Three (Working-class) Girls: Social Realism, the 'At-risk' Girl and Alternative classed Subjectivities

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Abstract:

This article focuses on the BBC One three-part drama *Three Girls*, broadcast in July 2017, which dramatized the Rochdale child sex-grooming gang scandal of 2011 and won 5 BAFTAs in 2018. Whilst many of the dominant press narratives focused on the ethnicity of the perpetrators, few accounts of the scandals spoke to the need for a sustained public discussion of the class location of the victims. This article considers how the process of recognising the social problem is set up for the audience through a particular mode of address. In many ways the drama rendered visible the structural conditions that provided the context for this abuse by drawing on the expanded repertoires of television social realism: the representation of the town as abuser; the championing of heroic working-class women; and the power of working-class vernacular. However, ultimately, the narrative marginalises the type of girl most likely to be the victim of this form of sexual abuse. By focusing on the recognisable journey of the girl 'who can be saved' this renders the poor girl as already constitutive of the social problem. The analysis draws attention to the difficulties of recognising alternative classed subjectivities on television because of the way boundary-markers are placed between the working-class and the poor and suggests that the consequence of these representations is to reify ideas about the victims of poverty and exploitation.

Keywords: child sex exploitation; class; poverty; social realism; television drama; *Three Girls* (2017).

Introduction

This article takes as its focus the BBC One three-part drama *Three Girls* which was broadcast in July 2017 to critical acclaim and won 3 BAFTAs in 2018. The drama stages the real events of the Rochdale child sex abuse scandal that came to light in the UK in 2011 and is based on extensive research, interviews and published accounts. The evidence used includes the autobiographical account, *Girl A: The Truth about the Rochdale Sex Ring by the Victim who Stopped them* (Girl A and Bunyan 2013), and consultation with key figures involved in the real case including Sara Rowbotham (sexual health worker), Maggie Oliver (police officer) and Nazir Afzal (crown prosecutor). It is therefore a social realist drama which documents real events. Whilst many of the dominant press narratives of those events focused on the ethnicity of the perpetrators and victims (concentrating on the perpetrators as mostly of British-Pakistani origin and the victims as mostly white girls), they have taken attention away from the class location of the victims and the need for race and class to be intersectionally drawn together.

The aim of this article is to consider how such a story gets to our screens, and how the process of recognising the social problem is set up for the audience. In many ways, the drama renders visible the structural conditions that provide the context for this abuse by developing a more expanded repertoire of social realism such as the use of time-lapse views of the town, the casting of important working-class actors such as Maxine Peake and Lesley Sharpe and the powerful performance of class vernacular at key moments of antagonism. However, I argue that, ultimately, the drama marginalises the voice of the type of girls - girls in the care system and/or from the most economically-deprived backgrounds - most likely to be the victim of this kind of sexual abuse. This is partly related to the registers of social realism that

are available to *Three Girls*, but also to the programme's appeal to the audience to ask themselves the question 'what if this was my daughter?' This analysis therefore highlights some of the problems related to the difficulty, for the viewer, in recognising alternative classed subjectivities on television because of the way boundary markers are placed between the working-class and those living with poverty and it examines the consequences of these representations in reifying ideas about the contexts of poverty and exploitation.

Child sexual abuse scandals in Britain – the betrayal of those living with poverty.

Rochdale was the first of a series of child-sex abuse scandals to come to the public's attention which have been marked by their racialised character. Journalist Andrew Norfolk (2011) was credited for first breaking the story of hundreds of young white girls being exploited by mostly Pakistani men in *The Times* in January 2011. A subsequent report, published in 2014, about the related Rotherham scandal by Professor Alexis Jay (2014) found that over 1400 girls had been abused over a sixteen-year period, citing harrowing accounts of violence, sex-trafficking and forced prostitution. The report also showed in detail how the children were already known to child protection services but were deliberately *not* protected, even sometimes criminalised themselves, since their involvement, despite their age, was deemed to be voluntary and part of their chosen 'chaotic' lifestyles. Sadly, Rochdale and Rotherham have not proven to be isolated tragedies and many more similar cases involving thousands of young, poor girls have come to light in Manchester, Peterborough, Oxford, Bristol, Newcastle, Telford and, most recently in August 2018, Huddersfield. It has become clear that young girls from the poorest communities in England have been systematically raped, beaten and then betrayed by the national services supposed to protect them. At the time of writing it is difficult to find a clear picture of this abuse given that, as Jess Phillips MP suggests, we are only part-way through revealing the true scale of the problem (Phillips, 2018).

The subsequent evaluation of, and any strategic intervention into, the abuse has not been helped by the Far Right's appropriation of the scandal for their own ends

My main concern here is with how some of these narratives obscure a more complete understanding of the victims through concentrating on the perpetrators of the abuse. Highlighting race over class suggests that what made the girls subject to abuse was their availability through their whiteness, rather than their poverty. As Robbie Shilliam has argued, historically narratives of the deserving and undeserving poor have been racialised through the legacies of colonialism, to such an extent that 'there is no politics of class that is not already racialised' (2018: 180) and presumably by extension no politics of race that is not already classed (See also Virdee 2014). Recent accounts of 'extreme whiteness' in Britain discuss how whiteness has been re-coded, not as a 'neutral' and 'ordinary' category of the kind described by Richard Dyer in 1997, but as an ethnic category associated only with the working class. This locates white working-classness negatively as anachronistic and unable to embrace the progress of multi-culturalism (Lawler 2012). Documenting the Far Right responses fuels such narratives and fails to account for the structural position of the victims which made them vulnerable to this particular exploitation. The access that the perpetrators had to basic resources like food, taxis and entertainment meant that they were filling the space left by lack of basic support for the economically deprived, evidenced by the increasing need for food banks and the rise in child poverty in the UK which shot up in 2017-18 from 30.3 per cent to 33.4 per cent (Chu 2018). This is part of a structural problem occurring within the wider context of condemnation of the~~the~~ British government ~~being condemned~~ by a UN report on the impact of austerity on human rights in the UK (Booth, 2019). This 'violence of austerity' is having a devastating impact on the poorest of society (Whyte and Cooper 2017).

The production of 'extreme whiteness' as a working-class marker has played a significant role in the systematic failings of the police and child protection services to intervene. As Chris Haylett (2001) has described, under the Labour government of 1997-2010, a shift from naming the 'underclass' to describing them as 'socially excluded' was an ideological move away from an 'irredeemable other' to a 'recuperable other' who could do better and therefore could be blamed for their own their failure to take part in projects of responsible selfhood. This context meant that the girls in Rochdale were doubly punished: firstly as the *right* kind of victim in the eyes of perpetrators but then, secondly, in the eyes of authorities, as *wrong* kind of victim who did not deserve protection and could even be blamed for their own situation. It is from within this broader context of contemporary classed and raced relations in the UK, where poor girls are doomed to failure, that I want to consider the representation of class in the drama *Three Girls.*

Extending the repertoire of social realism – the town as abuser

Three Girls was critically successful on its initial broadcast: it went on to win BAFTAS for best drama and best actress for Molly Windsor who plays the girl known as 'Girl A', whose testimony helped to secure prosecution. In Norfolk's assessment of the drama in *The Times*, titled 'Giving a voice to the lost girls of Rochdale', he suggests *'Three Girls* pulls no punches. It tells a raw, harrowing story in a way that makes for searingly compelling drama' (Norfolk, 2017). Writer Nicole Taylor told BBC *Breakfast Television* on the day of the first broadcast that 'There was no use sanitising it. I wanted to tell the truth' (16/5/17)

The drama draws upon the textual conventions of social realism and its tackling of social problems that are part of the landscape of British television. Domestic familial dynamics and settings, particularly those of Girl A Holly, against the background of the impoverished locale of Rochdale, frame an 'authentic' drawing of working-class life.[2] Staged

in a post-industrial town in despair, the drama enables us to feel the vulnerability and chaos of the girls as their lives are enriched by the resources the men have to offer. Initially, in the lively and welcoming space of the kebab shop, the girls jump around with youthful joy to the music of 'That's Not my Name' by the Ting Tings; these scenes are a vital relief and show an escape from the boredom of the streets and the generational conflict at home. We see the protagonists first as girlfriends trying to have fun and, as viewers, we begin the journey of coming to understand some answers to the pervading question, 'how could this have happened?'

