Original Article

Critical Studies in Television

BeastEnders: Pets and Soap Opera

Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies
2025, Vol. 20(3) 317–330

DOI: 10.1177/17496020251340357
journals.sagepub.com/home/cst
Sage

Brett Mills
University of East Anglia, UK

Abstract

While soap operas typically focus their storylines on human characters, animals serve significant roles in them too. Focussing on the most common animal in the series – dogs – this analysis examines the functions animals play in *EastEnders* (1985-present), foregrounding species-based hierarchies and popular culture's normalised anthropocentrism. The focus here is on how pets function as symbols of the domestic, the familial and human-animal relationships. Drawing on Animal Studies and Critical Animal Studies approaches the analysis shows how soap operas make use of representations of pets, and the functions these fulfil in terms of the particular pleasures long-running, episodic soap operas offer.

Keywords

EastEnders, soap opera, pets, Animal Studies

Introduction

In August 2008 one of *EastEnders*' (1985-present) longest-running characters died. Surrounded by friends at the moment of his passing, his death was mourned by the programme's fans, with the departure of such a long-established figure a disruption to the community the series depicts. But this death was unlike many others in the series, because it was of a dog: Wellard, the Belgian Tervuren, long-time companion of Robbie Jackson (Dean Gaffney) and Gus Smith (Mo George), and a regular character in the programme for 14 years. While soap operas typically focus their storylines on human characters, animals – usually as pets – serve significant roles in such series too.[1] Several kinds of

Corresponding author:
Brett Mills, Art, Media and American Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK.
Email: brett.mills@uea.ac.uk

animals have been represented as pets in *EastEnders*. There have been cats (Musty, Dave and Bella), fish (Posh and Becks), gerbils (Rolf and Freddie Mercury), rabbits (Mr Pickles and Hercules), a lizard (Rooney), and a snake (Monty). Animals that are usually understood as less typical for pets (especially within the context of the programme's urban setting) include Chops the pig, whom Mo Harris (Leila Morse) took for walks around the Square. And those animals have been a part of many storylines: Hercules the rabbit died from accidentally eating illegal drugs; Lady Di the bulldog swallowed a £200,000 diamond ring leading to the Carter family having to root through his excrement; Sugar the collie was murdered to stop her repeatedly sniffing where a corpse was buried; Joey the budgerigar was accidentally sucked up a vacuum cleaner during Jim Branning's attempt to clean his cage. That dogs need walking has been used by characters as ways of keeping secrets; both Den Watts (Leslie Grantham) and Mick Carter (Danny Dyer) would use these daily strolls with their pets as ways of meeting other (human) characters away from the prying eyes of families and neighbours. Animals are also used by the programme to indicate the personality and motivations of its (human) characters. For example, the shaggy, badly behaved dog Genghis was routinely seen in the programme as emblematic of the characteristics of his comparably troublesome owner, Keith Miller (David Spinx). In all, the world depicted in *EastEnders* is one in which animals are present and human-animal interactions are employed for storytelling purposes. Examination of these representations is thus useful for thinking through soap opera conventions, the genre's storytelling practices and wider social norms.

The analysis here will primarily focus on one category of non-human animal which accounts for the largest proportion of pet representations in *EastEnders*: dogs. Other species have usually appeared briefly for the purposes of very specific storylines but multiple dogs have been in the programme for years, functioning in a manner akin to, but not identical to, recurring human characters. When the programme began in 1985 it featured two dogs – Roly and Willie – showing that the ideas of family the programme aimed to portray included non-humans from the outset. Indeed, pets were part of the promotion for the programme before it even began, for 'In December [1984] press photographers were invited to a photocall to introduce Roly the poodle with actress Laetitia Dean who played Den and Angie's daughter, Sharon Watts' (McNicholas, 2005: 28–9). Roly went on to be in the series for eight years, and other long-standing dogs in the programme include Willie (seven years) and Lady Di (nine years).

That a soap opera should find dogs a useful resource for storytelling is testament to wider cultural understandings of them which the series draws on. Given the genre is often interested in ideas of the family – and explores complex ways in which families can be structured, not always along 'traditional' biological lines – it can use dogs to indicate that 'post-human families' constituted by 'multi-species groups' (Charles, 2019: 136) are not uncommon. Dogs are useful for storytelling because human-dog interactions and bonds are understood as having potential for communication and emotional exchange less likely for other pets (Kaminski and Nitzschner, 2013). This relies on dogs' status as an 'ordinary and mundane species' (McHugh, 2004: 196), able to align with everyday human activities and norms. To think about the dogs in *EastEnders*, then, is to think about to what purposes human cultures put animals, both in wider society and in a piece of television fiction.

