Viscerally Uncomfortable TV:
Affective Spectatorship and Televisual Neoliberalism

A dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Modern Culture and Media

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{Preface}

This is a dissertation about being made to feel uncomfortable by American television. While the aesthetic, industrial, technological, generic, and convergent changes to television of the past three decades have been extensively documented, little has been written about the affective texture of millennial television, or how these changes elicit different affective responses and investments from its spectators. Although fan studies has attempted to read some of these changes together – most notably through attending to the digital technologies that enable participatory culture and media convergence – *Viscerally Uncomfortable TV* examines millennial television from a different angle, through the contradictory feelings of pleasure and discomfort that come from television’s present fascination with the perverse.

I turn to affect as necessary to make sense of millennial television. As I explore in later pages, the renewed interest in affect across the humanities and social sciences resonates with the ascendancy of neoliberalism in life and representation, I refuse distinctions between the affective and the ideological, believing that both analytical modes are necessary for making sense of television, the dominant entertainment medium of late capitalism. We might say, following Amy Villarejo, that this demands a rather ethereally “queer” project: queer not only in that it demonstrates the entanglement of political-economic, aesthetic, technological, and formal concerns, but queer in that it thinks through the rather “queer” feeling experienced by spectators who are confronted with excessively intense material on their screens.¹ If the primary intervention of cultural studies was to reveal the *ideological* effects of such an entanglement of forces, my goal
here is to reveal the affective effects of those same forces on the spectator (or better still, the entanglement of the ideological and the affective).

The clash between affect (as presubjective in the sense of subjectivity or as subjective in the sense of being personal or individual) and ideology (as institutional or as social) makes the act of identifying and categorizing uncomfortable television difficult. Who determines, for example, what counts as uncomfortable, and for which audiences? Many series with uncomfortable elements do not appear in this dissertation, and not just for lack of space: fantasy and horror series such as *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-present) and *American Horror Story* (FX, 2011-present) would seem to qualify as deeply uncomfortable, given their displays of sexual and racial violence, but I see their generic classifications as doing other work to govern the mechanisms of disavowal and critique by which uncomfortable affects become rerouted into viewer pleasure. Such exclusions may strike some readers as being unfair or as incorrect, but I do not mean to limit narrowly definitions of discomfort through establishing these parameters. Rather, I provide a representative sampling across four genres that, by and large, have come to define millennial television: serialized drama, reality TV, hybrid comedy, and the transformative works exemplary of a convergent participatory culture.

The following chapters outline how the viscerally uncomfortable as a model registers these spectatorial performances of pleasure and discomfort in many genres of millennial television: it touches upon reality, narrative drama, police procedural, news, real crime, serialized comedy, and fan-produced satire. Moreover, the dissertation argues against the ontological differentiation of these genres with respect to cultural status (i.e. “quality,” “middlebrow,” and “trash”). Through wielding the viscerally uncomfortable, I
trace how spectators are both complicit in (through, for example, buying into the branding culture of quality television) and resistant to (through the queerly perverse spectacles of trash television) the prevailing cultural logics of neoliberalism that calcified in 1990s America. In emphasizing television as an object in which to read these cultural histories, I draw from a discipline significantly steeped in feminist modes of thought; as a medium that primarily entered the national imaginary through the domestic space of the suburban American home, television has always emphasized questions of gender and sexuality.

Viscerally Uncomfortable TV thus makes an intervention into analyses that examines television “after TV,” demanding that a “queer” television studies synthesize work in affect and performance into its methodological repertoire. The dissertation is intended to provoke discomfort among its readers, who must account for their own spectatorial pleasure in the popular texts of a pervasively neoliberal American culture. While such discomfort might ultimately be nothing new – American television has never claimed to be an antagonistic force against the status quo – my dissertation intends to pressure the category of the “popular,” highlighting how the perverse and the popular, ideological and affective critique, and scriptive things and spectators all circulate when we consume millennial TV.

Chapter 1, “Television Scripts,” provides the theoretical framework for understanding the viscerally uncomfortable, as well as accounting for the richness and complexity of the three terms that animate this project: millennial television, affect, and neoliberalism. Highlighting television’s role in scripting audiences to think with and
against neoliberal rationalities, I sketch out the changes to television that have enabled the viscerally uncomfortable to emerge.