The landscape of Rochdale is very much a character in the drama, an argument which is in keeping with Higson's (1987) analysis of place in the social realist film. However, the use of landscape in the tradition of social realist 'kitchen sink' dramas of the fifties and sixties is significantly developed in this drama in a way which also registers the classed contexts of the abuse. The recognisable shot of the town as important to the social realism of place - 'That Long Shot of our Town from That Hill', according to Higson (1984) - is usually an aerial shot deployed for the upwardly mobile working-class male protagonist who is longing to leave the place of his birth. This is a shot that ultimately contributes to maintaining a distance between the middle-class spectator and the working-class subject. In what Higson discusses as the staging of a dialectic between social problem and spectacle, the 'kitchen sink films' were also subsumed by a poetic and nostalgic quality. In *Three Girls*, the streets are not swathed in any nostalgic depiction of working-class life. There are many shots of Rochdale from the ground level but, while the streets and town briefly appear as bright sites for fun, as the drama continues, Rochdale's settings offer the dark and foreboding spaces of abuse: the rear of taxis, the derelict industrial estates and the dingy flats, especially in the first and second episodes where the girls are moved from place to place. After the first depiction of Holly's rape (the only rape scene in the drama), we cut to Holly and Amber discussing it in

a dingy and dirty bathroom with Holly naked in the bath and Amber standing clothed over her. The scene then immediately cuts to another shot of the town from the interior, looking out over rooftops at the hills beyond. This movement from the inside the bathroom to looking out over the town operates as the reverse of 'that shot' and the town begins to be established as the place which *contains* the girls so that they cannot escape. When Holly and Amber are walking through the streets immediately after the bath scene looking for breakfast, Amber says, 'You know what this town needs? another Subway'[3] signalling the relationship between the town's lack of resources and the nature of the abuse.

The 'long shot' or aerial shot of the townscape does recur but draws on a different aesthetic; time-lapse photography of different aerial views of Rochdale is used to signify the passing of time when the girls are abused. This occurs for the first time in episode one, after the girls are taken to a party and instructed to go with different men. When we know the abuse is about to take place, there is a cut to shots of the moving town-scape, accompanied by high-pitched piercing music, which is broken by the girls being dropped off from the car in the morning daylight. The aerial time-lapse motif of night time movement, dark clouds, moving car headlights and eerily pitched music, registers with some force, the nature of the crime. In the real case it was the movement of the girls around different towns that helped facilitate some of the first ever prosecutions of sex-trafficking within the UK (Bunyan 2012). Here, director Philippa Lowthorpe has found an aesthetic that seems to mirror the movement and the perpetual disrupting and disturbing way these girls were transported as commodities, from one place to another. Rochdale's streets, kebab shops and taxis are the classed contexts for the exploitation and, in this motif, Rochdale does become the signifier of a character – that of an abuser.

Time-lapse movements of the town also appear at different junctures in the drama in later episodes. They are shot in daylight to signify another passing of time and indicate

another kind of institutional abuse. These time-lapses signify the two years that pass as the police finally take seriously the nature of the crimes and launch an investigation and occur again to show the period of time waiting for a trial. Rather than registering an exotic distance and poetic othering of the town then, 'That Shot…' serves to remind us and reiterate that the primary crimes of abuse reverberate into a second set of crimes at the hands of the authorities, in relation to the delays to protection and to justice. 'That shot', embedded in this way, brings the viewer closer to the psychological trauma of confusion and movement of the victims, first at the hand of the gang and secondly at the hands of the authorities. They are shots that become synonyms for abuse, reminding us that the abuse is abetted by the structural conditions of the town itself. Rather than a motif which registers the potential for escape, the 'long shot' here works to reinforce the entrapment of the working-class or poor girl.

The heroic working-class female

The British social realist tradition of New Wave films of the 1960s typically revolved around the narrative of the scholarship boy and assumed that working-class life was something that must be escaped; they focused on the lives of the white, heterosexual, industrial male workers in the tradition of the 'Angry Young Man'. Television is largely acknowledged as being more successful at giving us more developed female characters, largely through soap opera (Lay, 2002). In more recent British television drama, women writers like Sally Wainwright and Kay Mellor have been credited with developing strong women protagonists and breathing new life into social realism by giving it an authentic 'female voice' (Gorton 2016: 79). *Three Girls* therefore also draws on newer developments in social realist television drama like *Clocking Off* (BBC One, 2000-2003), *Playing The Field* (BBC One, 1998-2002) or *Scott ~~and~~ & Bailey* (ITV, 2011-2016) which have sketched women's stories to challenge the masculinisation of the space of the working-class North. In particular the casting of well-

known working-class actresses like Maxine Peake as sexual health worker Sara Rowbotham (whose repeated attempts to get the girls stories heard finally triumphed), and Lesley Sharp as Detective Inspector Maggie Oliver (who was brought in to re-open the case, to re-engage the girls and helped get the cases to trial) is significant to the way in which this programme can be understood to narrate a particular female Northern heroine. Het Philipps (2016) has argued that Maxine Peake herself has come to signify an excessive and transgressive femininity of the gothic North where Northerness and working-classness are synonymous. Similarly, Johnson and Forrest suggest that Sharp has generated a working-class Northern stardom through a strong feminine agency that is characterised more by 'resilience rather than of deficit' (2016: 207) and is distinct from many previous social realist dramas in which women are usually the passing victims of social problems. Sue Thornham (2019) argues that *Happy Valley* extends the traditions of social realist drama offering a maternal subjectivity, eschewing the traditional othering trope of 'our mam' (Hoggart 1958) generating a new realism through which a more complex working-class female identity can be claimed.

Three Girls, in its casting of Peake and Sharp, does the same but I would argue that the *Three Girls* of the title are not actually the three victims of the abuse (Holly, Amber, Ruby) as the title suggests but rather the protagonists, Holly, Sara and Maggie: the females who can display the agency and gritty resilience to drive the narrative. The real women on which these roles are based have a developed or a developing (in the case of Holly) voice in their relevant roles in public life. The three 'girls' who dominate the narrative therefore are the abused girl, the determined sexual health worker (now in real life a Labour counsellor) and the police detective (who now has a media profile and appeared on *Celebrity Big Brother* (Channel 5, 2011-2018) in 2017), whose heroic actions and determination all contrived to generate a resolution in the final court room scenes of this drama and in the actual prosecution of the abusers. They are the heroines of the story and in terms of a narrative of

progress and triumph, they become three working-class 'girls' we can recognise as part of a now feminised and extended repertoire of social realism on British Television.

The power of the performance of working-class vernacular

The three female voices of Holly, Sara and Maggie are eventually heard by authorities in the scripting of the drama. The real fight to get the abuse recognised is staged as one of class antagonism which is played out in the struggle to be believed against the overwhelming perception of the girls as *not victims* by the administrative bodies that they encounter. In the real-life story of Girl A, who first reported rape to the police in 2008 but whose case was dropped, the CPS report said,

> It is a tragic case that one so young has fallen into this lifestyle and has been taken advantage of in this way. However, we would have to convince a jury that all of the acts were without her consent and I do not believe that we could do that. (CPS report 2009, cited in Norfolk 2017)

Here the real failure of the authorities to see a crime relies on ideas about the type of girl whose 'lifestyle' marks her as unable to occupy the position of victim. This prevented prosecutions for years and fuelled the spread of abuse: without victims there were also no crimes. The blame here is on the kind of girl who has clearly made all the wrong choices and therefore put herself at risk of harm. The dominant narrative of the appropriate victim of CSE (Child Sexual Exploitation) requires sexual innocence, a child who lacks any agency. This has reinforced a situation in which children whose stories do not fit that pattern gain little traction in social work systems (Smith and Woodiwiss 2016) and Jo Woodiwiss (2018) has argued that a focus on understanding the crime through the severity of the harm done to the innocent victim can sometimes dangerously overlook the 'wrongfulness' of the crime. In this way, the apparent lack of 'appropriate innocence' on the part of the victims of CSE in

Rochdale and elsewhere meant that they were not seen to be deserving of protection. In the drama, this failure to listen is clearly demonstrated during scenes in which we see how the language of bureaucracy facilitates this position, with social workers and police who say that 'their hands are tied'; they can only understand the girls as abject 'others' who had chosen their own downfall. In the opening scene, when Holly first talks to the police with her father beside her in a darkened and intimidating police interview room, she struggles to articulate what has happened to her. The police officer clearly displays his boredom and sense of mistrust as he yawns through her testimony (this is also written up in the autobiography of Girl A). In that scene, Holly, is judged as lacking innocence for already having had sex before meeting the perpetrators and therefore her claims of rape are not believed.