Thinking about pets

Living with a pet is a choice, for the human at least. Human societies spend much time and effort excluding unwanted non-humans from the buildings they call 'homes', and therefore the decision to allow an animal into those spaces must serve a purpose deemed of value. For Erika Fudge, pets contribute to 'the conceptualization of the home' (2008: 13), turning the physical object called a 'house' into something that can be understood more meaningfully. Soap operas depict homes as complex and contradictory spaces; while they are sites of family, domesticity, and security, they are also locations for abuse, violence and secrets, cut off from the outside world. Fudge argues 'the presence of the pet . . . merely marks our continuing dream of our own ontological security' (38), whereby humans' control of a living being in the home is a way to assert some semblance of power in a space which fails to live up to the promise of security it purports to exemplify. Acknowledging this human-centred power dynamic, Yi-Fu Tuan argues that in pet-keeping 'dominance may be combined with affection, and what it produces is the pet' (1984: 2). Humans dominate animals in many ways, such as in the meat-producing industry, or by caging them in zoos; it is the addition of affection that creates the category of 'pet'. Tuan asserts, though, that 'affection is not the opposite of dominance; rather it is dominance's anodyne – it is dominance with a human face' (1-2). It is, then, through acts of affection that humans justify, and seek to render invisible, the dominance inherent in the pet-owner relationship. This means pets are 'civilized paraphernalia . . . tangled in an ambiguous tyranny' (Shepard, 2017/1996: 614) that is not of their making, and which is often to their detriment. Furthermore, in most legal frameworks animals are understood as property – comparable to a home, or bicycle, or a television – protected against mal-treatment only inasmuch as this does not impinge upon humans' ability to use their property as they see fit. So, while the pet category purports to foreground affection over dominance, it does so in ways that do not undermine the fundamental principle that 'animals are the objects of the exercise of human property rights' (Francione, 1995: 4). It is this ownership aspect which a programme such as *EastEnders* repeatedly mines for stories, finding the moral quandaries posed by the legal ownership of a living being as productive fodder for the kinds of narratives soap operas find compelling.

This is important because, while the debates about pets explored above concern real-life animals, the focus in this article is instead on the *representation* of pets and pet-keeping. While real animals feature as performers in *EastEnders*, the narratives the programme offers instead focus on fictional ones. The question then, is how is pet-keeping portrayed on television, and what does this indicate about cultural understandings of that activity, within the norms of a genre like soap opera? While the examples below show pet-keeping is often injected with moral and ethical quandaries, it is telling that they persistently offer the same conclusions, especially in relation to animals and death. As such, series like *EastEnders* can be seen to normalise not only the act of pet-keeping, but also the species-based hierarchies that underpin it. The depictions of animals in the programme work powerfully to situate humans as active moral agents, and thus animals are useful representational resources for the kinds of human-centred stories central to soap operas.

Animal stories

At the heart of soap opera is story: its sequential, segmented form is structured around story, the pleasures it offers its viewers are predicated on story, and the ways in which it often engages with and interrogates the world it depicts is via story. The ideological implications of such storytelling has been at the heart of much academic analysis of the genre (Brunsdon, 2000: 52–65) and the 'open' nature of its storytelling means soaps 'trade narrative closure for paradigmatic complexity' (Allen, 1995: 18), forever deferring the closure that typically defines non-serialised forms. In the UK, this functions within particular conventions of realism, which have underpinned the genre's aesthetics, settings, and norms of storytelling since *Coronation Street* (1960-present) began (Longhurst, 1987). While it is important not to simplify the genre's aesthetics and to take 'a more considered approach' (Geraghty, 2010: 92) to its complex and multifarious engagements with realism, this form of realism has significant implications for the animals that appear in soaps, because it unwaveringly conceptualises that which is 'real' and 'comprehensible' in entirely human terms. This is embedded in television's technology; as an audio-visual medium it situates those two senses as the only ones necessary to render the world recognisable and comprehensible, yet for many other species – such as the dogs that recur across *EastEnders* and other soap operas – other senses, such as smell, are the primary way in which the world is understood. Through the normalisation of the audio-visual television functions as an 'anthropocentric medium' (Mills, 2017: 123); through the use of a representational mode understood as 'realism' soap opera reinforces this anthropocentrism, situating the human experience as the unquestioned way of conceptualising reality.

Furthermore, soap operas prioritise talk as a storytelling device and as a tool for revealing character (From, 2006). Dialogue persists as its primary enunciative tool, and hence soaps are often centred around locations that enable and invite talk, such as pubs and shops. For their audiences soap operas also invite talk as a response, with discussion of key events – and reflection on their own possible responses to the events and dilemmas depicted – a fundamental pleasure for the genre's viewers (Ang, 1989). Yet such talk is usually defined in human-only terms, situating humans as the only species able to fully engage in activities such as discussion, reflection and complex communication. While it is clear animals communicate (Rossano and Kaufhold, 2021), they do not do so in ways that align with how soap operas understand and represent that concept, becoming merely objects whose needs and responses must be interpreted and communicated via the humans who interact with them.