Chapter 2, “(TV) Junkies in Need of an Intervention: Theorizing Addictive Spectatorship,” reads theories of narcoanalysis alongside episodes of recovery television, a subgenre of reality TV in which addicts are profiled and reformed through a staged intervention. Using an episode of the reality series Intervention, I show that reality television’s structuring of affect provides audiences with a motive to disidentify with its subjects in order to disavow their own addictions – including, importantly, their addiction to TV itself.

Chapter 3, “Crossed Wires: Appropriative Intermediality and Quality TV,” considers what has been called a new “golden age” of serialized drama; these current programs feature anti-heroes and are heralded by critics and scholars as “literature” or as “cinema.” Examining why a dislikable or morally repugnant protagonist is presumed to be a necessary component for televisual risk-taking, and why both have been branded as “art,” I use discourses surrounding HBO’s The Wire to read intermedial appropriation – the disavowal of televisuality in favor of a more legitimated art form – against theories of cultural appropriation.

Chapter 4, “The Grand Supreme Cometh: Consenting to the Haptic Uncanny of the Predatory Spectator,” takes up the idiom of the exploited child in reality television, juxtaposing the 1996 cable news coverage of the death of JonBenêt Ramsey with millennial programs that follow child beauty pageants. Using recent interventions in film and media theory that frame spectatorship as haptic, I propose that the “bad touches” enabled by the formal logic of these programs present them as texts so self-aware of their
ability to represent the fantasy of pornography that they interpellate the audience into the role of the sexual predator, both fulfilling and challenging the programs’ disciplinary objective to instrumentalize state power.

Chapter 5, “‘Let’s Get a Motherfucking Abortion’: Affective Economies of Perversion in Televisual Remix,” focuses on queer temporality and Sienna D’Enema’s “Jiz,” a reimagining of the children’s animated series Jem and the Holograms, in which the colorful glam rocker is transformed into a profane, violent, and drug addicted drag queen. I trace the role of nostalgia in remix culture, in which television series from the past now are inserted beyond their cancellation dates into a future punctuated by digital mediations and participatory culture. If remix is, in today’s digital cultural studies, used to promote cultural literacy, I argue that this is because of its capacity to pervert and corrupt. Remix may infuse creative potentiality into the wistful objects of one’s past, but only through taking as its premise the risking of innocence conjured by those objects.

Chapter 6, an Afterword, “Leaning to Love Discomfort: Irritation as Representation,” is the conclusion to the dissertation: a short excursus on “irritation” that positions this minor affect as a productive feeling with which to approach the study of representation. Using the example of HBO’s Girls and its polarizing series creator Lena Dunham, I consider what affective energies television scholars deploy while gaining pleasure from programs, characters, and storylines containing muddled (at best) or problematic (at worst) representational content. That is to say, I finish this exploration of television and affect by focusing on ambivalently antagonistic responses to programming both from within the apparatus and from within the discipline itself.
It is not emotionally easy to write a dissertation on discomfort, especially when whatever pleasure may have originally been derived from textual perversity changes upon repeated viewings and critical analysis. Yet television often provides pleasure through establishing the individual viewer as part of a larger community, even if that community is imagined. To break the fourth wall for a moment (something television is known to do occasionally), I invite you, the reader, to share in this discomfort, so that together we may reroute affect through critical pathways in order to make sense of the television we love – and of the world we inhabit – in more fruitful ways.
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Since the 1990s, American Television has undergone a number of aesthetic, structural, industrial, technological, and generic changes, to the point where what we might call television in the United States at once appears familiar and unfamiliar. This reinvention of television into an assemblage of practices described as “after TV” in one recent anthology – or this dissertation calls “millennial television” – is premised upon two important transformative “posts.” Due to such factors as the increase in the number of cable and satellite delivery systems, Internet convergence, increased serialization, and the emergence of reality television as both a generic staple and spectacle (among others), television must now be thought of as redefining “post-network” and “post-public service.” These changes in practice have had concrete effects on the programming itself; far from the sanitized, family-friendly fare of television’s past, TV today bombards viewers with widespread profanity, misogynistic violence, graphic sex, and the extraordinary exploitation of ordinary people. To give a few examples of this bombardment (many of which I read as texts in later chapters): the most popular series in the Law & Order franchise, Special Victims Unit (SVU), routinely depicts the sexual assault against women and children as casual, quotidian events in New York City. Reality programs such as Toddlers & Tiaras, Hoarders, and My Strange Addiction profile “ordinary” individuals and families as they indulge in decidedly abnormal, compulsive, and often uncanny hobbies and behaviors. And original narrative programs on cable and premium cable networks (and occasionally on the Big Four networks) chronicle the violent lifestyles of individuals in the urban drug trade (The Wire) and the New Jersey mob (The Sopranos), as well as several serial killers (Dexter, Hannibal, Bates Motel, The
Following) and white supremacists (which were featured prominently on Breaking Bad, Sons of Anarchy, and Justified), resulting, in the words of Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, in a “pushing [of] the limits of representation” that has become a signature of “quality” television.²

