with Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads* (1988) monologues (Holmwood, 2008). These monologues used the non-naturalist device of direct address but Dot's monologue is presented as a tape she is recording for her husband Jim, who is in hospital disabled by a stroke. She reminisces about her childhood, bemoaning the loss and lack of love she feels has shaped her life and talks through her fears over potentially having to care for Jim at home. This tape served as one of the memory objects used to embody Dot in her absence and was used to bring her aurally back to the Square in her funeral episode.

Wheatley draws on Maria del Pilar Blanco's work (2012) to suggest that 'to look for ghosts in a text is always to study place' (2024: 151). For viewers and characters alike, the homes and spaces of Albert Square retain the ghosts of characters and events past. Family members come and go, characters marry and blend established households, new characters are welcomed into found families, yet the spaces of *EastEnders* remain the same. Even when redecorated they hold the memory of storylines past. To create a fitting send-off, in the manner of Pat's and Peggy's, *EastEnders*'s creatives had to construct Dot's presence in her absence. The soap used public and domestic spaces tied to Dot to memorialise her character, mobilising the accumulated references, afterimages and moments that Holdsworth suggests make up the memory of a long-running series. Dot's death is centred around her house and her step-granddaughter Sonia Jackson who currently resides there, illustrating Paul Newland's assertion that the houses of *EastEnders* 'can be read as the uncanny doubles of their inhabitants' (2008: 83). Dot's death took place off-screen in Ireland where she lived with her grandson, but her body was returned 'home' to the Square where her coffin sat in her living room ahead of her funeral.

Dot's death arc employs soap opera's 'time-rich' spaces to stand in for Dot, drawing on the 'visually inspired memories of different characters and plot lines' (Lury, 2005: 16) that linger in soap spaces. As the *EastEnders* frame is always full of faces and bodies, the eeriness of the empty frame is used to evoke Dot's presence in her workplace, the laundrette, and in her home. Sonia sits in the laundrette on the day of the funeral and the scene opens with a shot of the empty counter where Dot had often stood, before reframing to include Sonia. Long-running *EastEnders* characters rarely reside in the same house across their entire soap life, but Dot remained in her home throughout her 35 years on the soap, rented from the council until a windfall enabled a late-in-life purchase. Its kitchen and living room remained mostly unchanged after she departed for Ireland, leaving the house inhabited by members of her extended family. In the house, as in the laundrette, the programme lingers on frames empty of characters to trigger viewers soap memories and layer the absent Dot onto this time-rich domestic space. In a shot, from behind, of Sonia

leaving the house, the camera holds a beat after the door closes, focusing on Dot's special occasion coat hanging on the coat rack. After being informed of her grandmother's death, Sonia uses the living room as a stand-in for the absent Dot, speaking her goodbye into the unoccupied space before closing the door. The camera holds on the empty shadowed living room to close the episode, allowing a pause for viewers to remember Dot. As with the departure from end-credits convention with Pat and Peggy's deaths, the credits then roll in silence over a shot of the empty room, rather than the usual aerial map, presenting the space as an embodiment of the character. Here, the soap mobilises embedded viewer memories of decades of scenes set in this space, using this pause to draw 'sentiment and empathy' that viewers have developed through 'the repetition of key images and the revisiting of particular locations' (Lury, 2005: 16). Without June Brown to play Dot's death scene, the spaces indelibly connected to the character are made to hold her presence.

This presence is also conjured through camera and voice. The *EastEnders* camera is normally motivated by character action, but in the funeral episode there are sequences where the camera moves without character motivation. These moments of disembodied camera take on a ghostly presence through unmotivated camera movements that drift across the Square and through Dot's house. The episode opens with an arcing crane shot moving across the early morning square to Dot's gate, slowly tracking up to the door and along the hallway to reveal Sonia sat alone at the kitchen table. This disruption of visual and spatial dynamics suggests the Square retains Dot's presence. As a diegetic song plays, the camera tracks across the kitchen table taking in Dot's headscarf, photos and the tape she made for Jim, items gathered in remembrance. The diegetic music transitions into Dot's voice as Sonia is playing Jim's tape, which she found in a previous episode. She had not known of the contents, but the sight of the tape would immediately serve as a memory object for long-term viewers. Like Dot's domestic spaces, the soap uses these items for their 'memory-trace weighted with meaning for the committed viewer' (Holdsworth, 2011: 63).

This episode returns Dot to the Square by repurposing fragments of the audio from Dot's solo episode as narration, an unconventional narrative device for the soap. Here, her philosophising is detached from the fraught emotions and self-pity that dominated that episode. As the camera drifts past Sonia into the hallway, Dot's voice shifts from diegetic sound into a non-diegetic acoustic, figured as narration. It takes on an omniscient quality, accompanying the camera drifting through the house to reveal her coffin and wedding photo. Dot's voice returns to narrate the sequence that closes the episode, accompanied by a rare use of musical score. Here, the camera again arcs across the Square, then tracks across the empty kitchen, over the table spread with photos, coming to rest on her Bible and a photo of Dot. The sequence then moves to her burial where the camera tracks from behind a tree, looking on at a distance. Dot's narration accompanies her own burial, offering the final words to sum up her life as the coffin is lowered, before the camera cranes up across the churchyard as the non-diegetic 'Abide with Me' transitions into an orchestral modification of the *EastEnders* theme tune. Like Pat and Peggy, Dot is given her own theme as the credits roll over a wide shot of the churchyard, signifying her importance to the programme through departures from formal conventions. *EastEnders* thus uses self-citation to bring Dot's presence back to the Square, enabling her to

accompany her own departure. Spaces and memory objects are used to stand in for Dot in place of the actress who played her, their resonances used to trigger audience memories, layering meaning to create emotional depth. Whilst Dot's is a lower-keyed send-off compared to the melodrama of Pat and Peggy's, as befitting her character, each woman's death is given grandeur to commemorate their status on the soap.

Academic discussion of soap opera frequently ignores or minimises its aesthetic dimensions, yet these deaths illustrate how soap aesthetics and space hold myriad expressive potentials. The deaths of these elder matriarchs highlight the different ways that soap opera can intensify or disrupt established narrative and aesthetic conventions in service of emotional impact, given extra resonance through the triggering of audience relationships built over time. To return to Warhol (2003), these crests of soap's affective waves memorialise iconic characters in soap events that rest a moment, before propelling the waves of serialised storytelling ever onwards across the expansive sea of soap opera narrative. Each displays a layering of soap's affective pleasures to present moments of pause and remembrance, tracing connections across soap's past and present.

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ORCID iD

Faye Woods  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8901-6524>

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Author biography

Faye Woods is Associate Professor in Film and Television at the University of Reading. She has published extensively on British and US television drama. She is the author of *Period Drama* (2022) and *British Youth Television* (2016) and is co-author of *An Introduction to Television Studies* (fourth edition) with Jonathan Bignell. Her work has featured in journals such as *Communication, Communication, Culture and Critique* and *Journal of British Cinema and Television* as well as in essays for numerous edited collections.