There is potential, though, for media forms to invite (human) audiences to understand and conceptualise the world outside of their norms and beyond these realist trappings: literature can sometimes 'narrate across the species lines'(McHugh, 2011) through the use of internal monologue; animals are 'an essential component of animation' (Wells, 2008: 2) and are often depicted in cartoons as active subjects; anthropomorphism – while often criticised – can also be a useful tool for inviting interspecies empathy (Parkinson, 2020). Yet the form of realism fundamental to a British soap opera such as *EastEnders* makes almost impossible the depiction of any kind of experience beyond the human; indeed, it situates the human experience as not just the only one worth attending to, but also the framework by which the world can and should be understood. So while soaps may rightly be lauded for their commitment to depicting aspects of gender and class often ignored in much media (Dodd and Dodd, 1992; Geraghty,

1990), and while their engagement with complex contemporary social issues may function powerfully as a space in which such topics can be fruitfully debated and explored, they remain wedded to human-centric representational forms that powerfully render the animal experience as unrepresentable and therefore of no concern.

The domestic

While soaps may be perceived as being about people, they are in fact about places. They are typically named after a location (e.g. *Brookside* [1982-2003] and *Albion Market* [1985-6]) and while characters come and go, their setting remains the same (albeit often with additions of new locations within the same environment). Their primary focus therefore is on ideas of community, with series repeatedly exploring what it means to live side-by-side with others whose interests, politics and norms of behaviour may differ. This means they 'place high value on the community in terms of representation (a wide range of ordinary characters of different generations and personality) and utopian ideal (the harmonious, all-embracing neighbourhood)' (Franco, 2001: 454), even if they also demonstrate the difficulties encountered in working towards that utopia. While this community may be understood at a macro-level across the entirety of the programme's setting it also functions on a smaller scale, typically via the home and the family. In soaps, '*Family life* and relationships (*people*) are opened up to public scrutiny' (Madill and Goldmeier, 2003: 486, italics in original) and families are shown to be complex and mutable structures. A key idea in many soaps is that families can be made, with characters finding supportive quasi-familial relationships beyond biology, often actively working to construct their own families.

Animals sit in particular relationships in this context. It is clear many people see their pets as part of their family, both in the series and in the real world (Hamlett et al., 2021). They can be regarded as a higher priority in familial terms than potential human relationships; for example, in 1996 Robbie Jackson began dating a woman who turned out to be allergic to his dog. When she mandated him to choose between her and his pet, he chose the dog, and the programme presented this as a reasonable decision given the security and consistency the pet had persistently offered Robbie for many years. In these ways *EastEnders* depicts a 'multi-species household' (Cudworth and Jensen, 2016: 198) as equally valid as one that contains humans alone. In that sense, soap operas could be seen as powerful spaces for exploring the roles animals can play in families, communities, and social worlds, given they often understand animal-human relationships as equally meaningful, and essential to social bonds, as those between humans.

These bonds enable the programme to explore moral issues inherent in pet-keeping relationships. These often circulate within discussion about money, given that *EastEnders* largely focuses on working-class characters for whom finances are routinely a concern. So, when the Carter family arrived in the programme in 2013 they intended to make money through breeding their bulldog, Lady Di. Here, an animal is reduced to a resource useful for humans' financial purposes, despite ample evidence that animal breeding routinely results in 'insufficient consideration of dogs' welfare needs and interests, leading to potential harm and suffering' (Menor-Campos, 2024: 757). However, a quite different understanding of animals and money was depicted in 2017, when Lady Di was diagnosed with pneumonia. While the

dog was insured, the policy did not cover the £8000 operation, and the series depicted the heartache the family faced as they grappled with the moral dilemma of what to do given their financial constraints. Unable to secure a loan, Lady Di's owner, Shirley (Linda Henry), eventually agreed to sell the freehold of the pub where the family live and work in order to get the funds, forging her co-owner son's signature in the process. A dog that was initially a money-making tool is now understood as more valuable than bricks and mortar, and the series depicted Shirley's choice as comprehensible and motivated by genuine care.

Yet while these moments do indicate a troubling of species-based hierarchies, they represent an exception rather than a norm. For a start, such animals exist in representational terms only because they are able to function as pets, and programmes such as *EastEnders* normalise the owning of animals as a legitimate form of human dominion over animals. Secondly, the series shows that it is reasonable for humans to expect animals to behave in ways that do not disrupt human requirements for their domestic space in order to maintain their status as a pet. When animals express their subjectivity in undesired (for humans) ways, they are castigated or ejected. For example, when in 2007 Genghis the dog ate some of a buffet laid on at the Queen Vic, he was reprimanded by the pub's landlady and thrown out into the street. In 1992, Dot Cotton (June Brown) refused to eat her dinner in her living room after Ethel's pug Willy – ill at the time – went to the toilet on the carpet. Pets are routinely depicted as unproblematically transferable, ignoring their need for routine and security; in 2015, Lady Di was transplanted between multiple households in response to her behaviour and others' distaste for her, and the collie Sugar lived with three different owners within a year before being murdered. The programme presents humans' dislike for a pet, or difficulty in accommodating them within their normal routines, as legitimate motivation for getting rid of them, indicating how animals always exist within contingent and revokable circumstances not of their making. That such inconsistency is not healthy for animals such as dogs is not a story *EastEnders* is interested in telling, and nor does it have the narrative tools to do so.