The efforts to cut through this administrative wall of wilful disinterest are taken on by sexual health worker Sara Rowbotham and the Detective Inspector Maggie Oliver in the drama. In the real events these women fought against the dominant narrative which had led the girls to be framed as 'child-prostitutes'. The trailer to *Three Girls* starts with Maxine Peake's voice-over which says, 'There is no such thing as a child prostitute. There is only a child that is being abused'. This is visualised by scenes of their commitment to their work: Sara's care for the girls and the careful plotting of the abuser's activities and Maggie's policework on the streets attempting to re-engage the victims. Some of the most powerful scenes in the drama come from the scripting and performing of class vernacular – of the power of speech and dialect to tell it like it is - as part of the discursive struggle over the labelling of abuse. When Holly falls pregnant to one of the men and is given a social worker, the social worker visits Holly with her family and, seemingly without feeling, calmly tells her parents that she is a prostitute. The social worker is only concerned with the well-being of the unborn child. Sara confronts the social worker in the beige corridor of social services' reception, with various colleagues looking on from around corners at her passionate and

emotive response. Squaring up to the social worker, who speaks without a recognized regional accent, she turns away, grabs her bag, and turns back threateningly and screams:

> "Ah do you know, it's like one of those magic-eye posters. Me and you we're looking at the same thing but where I am seeing girls turned inside out by abusers, all you lot are seeing is slags who bring it on 'emselves"

The violent, regional and passionate vernacular stands out against the disinterested bureaucratic gloss of administrative failure. Similarly, when Maggie picks up the police investigation years after the original complaint and goes, dressed in a suit, to Sara's shabby offices for the detailed files that she kept on the girls, Maggie is treated with suspicion. Sara is once again angry and scathing of Maggie's seemingly detached and procedural attitude to the crimes:

> Sara: "Fuck off, no really I mean it, fuck off. […] and what you're demanding off me now, I couldn't pay you lot to look at for years. You swan in here with your Prada handbag asking me to hand it over like you're asking me to check the gas meter"
>
> Maggie: "I understand"
>
> Sara: Oh no you don't, you really really don't […] and what do you think has been happening to those girls in the meantime? Raped, beaten, not believed. Raped, beaten, not believed"

Later in the drama Maggie must learn this approach to language and emotion so that she can be understood by the girls and by Amber's mother as she tries to get the girls back on side to tell their stories once more. But she also deploys it when she faces the male bureaucracy making judgments about which of the abused girls are credible: 'It's that attitude, "a family like that" that's the obstacle. It's not brain surgery this, we treat them like human-beings and we say we're sorry'. When she discovers that Amber's case is to be dropped because she was seen to have recruited other girls to the abuse and is named on the indictment, Maggie's

anger culminates with: ‘If she was getting other girls to dish out blow jobs, it was so she didn’t have to do them all herself’.

These are the women fighting back and much of episode two is an effort to encourage the girls to also find their own voices to tell their stories to officials again. We see just how wearing this process is, but we also see the resilience and heroism of the girls as they do so. The triumph of the female voice and its heroic and classed resilience in the face of the disdain of the institutions involved is no doubt another major achievement of the drama. However, I now want to address the ways we are positioned as viewers in relation to that voice, and what in turn this might mean for the voice of the girl most likely to be victim of this kind of abuse.

‘What if it was your daughter’?

As I have discussed, the ‘Long Shot’ of the town is not used to establish an exotic distance but rather to emphasise the nature of the crime and to draw the viewer closer to ‘feeling’ its violence and the nature of the entrapment of the girls. In terms of the real events, the main problem was getting social workers, police officers, and CPS officials to believe in these crimes as rape. The drama seems to deploy similar appeals to the viewers in establishing empathy with the victims by asking ‘What if this was your daughter?’. This appeal is made directly to the police officers when the case is re-opened: ‘I want you going out there thinking of these girls as your own kids or grandkids, because if it was your own, you’d be torn to pieces.’ This is also the appeal to one of the victims, Amber, when the police need her evidence; Maggie asks her to think about her daughter, whom she holds in her arms: ‘what if this were to happen to Yasmin?’. This question permeates the drama, but it ultimately reinforces the narrative of appropriate victimhood which it sets out to disrupt.

In the drama, much is made of Holly’s relationship with her father, rather than her mother: his disappointment as she starts going out and staying out all night, his desperate

attempts to get her to stay home and act as part of the family, and his pleas at the door of the doss-house as he tries to get her to come home. Despite his moments of despair at his daughter's behaviour, and also at the failures of social workers and police officers, the drama finds some resolution when the convictions are delivered and he tells her with tears in his eyes of his pride at her speaking out: 'It were you, it were you speaking up, that's the proudest moment of my life'. Holly's redemption in the eyes of her father is thus important to the overall narrative of *Three Girls* and to the empathetic appeal to the viewer. In this way, Holly's journey as the main protagonist is recognisable as the story of the 'fallen women' who can be saved in a classic redemption narrative. In the drama, Holly's parents explain to Sara that the family moved into the area after her father lost his business. They tell her of their problems that led them to Rochdale and how Holly is the most sensitive and bright of their daughters. In her autobiography, Girl A articulates the broader social problems that frame the abuse. She writes: 'In a town with no cinema, no ice rink and no hope - and with no money, anyway - this was as glitzy as it would get to 14-year-old girls like us' (Girl A and Bunyan 2013 :24/25). Her father, both in the drama and the book, tells her that she is not 'scum' like her friends. We are reminded throughout of Holly's safe domestic home life, two loving parents with comparative stability and resources, as compared to the other two girls, sisters Amber and Ruby Bowen, who mostly live in a doss-house with other men. In the book Amber is described as a monstrous girl, 'the honey monster', for her part in co-opting other girls into the abuse, whilst the drama makes visible the extreme violence that Amber was subject to if she did not comply. Throughout, the drama maintains a clear distinction between Holly and Amber as Holly's initially groomed and cared-for appearance gets eroded by the abuse and then is restored at the end. Holly is therefore representative of the girl who *can* be harmed by CSE, as we can visibly see just how damaged she is; she embodies ideas about the 'ideal victim' which draw upon middle-class ideas of childhood innocence (Woodiwiss,

2014). Holly is also envisioned as a girl with a future: there are brighter scenes with her at school, being encouraged by teachers, passing her exams and being told she can go to university. She has a period in a social services' mother and baby unit when her child is taken from her for alcoholism as the case is reopened but when she is given her daughter back from care, she is well-groomed and cheerful; she tells a social worker how she is looking forward to a future in which she sees going to college as a realistic opportunity. And finally, after the trial Sara meets with Holly in the park with her daughter in bright sunshine and colourful surroundings that signal her success and escape from Rochdale's darker spaces.

Empathy is therefore achieved because Holly is the 'right' kind of victim and one we can imagine as 'our daughter'. Framing the drama with Holly as the central protagonist replicates the decisions made by the police in the prosecution of the case. She was already the girl whom the police had identified as the most believable and her testimony is used to reopen the case. Girl A, on which the character of Holly, was based has already found her voice through her autobiography; therefore, she is also the girl whose story will lend itself to the television drama. In this sense, *Three Girls* resonates with *Cathy Come Home,* Ken Loach's much-lauded play made for television in 1966, which used documentary drama to raise awareness of the social problem of homelessness. Amongst the criticism of *Cathy Come Home* was its casting of blonde Carol White with her received pronunciation as Cathy, a character who had 'fallen' into problems and with whom the audience could therefore empathise, and whom they could will to 'come home' to a safer and more privileged place. Much was made of White's good looks (she was an actor who became associated with 1960's fashion iconography), and therefore the failure to cast a more 'natural' character who would have more likely been subject to homelessness (Paget, 1999). In this sense the framing of Holly in *Three Girls* as the central protagonist repeats this trope as the 'right' kind of victim,

appealing to a middle-class viewer, like the appeal to the police officers, to ask ‘what if this was your daughter?’.

Two girls: the ‘future’ girl and the ‘at-risk’ girl.

Throughout the drama we see the distinctions between Holly and Amber reinforced as they represent the girl who can and who cannot be saved. They also represent the girl with innocence and the girl who lacks innocence in the narratives of CSE. Holly knows that this is rape, whilst Amber and Ruby are groomed into understanding their abusers as boyfriends. Holly’s life descends into chaos, whilst Amber’s story is already chaos. Holly’s safe home with her parents and sisters is the place she will return to, whilst Amber lives in a doss house with the abusers buying her meals and constantly calling on her. In the book we learn that the ‘honey monster’s’ (Amber’s) white uncle, whose house it was, also abused her. Anita Harris in her 2004 study of the future of young women in the twenty-first century talks about the diametrically opposed figures of the ‘future girl’ and the ‘at-risk girl’ who ideologically work together to reinforce the idea of the sense of danger and failure that the ‘at-risk girl’ embodies in a neoliberal culture which emphasises the values of self-responsibility. The ‘at-risk girl’ becomes a warning sign to the ‘future girl’ who is otherwise empowered by working hard to secure her future. The ‘future girl’ makes the right choices, whilst the ‘at-risk girl’ only fails. It was the figure of the ‘at-risk girl’ that loomed large in the social work discourses that helped to perpetuate the problem in this case since the structural conditions that the at-risk girl finds herself trapped in are belied by the insistence on self-responsibility. Here, then, the problem of centring the main narrative on the girl who can be saved, through the recognisable narrative of the ‘fallen woman’, is that in the background is the ‘at-risk girl’ who is marked as always-already constitutive of this problem.