All of these are examples what I call in this dissertation “viscerally uncomfortable television.” Specifically, I investigate how the changes in the form of American millennial television – the structural changes that have led to the television “after TV” – have precipitated a similar change in how viewers pleasurably experience television’s content. This experience, the dissertation argues, is marked by an interest with discomfort, or increases in affective intensity, uncanniness, and taboo subject matter. As a model, the viscerally uncomfortable links together affective, embodied feelings of disgust with spectatorial pleasure. That is to say: the viscerally uncomfortable has become not just millennial television’s primary method of expressing affect, but, paradoxically too, its way of generating pleasure (making this a dissertation with a rather unusual orientation towards pleasure).

As this is both an introduction to the viscerally uncomfortable as well as its theoretical positioning within millennial television, this chapter requires an attention to the key terms with which this dissertation engages: the viscerally uncomfortable (as well as its component parts of “visceral” and “discomfort”), televisual neoliberalism, millennial television (and/as popular culture), affective spectatorship. Some of these terms I have stitched together from other interventions, while others are direct borrowings from scholarship and criticism on popular culture; all of these terms make reference to a number of disciplines and methodologies, including television and
comparative media studies, theories of embodiment and performance; feminist and queer theories of affect; and epistemic, cultural, political, and economic periodizations of the contemporary moment. To that end, this chapter places these terms *beside* each other, bearing witness to their many collisions while tracing the affective residue that subsequently lingers. The emphasis on preposition is critical in order to explain their resonances, as the notion of the “beside” rejects binaristic critique, offering instead a critical practice that affirms instability, provisionality, mobility, contingency, and circulation. I borrow its emphasis from Eve Sedgwick, who uses the term as the principal preposition in her exploration of emotion and expression, *Touching Feeling*. The “beside” is a perceptual lens that allows us to think in terms of nondualistic modes of critique, thus accounting for the rich complexity of spatiality inherent to theoretical work; she maintains that “the irreducibly spatial positionality of *beside* also seems to offer some useful resistance to the ease with which *beneath* and *beyond* turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos.” ⁴

I find the term particularly rich for the study of television, a medium that has historically considered spectatorship in terms of configurations of domestic space: a television set anchors the suburban living room, beside the post-World War II American family. This dissertation summons certain figures that animate affective reactions within audiences that in turn reconfigure (as it were), the spectatorial relationship between this perceived family of viewers, a changing apparatus divorced from its domestic context, and the ideological representations of texts. As a medium of popular culture, television functions as one of the ideological state apparatuses (“ISAs”) famously outlined by Louis Althusser that interpellates individuals as constituted subjects (in this case, as the
Richard Dienst notes that in Althusser’s famous essay on ideology, the word “telecommunication” is instrumental to the process of interpellation; in Althusser’s words, “experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed.” For Dienst, the possibility of misdirection implied in Althusser’s comment is significant, such that “ideology requires a short circuit between the singular and the general so the reception of a representation becomes a sending back – a representation of a reception.” Two critical observations can be made from Dienst’s prescriptive reading of Althusser: first, that the possibility exists that ideology can “miss [its] man”; and second, that ideology does not necessarily hail the subject in place, rather operating within a communicative context. So if interpellation occurs through mediations such as televisual texts, under what affective conditions are audiences (themselves simultaneously collective and individual) interpellated? John Mowitt reminds us that in Althusser’s account, interpellation “is clearly a conspicuously sonoric event” through the “Hey you!” of the policeman; such an intimation clearly resonates with Rick Altman’s work on television sound, in which the soundtrack “calls” or “scripts” (important terms in both accounts of interpellation and performance) the audience’s spatio-temporal engagement with the program, situating televisual flow beside household flow.