Human-animal relationships

Fundamental to soap opera's use of animal representations are the human-animal relationships of which they are a part. These serve to indicate aspects of human characters, especially when these relationships are long-standing and close. For example, Wellard's owner, Robbie Jackson, is described in *EastEnders* promotional material as 'unlucky-in-life' (BBC, 2002) and 'hapless in love and business' (BBC, 2015) and it is notable how these traits are often correlated with his relationship with Wellard. In an article outlining his 'hilariously unlucky love life,' the dog is listed alongside his human girlfriends as 'someone who never left Robbie's side' (Agius, 2015), in a jokey tone indicating such a relationship is problematic and comedic. That there is something immature about being so close to a dog is indicated in how the series characterised Robbie's return in 2017, after several years off-screen. He is described as 'a more grown-up character with a slightly more serious outlook than before' (Wootton, 2017). This is placed within the context of Wellard's absence: 'In his original run Robbie was often a figure of fun, and the pairing with Wellard was part of that, but that's not going to be the case this time around, so there

doesn't seem to be a call for the dog' (Wootton, 2017). There is a 'ubiquitous presence of nonhuman animals in children's lives' (Cole and Stewart, 2016: 4), with animal characters common in children's books, comics and films. However, animals are far less common in culture produced for adults, with them primarily being understood as objects of study, for example, in wildlife documentary series. The movement into human adulthood is aligned with distancing the self from other animals and demonstrating the prioritisation of humans over other beings. It is thus no surprise that *EastEnders* chooses to indicate Robbie's 'more serious outlook' through the absence of a pet.

This comedic aspect is apparent in how the character Ethel Skinner, and her pug Willy, were also used in the series. The BBC's obituary upon the death in 2005 of Gretchen Franklin, who played Ethel, linked the comic nature of the character to her dog: 'Her monologues with her pug dog, "my little Willy", provided some of the show's lightest relief' (BBC, 2005). There is clear comedic substance in the programme's choice of the dog's name, and even though the series was always careful not to mine the double entendre too simplistically; that the obituary places 'my little Willy' in inverted commas evidences how this had become a catchphrase. This comic aspect aligns with how the programme depicts Ethel in terms of her age, with the character routinely described using adjectives such as 'dotty' (Mirror.co.uk, 2012) and 'quietly scatty' (Barker, 2005). While Ethel was often used for serious storylines, it is notable that summaries of the character often foreground her comedic aspects, with her age and gender understood as making these characteristics comprehensible. In these terms, Ethel can be placed in a lineage of representations of women deemed to behave in socially problematic ways because of their age and their lack of a husband and/or children. She could be understood as a precursor of the stereotype of the 'cat lady', 'a single woman who has many cats which she obsesses over' (Dupius and Girme, 2024: 323), and whose close relationships with those animals are understood as a surrogate for 'real', 'proper' (i.e. human) relationships. So while Robbie's closeness to his pet is related to his immaturity, Ethel's is instead related to her older age.

While the 'cat lady' archetype may function to control women and normalise particular kinds of familial and domestic relationships, queer and feminist readings instead reframe older, single women's close bonds with animals as emblematic of a powerful troubling of gendered norms (McKeithen, 2017) and indicative of necessary evocations of ideas of care (McCubbin and Van Patter, 2021). Certainly, *EastEnders* shows that while others may find human-pet relationships absurd, those humans within them understand them as serious and meaningful. Ethel's Willy died in 1992, and in order to placate her grief the programme's residents organised a collection and bought her a puppy. While acknowledging the gesture, Ethel immediately announces she doesn't want him, expressing concern that she would likely die before the dog had grown up and that this would not be fair on the animal. She asserts that she still has her original Willy, revealing a framed photo of him. The scene indicates the different understandings of animals between pet owners and those without; for many characters, a dog is immediately replaceable but for Ethel Willy is unique. The whole sequence presents Ethel's response as reasonable, as she rebukes her friends for treating her like a child and trying to control her life. Here, the series presents Ethel's understanding of pets as reasonable, in contrast to her perceived 'batty' nature.