In *Three Girls*, Amber is clearly marked as the 'at-risk girl'. She is the fatherless girl who has little or no protection since, whilst Amber's mother, played by Lisa Riley, does appear later in episode two of the drama, she has clearly struggled to protect her two children. There are important moments where we can see Amber's pain; for instance, in the scene when she cries at the window of the doss house while she watches Holly's father taking her home and the scene when she recognises her main abuser on the street whilst she is pushing her baby in a pushchair. Responding to Maggie's question, 'What if it were Yasmin?', Amber says that it can't happen to her daughter because she won't let it. Maggie then asks her, 'And what about girls who have no one to protect them?' which, rather poignantly and perhaps cruelly, puts the question to the very girl without that protection. Yet Amber's story is treated as secondary to Holly's more familiar narrative of the deserving victim. Whilst Holly's story has also been one of finding her voice (which eventually gets to be heard in court), we learn that, as in the real case, Amber's testimony will not stand, and in fact she is named on the indictment. In the drama, her story culminates with Maggie visiting Amber and explaining that she will continue to fight for her and that she must, as a direct result of this case, resign from the force to continue this fight. This does give some resolution and registers the continued injustice still done to Amber, but the anger and the agency is given to Maggie. Amber is left, as perhaps in real life, resigned to the idea that hers will not be a story of triumph and escape.

In most of the cases of CSE revealed so far, so-called 'grooming gangs' have preyed upon the most vulnerable girls in children's homes. The way in which society views children in care has subsequently been called out for helping to excuse the abuse (Wilkinson, 2017). Girls at the bottom end of the social hierarchy, the poorest and most vulnerable, have been systematically criminalised as prostitutes and even placed in secure units, as society has already judged them as the waste of the system. The narrative organisation which

differentiates between Amber and Holly and gives the main story to Holly also shapes the problem of audience address in *Three Girls*: reaching beyond the diegesis of the drama, *Three Girls* asks the viewer to empathize with Holly through the question 'What if this were your daughter?' One cannot help but wonder what the impact of making Amber the main protagonist of this drama would have been since she is more emblematic of the kind of girl most likely to be the victim of this kind of abuse, and the girl who was ultimately let down by the police. What could her story have looked like?

One of the reasons for this absence, the fact that Amber's story is not so fleshed out, might be related to the available biography that the production team[4] drew on, meaning that Holly had already been able to 'tell her story'. Another reason might be related to the conventions of television social realism. As Marion Jordan describes:

> Briefly the genre of Social Realism demands that life should be presented in the form of a narrative of personal events, each with a beginning, a middle and an end, important to the central characters concerned but affecting others only in minor ways; that though these events are ostensibly about *social* problems they should have as one of their central concerns the settling of people in life; that the resolution of these events should always be of the effect of these social interventions;[…] to give in summary, the impression that the reader, or viewer, has spent some time at the expense of the characters depicted (1981:28).

For Amber, despite the gravity of the multiple injustices against her, there is no straight-forward beginning, middle and end and certainly no satisfactory resolution through any social intervention. Dwelling on Amber's story might not allow the same narrative of progress or futurity that can be more easily accessed through Holly's narrative trajectory. But, as Samantha Lay (2002) points out, resolution can be achieved in varying degrees in social

realist film texts so it feels as though Amber has been doubly let down - in real life and in the drama - and not permitted a subjectivity that might have been more fully explored.

Representing people living with poverty on television

There remains a problem therefore in how this story is told. I do not want to underestimate the achievement of *Three Girls* and the powerful and moving way in which it dramatizes abuse, but I do want to interrogate why the narrative struggles to accommodate the viewpoint of, and give full voice to, those against whom this crime is most likely to be committed. This problem relates to the limited spaces for making the 'underclass' visible in the context of the available resources of social realism where working-classness has either been tinged with nostalgia and poetry or, more recently, made more energetic and vibrant through the feminine space allowed to the figure of the strong Northern woman. Paul Abbott's work on *Clocking Off* has been praised for offering another kind of postmodern social realism which eschews traditional narrative structures and offers a brighter vision of working-class life (Cooke, 2005) and we might recognise this in the earlier joyful scenes of the kebab shop in *Three Girls*. In relation to *Shameless* (Channel 4, 2004-13) Glen Creeber has argued that Abbott generated an 'anti-social realism' in the fictional characters of the Gallaghers (also starring Maxine Peake) in which a moveable and shifting world-view and the construction of fantasy created a 'psychological space' for the characters to occupy (2009: 432). Of course, in comparison, *Three Girls* is a drama based on harrowing truth and it would jar to try and access the televisual codes of some of these newer developments in social realism.

However, I want to press another important issue here: in the transference of the narrative to television, some of the problematic boundary-markers deemed to operate within the working class were also transferred. Television might here be responsible for ignoring the complexity inherent in the relationship between gender and social class just as class analysis

itself, with the traditional emphasis upon the male industrial worker or the working family, has misrecognised the experience of poor women (Reay, 1998). As argued above, we can see this in the New Wave films and we can also see gender accounted for in the more recent and more complex subjectivities afforded to feisty, complexly flawed, Northern heroines on television who take on the system from positions of relative power. But in giving voice to Sara and to Maggie in *Three Girls* we might still be asking questions about who speaks for whom?

In focusing on the recuperable working-class girl who regains the faith of her father, the narrative of the poor girl from a single mother is left in the shade. Holly's father occupies the position of the traditional working-class man let down by post-industrial change and experiencing downward mobility. Many of those living with poverty are in families with single mothers, as is Amber, and we know that single mothers have been systematically castigated as 'the enemy within' (Skeggs, 1997: 51). Whilst the pathologized other of 'our Mam' from traditions of social realism might indeed be absent, there is an othering of the single mother represented by the depiction of Amber's mother.

Therefore, whilst exposing the details of sexual abuse, the drama still others the 'at-risk' girl and perversely it is this very othering which is the problem at the heart of the real story that the drama seeks to expose. Amber's lack of a developed narrative or a growing sense of voice fixes her in time as already-embodying the abuse. In Marx's terms we might argue that this serves as a process of reification whereby social relations are perceived as the inherent attributes of the people involved in them. As Vivyan Adair suggests,

> the economics of class are tied to its material and psychological manifestations for poor women. Material class distinctions become imprimaturs, producing, marking, mutilating and fixing the bodies of poor women and their being and value in the world (2005: 822).

We might understand Holly's narrative journey, through a period of downfall after starting out bright and happy and doing well in school, as staging a classed boundary-marker between Holly and Amber through deploying the recognisable trope of the deserving and undeserving poor. Amber's unchanging appearance might seem like the 'written proof of the body of no value' which, according to Adair, belongs to the bodies of poor women, 'testing the limits of working-class identity and 'deservedness'' (2005: 823). These issues matter because the drama seeks to speak truth to the social problem of the pathologisation of sexualised 'at-risk girl' but it still cannot seem to give her authorship on her own terms. Micheal Zweig suggests that if we imagine those living with poverty in diametric terms with the working class we serve to 'erase the dignity and authority of the poor' (2000: 39) [5]. Without more developed accounts in drama, we are left with the reality genre of 'poverty porn' (Jensen, 2014) or exploitative talk shows like *The Jeremy Kyle Show* (ITV 2005-2019) in which people living with poverty were ritually ridiculed and mistrusted through lie detectors and paternity tests (Hill, 2015).[6]

Conclusion

In this article, I have framed the drama *Three Girls* within an understanding of how some recent cases of Child Sexual Exploitation speak to contemporary class relations. Whilst journalistic narratives have focussed on the ethnicity of the perpetrators and victims, I have shown how the drama achieves some powerful understanding of how the abuse, and its subsequent neglect, is structurally related to class and poverty. Some of *Three Girls*' major achievements come through its development of registers from social realism, including the aesthetic construction of the town-as-abuser, as well as through the powerful performances of classed vernacular by recognisable working-class female actors. I have, however, also raised issues which should have resonance across television generally and which relate to the way in which we need to recognise a more diverse set of classed subjectivities. As Bev Skeggs

suggests, it is not only that we need a politics of recognition, but we also need to 'think about who is empathetically denied in the process of recognition' (2004:13). This matters for a social realist text and its claims to truth, especially in this case because the subjectivity of the girl who is most vulnerable to this crime is obscured in the attachment to a recognisable narrative of progress and in an appeal to the viewer to imagine the girl as *your* daughter.