What these two examples point to is complex and contradictory depictions of humans' close bonds with their pets, and the polysemic nature of those representations. It is easy to dismiss Robbie and Ethel as absurd, and to frame that absurdity in the context of their pet-keeping. Certainly, their prioritisation of their pets over other potential human-human relationships is sometimes presented as odd, especially in a genre such as soap opera which repeatedly offers up as desirable (while simultaneously problematic) key human-human relationship moments such as weddings and births. Yet there is a component in Robbie and Ethel's relationships with Wellard and Willy that undercuts this, and it is that it is clear that their pets make them happy. Given soap opera storylines regularly return to the collapse of human relationships and friendships, and persistently depict the betrayals humans carry out towards those they purport to love, there is evident value in the consistency and loyalty that their dogs offer Ethel and Robbie. The serial, long-running nature of soap opera is key here, for as Robbie flails in and out of minor and major disasters, and as Ethel confronts her increasing age, there is a constant in their lives that runs across years of screen time, and this is their pets. As such, soap opera offers the potential for depictions of pet-keeping unavailable to other, shorter kinds of fiction, as the mundanity and constancy of animals in humans lives rolls across the years.

Death

The point at which such human-animal relationships are most tested is in storylines about animal euthanasia or, as it is usually described for pets, 'being put to sleep'. The complex moral debates about human euthanasia have been often engaged with in soap opera; indeed, Willy's owner, Ethel, herself chose to die through a morphine overdose rather than suffer a prolonged painful death, and the series depicted in great detail the ethical quandaries this caused for her life-long friend, Dot. These debates are enacted via dialogue; fundamental to the moral complexity being represented are the differing viewpoints expressed via talk, with characters explaining themselves, and attempting to persuade others, through the words they say. Yet no such dialogue is possible when animals are diagnosed as terminally ill, and instead human owners must make decisions on behalf of their pet. That pets typically live shorter lives than their human owners, and thus facing their death is a component of humans' relationships with their animals, is something embedded in the practice of pet-keeping (Cooney et al., 2021).

In 2021, the Baker family had to decide whether to euthanise their dog, Bronson, following a diagnosis of terminal illness from their vet. The scene is played out as a moral conflict between the generations, with the teenage Bailey (Kara-Leah Fernandes) fighting against the decision to kill the dog in the face of older adults who present the decision as logical and ethically correct. That the disagreement is one based on age is unsurprising given as, noted above, close human-animal relationships are often portrayed as evidence of immaturity. Bailey logically notes that a human in Bronson's position would be given every possible treatment, asking why with a dog, 'We just write him off?'. She also pushes back against the assertion that treatment would be too expensive, indicating that animal health is equated with cost in a way not applicable to humans. In doing so, she repeatedly points to the ways in which human and animal health are distinguished in anthropocentric

culture, and there's no doubt the programme intends to present these arguments as legitimate. Yet in the end the adults win, pointing to the vet's diagnosis, ultimately insisting, 'There's just no choice'. Eventually Bailey capitulates but insists on being there as the procedure is carried out, asserting that Bronson should not be without family as he dies.

After the vet has left, the family reminisce over their life with Bronson and argue over what his favourite treat was. Age again here correlates with the significance placed upon the grieving process. Bailey's father, Mitch (Roger Griffiths), is initially unsure of what to say, seemingly unaware of the emotional trauma the dog's death has had upon Bailey. Bailey, though, is much more clearly able to articulate Bronson's significance: 'He was the best friend anyone could ask for'. The two here represent a recurring question in terms of thinking about animal death which is 'whose lives are grievable?' (DeMello, 2016: xxiii). In enabling Bailey to express her responses, Mitch – and the series – situate Bailey's engagement with what has happened as more significant than the death itself, and so Bronson's departure is useful in terms of soap opera storytelling more because of what it reveals about the human characters, and the complex moral dilemmas faced by pet owners, than the end of the life of the dog. Furthermore, in playing out a moral quandary, and presenting the decision to euthanise the dog as the correct outcome, the programme normalises notions of pet-keeping in which humans have life-and-death dominion over animals. Bailey here is shown that, while her reservations have some logic, the adult world of understanding human-animal relationships is the right one. The programme therefore – while allowing this debate to play out – reasserts species-based hierarchies that legitimise animal death.

Animals as celebrities

While pets appear as characters in *EastEnders*, the animals that portray them exist as real-world beings involved in the complex production processes necessary for making television. And like the programme's human actors, they have fans (as both characters and actual animals), are part of the series's promotional processes, and thus can be seen to exist within discourses of celebrity. For example, in 1987 it was reported that the actor Gretchen Franklin wanted to reduce her appearances in the series as she was unhappy with her working conditions. She complained that 'her dog is looked after better', with 'a chauffeur-driven car . . . while she struggles on public transport' (Smyllie, 1987: 13). That a dog should be treated as a star in this way has persisted as tabloid filler fodder, typically presented incredulously through comparison with humans. So, an article in 1985 asks 'Who arrives on the set of *EastEnders* in a chauffeur-driven car? Susan Tully? Wrong. Bill Treacher? Wrong' (*Daily Mirror*, 1985: 14). Readers are thus invited to find absurd that the answer is the dog who plays Willie, and the article goes on to state that he, alongside the real-life Roly, 'have their own assistant who grooms them, serves them tea – and takes them for walkies' (14). The piece exasperatedly ends, 'What it is to be a star' (14). Such articles see it as worthwhile to report that these dogs live in 'the lap of luxury' (Garbutt, 1986: 13) and note that both have been neutered, 'presumably to stop *The Sun* writing about their sex lives' (Cooper, 1986: 32). The animals' celebrity status can be leveraged for public campaigns and social awareness, in a manner similar to humans' use of

celebrity, and in accordance with the societal aims of a public service broadcaster such as the BBC. Thus, Roly and Willy are reported as taking part in 1986 in 'the first London Dogathon around Regent's Park' which 'is aimed at raising cash for less fortunate pets in the care of the National Canine Defence League' (Webb, 1986: A1).

These stories align with *EastEnders*' success in creating publicity for itself via tabloid stories that invite audiences to be interested in the behind-the-scenes aspects of the series as much as the programme itself. It has been argued that animals cannot be understood as celebrities in a manner comparable to that for humans, for celebrity is predicated on the distinction between on- and off-screen personae, while for animals 'there is no 'real' or 'authentic' person at the centre, and any notion of personality is simply an anthropomorphic projection' (Giles, 2013: 116). This is a rather absurd position, suggesting that animals do not have individual behaviours or personalities. Indeed, the fact that animals can be 'trained' to act evidences that there is a distinction between their on- and off-screen behaviour, comparable to – if not identical to – that for humans, and thus it is meaningful to understand there is such a thing as 'animal acting' (Peterson, 2007). Certainly, in the series all the animals are required to function within the needs of the programme's production processes in ways that do not undermine what is necessary in every shot they appear in. That *EastEnders* publicity recounts tales of the animals' off-screen – even when that is used to indicate they are pampered in comparison to their human co-stars – shows that they are 'individual beings who are constructed as stars by many of the same cultural, ideological and capitalistic mechanisms of stardom that apply to humans' (Parkinson, 2019: 41). It has been noted above that humans use animal representations for anthropocentric ends; the examples here show that this is not confined to on-screen moments, with off-screen material similarly a part of animals' entanglement in the human-centred motivations underpinning media production. What this all points to is the usefulness of animals as resources for a programme such as *EastEnders*, whose publicity machine can exploit humans' understandings of animals as pets to invite a variety of engagements with the series and its production. While this may all appear rather benign in terms of animal ethics – indeed, in the stories of Willy's chauffeur-driven car, it appears animals get a better deal than humans – it does not undermine the fact that all of this takes place within regimes not of the animals' making, and where any benefit that may accrue for those animals is accidental rather than intrinsic.

EastEnders, pets, and television

As the examples outlined above have shown, pets serve useful purposes in soap opera, especially within the conventions of British examples of the genre as exemplified by *EastEnders*. The series' working-class, realist, domestic mode is one which necessarily includes animals, in order for the fictional world to resemble that which is lived and experienced by much of the audience the series is intended for. Furthermore, pets are useful narrative resources for stories about families and relationships, and for exploring complex moral dilemmas, especially over illness in animals and animal euthanasia. Yet pets appear in these series only inasmuch as they are valuable for the human-centred stories they tell and often disappear for months on end should they be deemed to have no

value to current plotlines. In that sense, *EastEnders* offers, albeit inadvertently, a representative portrayal of contemporary pet-keeping in the UK. The series uses animals only where they are useful; in depicting as meaningful (some) human characters' relationships with their pets, it can be seen to depict a society that understands itself as 'a nation of animal lovers' (Wills, 2018). Yet that is also a nation in which cases of abuse and/or abandonment of pets have risen consistently over the past few years (RSPCA, 2024) and over 2 million dogs are illegally traded and farmed across Europe each year (Four Paws, 2024). There is a distinction to be drawn between how the UK as a nation talks about its relationship to animals, and how scores of animals are actually treated every day.