This is difficult to address because we might argue that all narrative progress essentially mirrors middle-class values in which working-class attachments to 'authenticity' render them anachronistic. Pygmalion narratives abound in popular culture where working-class identities are often marked by 'getting-away' and narratives of escape. But we need to find more ways on television to show that being trapped by the workings of capital relations does not limit a protagonist's dignity, authorship and profound subjectivity. If, as Raymond Williams (1974) set out, one of the defining characteristics of the social realist text is to *extend* the range of characters and topics to include marginal or previously under-represented groups in societies, then this might also involve continually rethinking television's available storytelling devices. I do not want to argue that there is currently *no* place on television where this might be happening, but if, as Higson describes, the history of the realist tradition is also 'the history of the changing conceptualisation of the relation between the public and the private, the political and the personal, the state and the citizen' (1995:193), then these questions of representation matter. Failing to adequately represent those living with poverty reiterates the current political situation of violent austerity politics whereby the economically deprived are not recognised as citizens and are moved out of sight.

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[1] The Rochdale trial was jeopardised by the actions of the British National Party protesting outside and forms part of events which have helped to spur the rise of Far Right populist leader Tommy Robinson.

[2] The drama achieves more than the documentary that was screened a few months later, *Betrayed Girls*, (BBC 2017) in which the structural terms of class are never spoken whilst the phrases 'vulnerable' and 'chaotic lives' stand in for any account of structural poverty.

[3] Subway is a chain of sandwich stores.

[4] We might want also to reflect on the influence of the socio-demographics of those able to work in television production (See O'Brien et.al. 2018).

[5] I have throughout tried to avoid the phrase 'the poor' for the way it may contribute to the process of othering, but here I am quoting directly here from Zweig (2000).

[6] At the time of editing this article, the show was cancelled by ITV following the death of one of its guests. This prompted a parliamentary enquiry into the treatment of reality television participants which is a hopeful sign of some strategic intervention into television's faltering role in the representation and treatment of those living with poverty.

[1].

This has been fuelled by the mainstream media's intensification of this issue as a racialised problem, drawing on a recent history of demonising young South Asian men as the new folk devils, particularly in the tabloid press (Gill and Harrison 2015). Andrew Norfolk (2017) has resisted this overemphasis upon race, stating that most sexual abuse (particularly familial abuse, or that which is organised through institutions) is perpetrated by lone white men. The crime of 'grooming', which is broadly defined as de-sensitising children towards sexual acts through establishing relationships that might prevent disclosure, has since been over-identified with the Asian community (Miah 2015; Gill and Harrison 2015), despite the now very public understanding of child sexual abuse exemplified by the Jimmy Saville case and white men with power. This emphasis upon the whiteness of the victims has also served to obscure the sexual abuse of young Asian girls, according the evidence from the Muslim Women's Network (Gohir 2013), a focus which has also worked to 'decentre the systemic failures to protect vulnerable girls while obscuring the similarities between the victim-blaming attitudes of the perpetrators and authorities' (Salter and Dagistani 2015: 54). Indeed, some of the subsequent official and local news discourse blaming the lack of intervention by the authorities on 'political correctness' also concealed prevailing attitudes towards young 'vulnerable' children (Tufail 2018).

My main concern here is with how some of these narratives obscure a more complete understanding of the victims through concentrating on the perpetrators of the abuse. Highlighting race over class suggests that what made the girls subject to abuse was their availability through their whiteness, rather than their poverty. As Robbie Shilliam has argued, historically narratives of the deserving and undeserving poor have been racialised through the legacies of colonialism, to such an extent that 'there is no politics of class that is not already racialised' (2018: 180) and presumably by extension no politics of race that is not already classed (See also Virdee 2014). Recent accounts of 'extreme whiteness' in Britain discuss

how whiteness has been re-coded, not as a 'neutral' and 'ordinary' category of the kind described by Richard Dyer in 1997, but as an ethnic category associated only with the working class. This locates white working-classness negatively as anachronistic and unable to embrace the progress of multi-culturalism (Lawler 2012). Documenting the Far Right responses fuels such narratives and fails to account for the structural position of the victims which made them vulnerable to this particular exploitation. The access that the perpetrators had to basic resources like food, taxis and entertainment meant that they were filling the space left by lack of basic support for the economically deprived, evidenced by the increasing need for food banks and the rise in child poverty in the UK which shot up in 2017-18 from 30.3 per cent to 33.4 per cent (Chu 2018). This is part of a structural problem occurring within the wider context of condemnation of the~~the~~ British government ~~being condemned~~ by a UN report on the impact of austerity on human rights in the UK (Booth, 2019). This 'violence of austerity' is having a devastating impact on the poorest of society (Whyte and Cooper 2017).

The production of 'extreme whiteness' as a working-class marker has played a significant role in the systematic failings of the police and child protection services to intervene. As Chris Haylett (2001) has described, under the Labour government of 1997-2010, a shift from naming the 'underclass' to describing them as 'socially excluded' was an ideological move away from an 'irredeemable other' to a 'recuperable other' who could do better and therefore could be blamed for their own their failure to take part in projects of responsible selfhood. This context meant that the girls in Rochdale were doubly punished: firstly as the *right* kind of victim in the eyes of perpetrators but then, secondly, in the eyes of authorities, as *wrong* kind of victim who did not deserve protection and could even be blamed for their own situation. It is from within this broader context of contemporary classed and

raced relations in the UK, where poor girls are doomed to failure, that I want to consider the representation of class in the drama *Three Girls.*

Extending the repertoire of social realism – the town as abuser

Three Girls was critically successful on its initial broadcast: it went on to win BAFTAS for best drama and best actress for Molly Windsor who plays the girl known as 'Girl A', whose testimony helped to secure prosecution. In Norfolk's assessment of the drama in *The Times*, titled 'Giving a voice to the lost girls of Rochdale', he suggests *'Three Girls* pulls no punches. It tells a raw, harrowing story in a way that makes for searingly compelling drama' (Norfolk, 2017). Writer Nicole Taylor told BBC *Breakfast Television* on the day of the first broadcast that 'There was no use sanitising it. I wanted to tell the truth' (16/5/17)

The drama draws upon the textual conventions of social realism and its tackling of social problems that are part of the landscape of British television. Domestic familial dynamics and settings, particularly those of Girl A Holly, against the background of the impoverished locale of Rochdale, frame an 'authentic' drawing of working-class life.[2] Staged in a post-industrial town in despair, the drama enables us to feel the vulnerability and chaos of the girls as their lives are enriched by the resources the men have to offer. Initially, in the lively and welcoming space of the kebab shop, the girls jump around with youthful joy to the music of 'That's Not my Name' by the Ting Tings; these scenes are a vital relief and show an escape from the boredom of the streets and the generational conflict at home. We see the protagonists first as girlfriends trying to have fun and, as viewers, we begin the journey of coming to understand some answers to the pervading question, 'how could this have happened?'

The landscape of Rochdale is very much a character in the drama, an argument which is in keeping with Higson's (1987) analysis of place in the social realist film. However, the

use of landscape in the tradition of social realist 'kitchen sink' dramas of the fifties and sixties is significantly developed in this drama in a way which also registers the classed contexts of the abuse. The recognisable shot of the town as important to the social realism of place - 'That Long Shot of our Town from That Hill', according to Higson (1984) - is usually an aerial shot deployed for the upwardly mobile working-class male protagonist who is longing to leave the place of his birth. This is a shot that ultimately contributes to maintaining a distance between the middle-class spectator and the working-class subject. In what Higson discusses as the staging of a dialectic between social problem and spectacle, the 'kitchen sink films' were also subsumed by a poetic and nostalgic quality. In *Three Girls*, the streets are not swathed in any nostalgic depiction of working-class life. There are many shots of Rochdale from the ground level but, while the streets and town briefly appear as bright sites for fun, as the drama continues, Rochdale's settings offer the dark and foreboding spaces of abuse: the rear of taxis, the derelict industrial estates and the dingy flats, especially in the first and second episodes where the girls are moved from place to place. After the first depiction of Holly's rape (the only rape scene in the drama), we cut to Holly and Amber discussing it in a dingy and dirty bathroom with Holly naked in the bath and Amber standing clothed over her. The scene then immediately cuts to another shot of the town from the interior, looking out over rooftops at the hills beyond. This movement from the inside the bathroom to looking out over the town operates as the reverse of 'that shot' and the town begins to be established as the place which *contains* the girls so that they cannot escape. When Holly and Amber are walking through the streets immediately after the bath scene looking for breakfast, Amber says, 'You know what this town needs? another Subway'[3] signalling the relationship between the town's lack of resources and the nature of the abuse.

The 'long shot' or aerial shot of the townscape does recur but draws on a different aesthetic; time-lapse photography of different aerial views of Rochdale is used to signify the

passing of time when the girls are abused. This occurs for the first time in episode one, after the girls are taken to a party and instructed to go with different men. When we know the abuse is about to take place, there is a cut to shots of the moving town-scape, accompanied by high-pitched piercing music, which is broken by the girls being dropped off from the car in the morning daylight. The aerial time-lapse motif of night time movement, dark clouds, moving car headlights and eerily pitched music, registers with some force, the nature of the crime. In the real case it was the movement of the girls around different towns that helped facilitate some of the first ever prosecutions of sex-trafficking within the UK (Bunyan 2012). Here, director Philippa Lowthorpe has found an aesthetic that seems to mirror the movement and the perpetual disrupting and disturbing way these girls were transported as commodities, from one place to another. Rochdale's streets, kebab shops and taxis are the classed contexts for the exploitation and, in this motif, Rochdale does become the signifier of a character – that of an abuser.

Time-lapse movements of the town also appear at different junctures in the drama in later episodes. They are shot in daylight to signify another passing of time and indicate another kind of institutional abuse. These time-lapses signify the two years that pass as the police finally take seriously the nature of the crimes and launch an investigation and occur again to show the period of time waiting for a trial. Rather than registering an exotic distance and poetic othering of the town then, 'That Shot…' serves to remind us and reiterate that the primary crimes of abuse reverberate into a second set of crimes at the hands of the authorities, in relation to the delays to protection and to justice. 'That shot', embedded in this way, brings the viewer closer to the psychological trauma of confusion and movement of the victims, first at the hand of the gang and secondly at the hands of the authorities. They are shots that become synonyms for abuse, reminding us that the abuse is abetted by the structural conditions of the town itself. Rather than a motif which registers the potential for

escape, the 'long shot' here works to reinforce the entrapment of the working-class or poor girl.

The heroic working-class female

The British social realist tradition of New Wave films of the 1960s typically revolved around the narrative of the scholarship boy and assumed that working-class life was something that must be escaped; they focused on the lives of the white, heterosexual, industrial male workers in the tradition of the 'Angry Young Man'. Television is largely acknowledged as being more successful at giving us more developed female characters, largely through soap opera (Lay, 2002). In more recent British television drama, women writers like Sally Wainwright and Kay Mellor have been credited with developing strong women protagonists and breathing new life into social realism by giving it an authentic 'female voice' (Gorton 2016: 79). *Three Girls* therefore also draws on newer developments in social realist television drama like *Clocking Off* (BBC One, 2000-2003), *Playing The Field* (BBC One, 1998-2002) or *Scott ~~and~~ & Bailey* (ITV, 2011-2016) which have sketched women's stories to challenge the masculinisation of the space of the working-class North. In particular the casting of well-known working-class actresses like Maxine Peake as sexual health worker Sara Rowbotham (whose repeated attempts to get the girls stories heard finally triumphed), and Lesley Sharp as Detective Inspector Maggie Oliver (who was brought in to re-open the case, to re-engage the girls and helped get the cases to trial) is significant to the way in which this programme can be understood to narrate a particular female Northern heroine. Het Philipps (2016) has argued that Maxine Peake herself has come to signify an excessive and transgressive femininity of the gothic North where Northerness and working-classness are synonymous. Similarly, Johnson and Forrest suggest that Sharp has generated a working-class Northern stardom through a strong feminine agency that is characterised more by 'resilience rather than of deficit' (2016: 207) and is distinct from many previous social realist dramas in which women

are usually the passing victims of social problems. Sue Thornham (2019) argues that *Happy Valley* extends the traditions of social realist drama offering a maternal subjectivity, eschewing the traditional othering trope of 'our mam' (Hoggart 1958) generating a new realism through which a more complex working-class female identity can be claimed.

Three Girls, in its casting of Peake and Sharp, does the same but I would argue that the *Three Girls* of the title are not actually the three victims of the abuse (Holly, Amber, Ruby) as the title suggests but rather the protagonists, Holly, Sara and Maggie: the females who can display the agency and gritty resilience to drive the narrative. The real women on which these roles are based have a developed or a developing (in the case of Holly) voice in their relevant roles in public life. The three 'girls' who dominate the narrative therefore are the abused girl, the determined sexual health worker (now in real life a Labour counsellor) and the police detective (who now has a media profile and appeared on *Celebrity Big Brother* (Channel 5, 2011-2018) in 2017), whose heroic actions and determination all contrived to generate a resolution in the final court room scenes of this drama and in the actual prosecution of the abusers. They are the heroines of the story and in terms of a narrative of progress and triumph, they become three working-class 'girls' we can recognise as part of a now feminised and extended repertoire of social realism on British Television.

The power of the performance of working-class vernacular

The three female voices of Holly, Sara and Maggie are eventually heard by authorities in the scripting of the drama. The real fight to get the abuse recognised is staged as one of class antagonism which is played out in the struggle to be believed against the overwhelming perception of the girls as *not victims* by the administrative bodies that they encounter. In the real-life story of Girl A, who first reported rape to the police in 2008 but whose case was dropped, the CPS report said,

> It is a tragic case that one so young has fallen into this lifestyle and has been taken advantage of in this way. However, we would have to convince a jury that all of the acts were without her consent and I do not believe that we could do that. (CPS report 2009, cited in Norfolk 2017)

Here the real failure of the authorities to see a crime relies on ideas about the type of girl whose 'lifestyle' marks her as unable to occupy the position of victim. This prevented prosecutions for years and fuelled the spread of abuse: without victims there were also no crimes. The blame here is on the kind of girl who has clearly made all the wrong choices and therefore put herself at risk of harm. The dominant narrative of the appropriate victim of CSE (Child Sexual Exploitation) requires sexual innocence, a child who lacks any agency. This has reinforced a situation in which children whose stories do not fit that pattern gain little traction in social work systems (Smith and Woodiwiss 2016) and Jo Woodiwiss (2018) has argued that a focus on understanding the crime through the severity of the harm done to the innocent victim can sometimes dangerously overlook the 'wrongfulness' of the crime. In this way, the apparent lack of 'appropriate innocence' on the part of the victims of CSE in Rochdale and elsewhere meant that they were not seen to be deserving of protection. In the drama, this failure to listen is clearly demonstrated during scenes in which we see how the language of bureaucracy facilitates this position, with social workers and police who say that 'their hands are tied'; they can only understand the girls as abject 'others' who had chosen their own downfall. In the opening scene, when Holly first talks to the police with her father beside her in a darkened and intimidating police interview room, she struggles to articulate what has happened to her. The police officer clearly displays his boredom and sense of mistrust as he yawns through her testimony (this is also written up in the autobiography of Girl A). In that scene, Holly, is judged as lacking innocence for already having had sex before meeting the perpetrators and therefore her claims of rape are not believed.

The efforts to cut through this administrative wall of wilful disinterest are taken on by sexual health worker Sara Rowbotham and the Detective Inspector Maggie Oliver in the drama. In the real events these women fought against the dominant narrative which had led the girls to be framed as 'child-prostitutes'. The trailer to *Three Girls* starts with Maxine Peake's voice-over which says, 'There is no such thing as a child prostitute. There is only a child that is being abused'. This is visualised by scenes of their commitment to their work: Sara's care for the girls and the careful plotting of the abuser's activities and Maggie's policework on the streets attempting to re-engage the victims. Some of the most powerful scenes in the drama come from the scripting and performing of class vernacular – of the power of speech and dialect to tell it like it is - as part of the discursive struggle over the labelling of abuse. When Holly falls pregnant to one of the men and is given a social worker, the social worker visits Holly with her family and, seemingly without feeling, calmly tells her parents that she is a prostitute. The social worker is only concerned with the well-being of the unborn child. Sara confronts the social worker in the beige corridor of social services' reception, with various colleagues looking on from around corners at her passionate and emotive response. Squaring up to the social worker, who speaks without a recognized regional accent, she turns away, grabs her bag, and turns back threateningly and screams:

> "Ah do you know, it's like one of those magic-eye posters. Me and you we're looking at the same thing but where I am seeing girls turned inside out by abusers, all you lot are seeing is slags who bring it on 'emselves"

The violent, regional and passionate vernacular stands out against the disinterested bureaucratic gloss of administrative failure. Similarly, when Maggie picks up the police investigation years after the original complaint and goes, dressed in a suit, to Sara's shabby offices for the detailed files that she kept on the girls, Maggie is treated with suspicion. Sara

is once again angry and scathing of Maggie's seemingly detached and procedural attitude to the crimes:

> Sara: "Fuck off, no really I mean it, fuck off. […] and what you're demanding off me now, I couldn't pay you lot to look at for years. You swan in here with your Prada handbag asking me to hand it over like you're asking me to check the gas meter"
>
> Maggie: "I understand"
>
> Sara: Oh no you don't, you really really don't […] and what do you think has been happening to those girls in the meantime? Raped, beaten, not believed. Raped, beaten, not believed"

Later in the drama Maggie must learn this approach to language and emotion so that she can be understood by the girls and by Amber's mother as she tries to get the girls back on side to tell their stories once more. But she also deploys it when she faces the male bureaucracy making judgments about which of the abused girls are credible: 'It's that attitude, "a family like that" that's the obstacle. It's not brain surgery this, we treat them like human-beings and we say we're sorry'. When she discovers that Amber's case is to be dropped because she was seen to have recruited other girls to the abuse and is named on the indictment, Maggie's anger culminates with: 'If she was getting other girls to dish out blow jobs, it was so she didn't have to do them all herself'.