This article has focussed on the dogs of *EastEnders* but, as noted at the outset, a variety of animals have been depicted in the series, and further analysis could reveal the extent to which animal type correlates with particular kinds of narratives or depictions. Indeed, while the programme repeatedly turns to dogs for storytelling purposes, it is cats that are the most common pet in the UK, with dogs a very close second (PDSA, 2024).[2] Yet significantly fewer cats than dogs appear in the series, and fewer storylines focus on them. This is likely a consequence of dog-related stories being easier to conceptualise and produce than those for cats, or for other common pet animals such as birds, hamsters or fish. This indicates the extent to which animal representation in a series such as *EastEnders* is correlated with the storytelling norms of the genre of which it is a part. Yet as a programme produced by a national public service broadcaster, in a genre with a tradition in the UK of engaging with social issues, *EastEnders*' anthropocentric approach to storytelling includes animals only where they are useful for examining and depicting human-centred narratives. Within contemporary contexts of global animal abuse and exploitation, climate change, and the destruction of animal habitats, serial television has the potential to play a vital role in questioning anthropocentric representational norms.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Brett Mills https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9899-5303

Notes

1. The term 'pet' is highly problematic within the contexts of the analytical frameworks this paper uses, as it simplifies the human-animal relationship and erases the anthropocentric power hierarchies inherent within it. It is often instead replaced with other terms, such as 'companion animal'. While committed to those politics, 'pet' is used here in order to indicate that the

depictions on offer in *EastEnders* are ones that conform to the problematic ideas encapsulated in that term. That is, on the whole the series depicts such animals as 'pets', and works to normalise the idea of the 'pet'; it is a series engaged in 'pet'-making.

2. It's actually hard to definitively discern what the most common pet in the UK is, because of vagaries in counting which themselves indicate humans' problematic understanding of animals. There are seven million indoor fish tanks in the UK (GlobalPets, 2025), so it is likely there are more pet fish in the country than dogs or cats. However, fish are not counted in most organisation's statistics, so this is hard to know. That fish are erased in statistical analysis in this way evidences how some animals are seen as more important than others.

References

Agius N (2015) *EastEnders*: as Dean Gaffney prepares to return, check out Robbie Jackson's hilariously unlucky love life. Available at: https://www.mirror.co.uk/tv/tv-news/eastenders-dean-gaffney-prepares-return-5948226 (accessed 19 August 2024).

Albion Market (1985-6) ITV, Granada Television, UK.

Allen RC (1995) Introduction. In: Allen RC (ed) *To Be Continued...: Soap Operas Around the World*. London: Routledge, pp. 1–26.

Ang I (1989) *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*. London: Routledge.

Barker D (2005) Obituary: Gretchen Franklin. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/media/2005/jul/14/broadcasting.guardianobituaries (accessed 19 August 2024).

BBC (2002) EastEnders Robbie Bows Out. Available at: https://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/2513811.stm (accessed 19 August 2024).

BBC (2005) Obituary: Gretchen Franklin. Available at: https://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/4017067.stm (accessed 19 August 2024).

BBC (2015) EastEnders' Robbie Jackson returning to square. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-33277486 (accessed 19 August 2024).

Brookside (1982-2003) Channel 4, mersey television, UK.

Brunsdon C (2000) *The Feminist, the Housewife, and the Soap Opera*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Charles N (2019) Post-human families? Dog-human relations in the domestic sphere. In: Sorenson J and Matsuoka A (eds) *Dog's Best Friend? Rethinking Canid-Human Relations*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, pp. 135–159.

Cole M and Stewart K (2016) *Our Children and Other Animals: The Cultural Construction of Human-Animal Relations in Childhood*. London and New York: Routledge.

Cooney KA, Kogan LR, Brooks SL, et al. (2021) Pet owners' expectations for pet end-of-life support and after-death body care: exploration and practical applications. *Topics in Companion Animal Medicine* 43(1): 1–8.

Cooper J (1986) Jilly cooper meets the EastEnders. *Mail on Sunday* 16 February: 32–33.

Coronation Street (1960-present) ITV, Granada Television/ITV Productions/ITV Studios, UK.

Cudworth E and Jensen T (2016) *Puppy Love*? Animal companions in the media. In: Almiron N, Cole M and Freeman CP (eds) *Critical Animal and Media Studies: Communication for Nonhuman Animal Advocacy*. New York and London: Routledge, pp.185–201.

Daily Mirror (1985) Bow down to real style. Daily Mirror, 26 October, 14.

DeMello M (2016) Introduction. In: DeMello M (ed) *Mourning Animals: Rituals and Practices Surrounding Animal Death*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, pp.xviii–xxv.

Dodd K and Dodd P (1992) From the East end to *EastEnders*: representations of the working class, 1890-1990. In: Strinati D and Wagg S (eds) *Come on Down? Popular Media Culture in Postwar Britain*. London: Routledge, pp.116–132.

Dupius HE and Girme YU (2024) 'Cat ladies' and 'Mama's boys': a mixed-methods analysis of the gendered discrimination and stereotypes of single women and single men. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 50(2): 314–328.

EastEnders (1985-present) BBC One, BBC Studios Productions, UK.

Four Paws (2024) The illegal puppy trade. Available at: https://www.four-paws.org.uk/campaigns-topics/campaigns/the-illegal-puppy-trade (accessed 19 August 2024).

Francione GL (1995) *Animals, Property, and the Law*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Franco J (2001) Cultural identity in the community soap: a comparative analysis of *Thuis (At Home)* and *EastEnders*. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 4(4): 449–472.