These are the women fighting back and much of episode two is an effort to encourage the girls to also find their own voices to tell their stories to officials again. We see just how wearing this process is, but we also see the resilience and heroism of the girls as they do so. The triumph of the female voice and its heroic and classed resilience in the face of the disdain of the institutions involved is no doubt another major achievement of the drama. However, I now want to address the ways we are positioned as viewers in relation to that voice, and what in turn this might mean for the voice of the girl most likely to be victim of this kind of abuse.

'What if it was your daughter'?

As I have discussed, the 'Long Shot' of the town is not used to establish an exotic distance but rather to emphasise the nature of the crime and to draw the viewer closer to 'feeling' its violence and the nature of the entrapment of the girls. In terms of the real events, the main problem was getting social workers, police officers, and CPS officials to believe in these crimes as rape. The drama seems to deploy similar appeals to the viewers in establishing empathy with the victims by asking 'What if this was your daughter?'. This appeal is made directly to the police officers when the case is re-opened: 'I want you going out there thinking of these girls as your own kids or grandkids, because if it was your own, you'd be torn to pieces.' This is also the appeal to one of the victims, Amber, when the police need her evidence; Maggie asks her to think about her daughter, whom she holds in her arms: 'what if this were to happen to Yasmin?'. This question permeates the drama, but it ultimately reinforces the narrative of appropriate victimhood which it sets out to disrupt.

In the drama, much is made of Holly's relationship with her father, rather than her mother: his disappointment as she starts going out and staying out all night, his desperate attempts to get her to stay home and act as part of the family, and his pleas at the door of the doss-house as he tries to get her to come home. Despite his moments of despair at his daughter's behaviour, and also at the failures of social workers and police officers, the drama finds some resolution when the convictions are delivered and he tells her with tears in his eyes of his pride at her speaking out: 'It were you, it were you speaking up, that's the proudest moment of my life'. Holly's redemption in the eyes of her father is thus important to the overall narrative of *Three Girls* and to the empathetic appeal to the viewer. In this way, Holly's journey as the main protagonist is recognisable as the story of the 'fallen women' who can be saved in a classic redemption narrative. In the drama, Holly's parents explain to

Sara that the family moved into the area after her father lost his business. They tell her of their problems that led them to Rochdale and how Holly is the most sensitive and bright of their daughters. In her autobiography, Girl A articulates the broader social problems that frame the abuse. She writes: 'In a town with no cinema, no ice rink and no hope - and with no money, anyway - this was as glitzy as it would get to 14-year-old girls like us' (Girl A and Bunyan 2013 :24/25). Her father, both in the drama and the book, tells her that she is not 'scum' like her friends. We are reminded throughout of Holly's safe domestic home life, two loving parents with comparative stability and resources, as compared to the other two girls, sisters Amber and Ruby Bowen, who mostly live in a doss-house with other men. In the book Amber is described as a monstrous girl, 'the honey monster', for her part in co-opting other girls into the abuse, whilst the drama makes visible the extreme violence that Amber was subject to if she did not comply. Throughout, the drama maintains a clear distinction between Holly and Amber as Holly's initially groomed and cared-for appearance gets eroded by the abuse and then is restored at the end. Holly is therefore representative of the girl who *can* be harmed by CSE, as we can visibly see just how damaged she is; she embodies ideas about the 'ideal victim' which draw upon middle-class ideas of childhood innocence (Woodiwiss, 2014). Holly is also envisioned as a girl with a future: there are brighter scenes with her at school, being encouraged by teachers, passing her exams and being told she can go to university. She has a period in a social services' mother and baby unit when her child is taken from her for alcoholism as the case is reopened but when she is given her daughter back from care, she is well-groomed and cheerful; she tells a social worker how she is looking forward to a future in which she sees going to college as a realistic opportunity. And finally, after the trial Sara meets with Holly in the park with her daughter in bright sunshine and colourful surroundings that signal her success and escape from Rochdale's darker spaces.

Empathy is therefore achieved because Holly is the 'right' kind of victim and one we can imagine as 'our daughter'. Framing the drama with Holly as the central protagonist replicates the decisions made by the police in the prosecution of the case. She was already the girl whom the police had identified as the most believable and her testimony is used to reopen the case. Girl A, on which the character of Holly, was based has already found her voice through her autobiography; therefore, she is also the girl whose story will lend itself to the television drama. In this sense, *Three Girls* resonates with *Cathy Come Home,* Ken Loach's much-lauded play made for television in 1966, which used documentary drama to raise awareness of the social problem of homelessness. Amongst the criticism of *Cathy Come Home* was its casting of blonde Carol White with her received pronunciation as Cathy, a character who had 'fallen' into problems and with whom the audience could therefore empathise, and whom they could will to 'come home' to a safer and more privileged place. Much was made of White's good looks (she was an actor who became associated with 1960's fashion iconography), and therefore the failure to cast a more 'natural' character who would have more likely been subject to homelessness (Paget, 1999). In this sense the framing of Holly in *Three Girls* as the central protagonist repeats this trope as the 'right' kind of victim, appealing to a middle-class viewer, like the appeal to the police officers, to ask 'what if this was your daughter?'.

Two girls: the 'future' girl and the 'at-risk' girl.

Throughout the drama we see the distinctions between Holly and Amber reinforced as they represent the girl who can and who cannot be saved. They also represent the girl with innocence and the girl who lacks innocence in the narratives of CSE. Holly knows that this is rape, whilst Amber and Ruby are groomed into understanding their abusers as boyfriends. Holly's life descends into chaos, whilst Amber's story is already chaos. Holly's safe home

with her parents and sisters is the place she will return to, whilst Amber lives in a doss house with the abusers buying her meals and constantly calling on her. In the book we learn that the 'honey monster's' (Amber's) white uncle, whose house it was, also abused her. Anita Harris in her 2004 study of the future of young women in the twenty-first century talks about the diametrically opposed figures of the 'future girl' and the 'at-risk girl' who ideologically work together to reinforce the idea of the sense of danger and failure that the 'at-risk girl' embodies in a neoliberal culture which emphasises the values of self-responsibility. The 'at-risk girl' becomes a warning sign to the 'future girl' who is otherwise empowered by working hard to secure her future. The 'future girl' makes the right choices, whilst the 'at-risk girl' only fails. It was the figure of the 'at-risk girl' that loomed large in the social work discourses that helped to perpetuate the problem in this case since the structural conditions that the at-risk girl finds herself trapped in are belied by the insistence on self-responsibility. Here, then, the problem of centring the main narrative on the girl who can be saved, through the recognisable narrative of the 'fallen woman', is that in the background is the 'at-risk girl' who is marked as always-already constitutive of this problem.

In *Three Girls*, Amber is clearly marked as the 'at-risk girl'. She is the fatherless girl who has little or no protection since, whilst Amber's mother, played by Lisa Riley, does appear later in episode two of the drama, she has clearly struggled to protect her two children. There are important moments where we can see Amber's pain; for instance, in the scene when she cries at the window of the doss house while she watches Holly's father taking her home and the scene when she recognises her main abuser on the street whilst she is pushing her baby in a pushchair. Responding to Maggie's question, 'What if it were Yasmin?', Amber says that it can't happen to her daughter because she won't let it. Maggie then asks her, 'And what about girls who have no one to protect them?' which, rather poignantly and perhaps cruelly, puts the question to the very girl without that protection. Yet Amber's story is treated

as secondary to Holly's more familiar narrative of the deserving victim. Whilst Holly's story has also been one of finding her voice (which eventually gets to be heard in court), we learn that, as in the real case, Amber's testimony will not stand, and in fact she is named on the indictment. In the drama, her story culminates with Maggie visiting Amber and explaining that she will continue to fight for her and that she must, as a direct result of this case, resign from the force to continue this fight. This does give some resolution and registers the continued injustice still done to Amber, but the anger and the agency is given to Maggie. Amber is left, as perhaps in real life, resigned to the idea that hers will not be a story of triumph and escape.

In most of the cases of CSE revealed so far, so-called 'grooming gangs' have preyed upon the most vulnerable girls in children's homes. The way in which society views children in care has subsequently been called out for helping to excuse the abuse (Wilkinson, 2017). Girls at the bottom end of the social hierarchy, the poorest and most vulnerable, have been systematically criminalised as prostitutes and even placed in secure units, as society has already judged them as the waste of the system. The narrative organisation which differentiates between Amber and Holly and gives the main story to Holly also shapes the problem of audience address in *Three Girls*: reaching beyond the diegesis of the drama, *Three Girls* asks the viewer to empathize with Holly through the question 'What if this were your daughter?' One cannot help but wonder what the impact of making Amber the main protagonist of this drama would have been since she is more emblematic of the kind of girl most likely to be the victim of this kind of abuse, and the girl who was ultimately let down by the police. What could her story have looked like?

One of the reasons for this absence, the fact that Amber's story is not so fleshed out, might be related to the available biography that the production team[4] drew on, meaning that

Holly had already been able to 'tell her story'. Another reason might be related to the conventions of television social realism. As Marion Jordan describes:

> Briefly the genre of Social Realism demands that life should be presented in the form of a narrative of personal events, each with a beginning, a middle and an end, important to the central characters concerned but affecting others only in minor ways; that though these events are ostensibly about *social* problems they should have as one of their central concerns the settling of people in life; that the resolution of these events should always be of the effect of these social interventions;[…] to give in summary, the impression that the reader, or viewer, has spent some time at the expense of the characters depicted (1981:28).

For Amber, despite the gravity of the multiple injustices against her, there is no straight-forward beginning, middle and end and certainly no satisfactory resolution through any social intervention. Dwelling on Amber's story might not allow the same narrative of progress or futurity that can be more easily accessed through Holly's narrative trajectory. But, as Samantha Lay (2002) points out, resolution can be achieved in varying degrees in social realist film texts so it feels as though Amber has been doubly let down - in real life and in the drama - and not permitted a subjectivity that might have been more fully explored.

Representing people living with poverty on television

There remains a problem therefore in how this story is told. I do not want to underestimate the achievement of *Three Girls* and the powerful and moving way in which it dramatizes abuse, but I do want to interrogate why the narrative struggles to accommodate the viewpoint of, and give full voice to, those against whom this crime is most likely to be committed. This problem relates to the limited spaces for making the 'underclass' visible in the context of the available resources of social realism where working-classness has either been tinged with

nostalgia and poetry or, more recently, made more energetic and vibrant through the feminine space allowed to the figure of the strong Northern woman. Paul Abbott's work on *Clocking Off* has been praised for offering another kind of postmodern social realism which eschews traditional narrative structures and offers a brighter vision of working-class life (Cooke, 2005) and we might recognise this in the earlier joyful scenes of the kebab shop in *Three Girls*. In relation to *Shameless* (Channel 4, 2004-13) Glen Creeber has argued that Abbott generated an 'anti-social realism' in the fictional characters of the Gallaghers (also starring Maxine Peake) in which a moveable and shifting world-view and the construction of fantasy created a 'psychological space' for the characters to occupy (2009: 432). Of course, in comparison, *Three Girls* is a drama based on harrowing truth and it would jar to try and access the televisual codes of some of these newer developments in social realism.

However, I want to press another important issue here: in the transference of the narrative to television, some of the problematic boundary-markers deemed to operate within the working class were also transferred. Television might here be responsible for ignoring the complexity inherent in the relationship between gender and social class just as class analysis itself, with the traditional emphasis upon the male industrial worker or the working family, has misrecognised the experience of poor women (Reay, 1998). As argued above, we can see this in the New Wave films and we can also see gender accounted for in the more recent and more complex subjectivities afforded to feisty, complexly flawed, Northern heroines on television who take on the system from positions of relative power. But in giving voice to Sara and to Maggie in *Three Girls* we might still be asking questions about who speaks for whom?

In focusing on the recuperable working-class girl who regains the faith of her father, the narrative of the poor girl from a single mother is left in the shade. Holly's father occupies the position of the traditional working-class man let down by post-industrial change and

experiencing downward mobility. Many of those living with poverty are in families with single mothers, as is Amber, and we know that single mothers have been systematically castigated as 'the enemy within' (Skeggs, 1997: 51). Whilst the pathologized other of 'our Mam' from traditions of social realism might indeed be absent, there is an othering of the single mother represented by the depiction of Amber's mother.

Therefore, whilst exposing the details of sexual abuse, the drama still others the 'at-risk' girl and perversely it is this very othering which is the problem at the heart of the real story that the drama seeks to expose. Amber's lack of a developed narrative or a growing sense of voice fixes her in time as already-embodying the abuse. In Marx's terms we might argue that this serves as a process of reification whereby social relations are perceived as the inherent attributes of the people involved in them. As Vivyan Adair suggests,

> the economics of class are tied to its material and psychological manifestations for poor women. Material class distinctions become imprimaturs, producing, marking, mutilating and fixing the bodies of poor women and their being and value in the world (2005: 822).

We might understand Holly's narrative journey, through a period of downfall after starting out bright and happy and doing well in school, as staging a classed boundary-marker between Holly and Amber through deploying the recognisable trope of the deserving and undeserving poor. Amber's unchanging appearance might seem like the 'written proof of the body of no value' which, according to Adair, belongs to the bodies of poor women, 'testing the limits of working-class identity and 'deservedness'' (2005: 823). These issues matter because the drama seeks to speak truth to the social problem of the pathologisation of sexualised 'at-risk girl' but it still cannot seem to give her authorship on her own terms. Micheal Zweig suggests that if we imagine those living with poverty in diametric terms with the working class we serve to 'erase the dignity and authority of the poor' (2000: 39) [5]. Without more developed

accounts in drama, we are left with the reality genre of 'poverty porn' (Jensen, 2014) or exploitative talk shows like *The Jeremy Kyle Show* (ITV 2005-2019) in which people living with poverty were ritually ridiculed and mistrusted through lie detectors and paternity tests (Hill, 2015).[6]

Conclusion

In this article, I have framed the drama *Three Girls* within an understanding of how some recent cases of Child Sexual Exploitation speak to contemporary class relations. Whilst journalistic narratives have focussed on the ethnicity of the perpetrators and victims, I have shown how the drama achieves some powerful understanding of how the abuse, and its subsequent neglect, is structurally related to class and poverty. Some of *Three Girls*' major achievements come through its development of registers from social realism, including the aesthetic construction of the town-as-abuser, as well as through the powerful performances of classed vernacular by recognisable working-class female actors. I have, however, also raised issues which should have resonance across television generally and which relate to the way in which we need to recognise a more diverse set of classed subjectivities. As Bev Skeggs suggests, it is not only that we need a politics of recognition, but we also need to 'think about who is empathetically denied in the process of recognition' (2004:13). This matters for a social realist text and its claims to truth, especially in this case because the subjectivity of the girl who is most vulnerable to this crime is obscured in the attachment to a recognisable narrative of progress and in an appeal to the viewer to imagine the girl as *your* daughter.

This is difficult to address because we might argue that all narrative progress essentially mirrors middle-class values in which working-class attachments to 'authenticity' render them anachronistic. Pygmalion narratives abound in popular culture where working-class identities are often marked by 'getting-away' and narratives of escape. But we need to find more ways on television to show that being trapped by the workings of capital relations

does not limit a protagonist's dignity, authorship and profound subjectivity. If, as Raymond Williams (1974) set out, one of the defining characteristics of the social realist text is to *extend* the range of characters and topics to include marginal or previously under-represented groups in societies, then this might also involve continually rethinking television's available storytelling devices. I do not want to argue that there is currently *no* place on television where this might be happening, but if, as Higson describes, the history of the realist tradition is also 'the history of the changing conceptualisation of the relation between the public and the private, the political and the personal, the state and the citizen' (1995:193), then these questions of representation matter. Failing to adequately represent those living with poverty reiterates the current political situation of violent austerity politics whereby the economically deprived are not recognised as citizens and are moved out of sight.

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[1] The Rochdale trial was jeopardised by the actions of the British National Party protesting outside and forms part of events which have helped to spur the rise of Far Right populist leader Tommy Robinson.

[2] The drama achieves more than the documentary that was screened a few months later, *Betrayed Girls*, (BBC 2017) in which the structural terms of class are never spoken whilst the phrases 'vulnerable' and 'chaotic lives' stand in for any account of structural poverty.

[3] Subway is a chain of sandwich stores.

[4] We might want also to reflect on the influence of the socio-demographics of those able to work in television production (See O'Brien et.al. 2018).

[5] I have throughout tried to avoid the phrase 'the poor' for the way it may contribute to the process of othering, but here I am quoting directly here from Zweig (2000).

[6] At the time of editing this article, the show was cancelled by ITV following the death of one of its guests. This prompted a parliamentary enquiry into the treatment of reality television participants which is a hopeful sign of some strategic intervention into television's faltering role in the representation and treatment of those living with poverty.