From U (2006) Everyday talk and the conversational patterns of the soap opera. *Nordicom Review* 27(2): 227–242.

Fudge E (2008) *Pets*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Garbutt C (1986) Dog in the lap of luxury. *Daily Mirror*, 4 January, 13.

Geraghty C (1990) *Women and Soap Opera: A Study of Prime Time Soaps*. Cambridge: Polity.

Geraghty C (2010) Exhausted and exhausting: television studies and British soap opera. *Critical Studies in Television* 5(1): 82–96.

Giles DC (2013) Animal celebrities. *Celebrity Studies* 4(2): 115–128.

Global Pets (2025) Which are the UK's top 10 pets? Available at: https://globalpetindustry.com/news/which-are-uks-top-10-pets/ (accessed 18 March 2025).

Hamlett J, Hoskins L and Preston R (2021) Pets and family relationships in twentieth-century British diaries. *History of the Family* 26(2): 266–287.

Kaminski J and Nitzschner M (2013) Do dogs get the point? A review of dog-human communication ability. *Learning and Motivation* 44(4): 294–302.

Longhurst B (1987) Realism, naturalism and television soap opera. *Theory, Culture & Society* 4(4): 633–649.

Madill A and Goldmeier R (2003) *EastEnders*: tales of female desire and community. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6(4): 471–494.

McCubben SG and Van Patter LE (2021) Trophy hunters & crazy cat ladies: exploring cats and conservation in north America and southern Africa through intersectionality. *Gender, Place & Culture* 28(9): 1327–1350.

McHugh S (2004) *Dog*. London: Reaktion.

McHugh S (2011) *Animal Stories: Narrating across Species Lines*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

McKeithen W (2017) Queer ecologies of home: Heteronormativity, speciesism, and the strange intimacies of crazy cat ladies. *Gender, Place & Culture* 24(1): 122–134.

McNicholas A (2005) *EastEnders* and the manufacture of celebrity. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 2(2): 22–36.

Menor-Campos DJ (2024) Ethical concerns about fashionable dog breeding. *Animals* 14(5): 756–781.

Mills B (2017) *Animals on Television: The Cultural Making of the Non-human*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Mirror.co.uk (2012) EastEnders star Ethel dies at 94. Available at: https://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/eastenders-star-ethel-dies-at-94-550026 (accessed 19 August 2024).

Parkinson C (2019) Animal stars: a critical view of creaturely celebrity. *Czech & Slovak Journal of Humanities* 9(1): 40–51.

Parkinson C (2020) *Animals, Anthropomorphism and Mediated Encounters*. London: Routledge.

PDSA (2024) How many pets are there in the UK? Available at: https://www.pdsa.org.uk/what-we-do/pdsa-animal-wellbeing-report/uk-pet-populations-of-dogs-cats-and-rabbits (accessed 18 March 2025).

Peterson M (2007) The animal apparatus: from a theory of animal acting to an ethics of animal acts. *TDR* 51(1): 33–48.

Rossano F and Kaufhold SP (2021) Animal communication overview. In: Kaufman AB, Call J and Kaufman JC (eds) *The Cambridge Handbook of Animal Cognition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 5–35.

RSPCA (2024) pet owners. Available at: https://www.rspca.org.uk/whatwedo/latest/kindessindex2023/petowners (accessed 19 August 2024).

Shepard P (2017/1996) The pet world. In: Armstrong SJ and Botzler RG (eds) *The Animal Ethics Reader*. 3rd ed. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 613–615.

Smyllie P (1987) Dog's life for EastEnd Ethel. *Daily Mirror*, 14 November, 13.

Tuan Y-F (1984) *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Webb C (1986) TV dog Roly's walk aid. *Daily Mirror*, 3 October, A1.

Wells P (2008) *The Animated Bestiary: Animals, Cartoons, and Culture*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press.

Wills J (2018) A nation of animal lovers? The case for a general animal killing offence in UK law. *King's Law Journal* 29(3): 407–436.

Wootton D (2017) So long, fareWellard: Dean Gaffney set to make *EastEnders* return alone after BBC soap bosses ditch pet pooch Wellard. Available at: https://www.thesun.co.uk/tvandshowbiz/3396218/dean-gaffney-set-to-make-eastenders-return-alone-after-bbc-soap-bosses-ditch-pet-pooch-wellard/ (accessed 19 August 2024).

Author biography

Brett Mills is an Honorary Professor of Media and Cultural Studies at the University of East Anglia, UK. He is the author of *Animals on Television: The Cultural Making of the Non-Human* (2017), co-author of two editions of *Reading Media Theory: Thinkers, Approaches, Contexts* (2009, 2012), and co-editor of the forthcoming *Animals and Landscapes: Multispecies, Space and Place* (2025).