The viscerally uncomfortable helps necessitate, I believe, an affective dispossession within the spectator; furthermore, this dispossession is what happens when ideology “misses” its target. When spectators are made to feel uncomfortable, they “look” at their screens in different, and often synesthetic, ways. The figures indexed by
the viscerally uncomfortable represent perverse forms of neoliberal subjectivity present within programming but also produced by the spectator, beside him or her in the context of reception. The viscerally uncomfortable may be thought of as the affective corollary to the changes to television immediately before and after the millennium, changed that by and large have been extensively documented by scholars. Yet left unsaid in this litany of changes is the body of the televisual spectator, and what kind of labor s/he performs in consuming these new iterations of television. The viscerally uncomfortable describes how new cultural forms and practices – what we might call a new “televisuality” – articulated through negative affect emerged around the millennium as television’s response to a set of cultural logics of neoliberalism. The model thinks through how spectators participate in a relational economy to television that traffics in the viscerally uncomfortable as a way to gain pleasure from and, at times, resist these cultural logics. It takes Jodi Dean’s gloss on the work of Slavoj Žižek that “communicative capitalism is thus characterized by the prevalence of the supergo injunction to enjoy” to heart, proposing embodied feelings of discomfort as the means by which neoliberalism has televisually constructed its audiences.7 And, importantly, it employs the viscerally uncomfortable as what Eve Sedgwick would call a reparative viewing practice as an attempt to move outside “the relentlessly self-propagating, adaptive structure of the repressive hypothesis.”8 In other words, I am interested in how analyzing negative affects can reveal a collection of positive energies – such as pleasure – within emotional schemas of neoliberalism.

Televisual Neoliberalism at the Millennium
Why has television gravitated towards the perverse immediately prior to and following the millennium, and why is this new iteration of the medium as popular as ever? “Millennial television” is a flexible category within this dissertation, as it refers to different viewing practices, technologies, genres, and narrative forms of television, all of which affect its content. It is in a sense the kind of periodization against which Frederic Jameson cautions for its potential for totalization (and thus the impossibility that it may be done well), even though Jameson reluctantly concedes that periodization may be necessary for students of culture. Not all television programs broadcast in the years prior to and following the year 2000 qualify as “millennial television,” insofar as many of the era’s popular programs had been on the air for years, such as the staple ratings hits of televised sport competitions. While the category is thus defined relationally to the television that came before it, I identify a number of changes addressed throughout this dissertation: the explosion of reality programming and the impacts it has had on production, labor, and celebrity; increased serialization across many genres of programming, but particularly within dramatic programming produced by cable networks; the slow legitimation of television as an art form; a widespread growth in platforms and technologies of distribution, which include subscription based streaming services that now produce original content (such as Netflix or Amazon Instant Video) as well as hardware such as smartphones and tablets that allow for a mobile audience; increased narrative adaptation from and movement across other media forms and national programming; and a hybridization of genre and narrative form found in, for example, the “dramedy” (part drama, part comedy) or the “docusoap” (part soap opera, part documentary). This list is not exhaustive, and indeed, many more changes could be
located, such as in Lynn Spigel’s claim that media convergence refers not only to the experience of watching content across multiple platforms but also to the merging of television’s commercial and public-service imperatives.10

Because the category of “millennial television” is marked through historical different (as in “after TV”), distinguishing between characterizations of television from the 1980s and early 1990s (which can be best encapsulated as “postmodern”) and those of millennial television becomes crucially important. In her influential study of 1980s television, Jane Feuer cautions readers from assuming that changes in televsional form and industry (the popularity of primetime serialized “soaps” such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty* and the expansion of cable networks targeting specific audiences along racial, gendered, and generational lines, to name but two examples) are either the cause or the effect of the politically dominant ideology of the economic and social conservatism of the Reagan administration. Instead, Feuer argues for a “more complex and bidirectional model in which Reaganomics and *Dynasty* are viewed as mutually causing and mutually effecting each other.”11 If television in the 1980s represented the apotheosis of “postmodern” TV that simultaneously interrogated Reaganomics while drawing on its logic (for Feuer), harnessing excessive production and videographic embellishment for mass audiences (for John Caldwell), and representative of a self-characterization of “feminine” consumer culture (for Lynne Joyrich), we must ask: what follows?12 What is the difference between the “postmodern” TV of the 1980s and the “millennial” TV of today?

One argument – an argument to which this project is somewhat sympathetic – is that the difference is simply cosmetic, an archaeological difference of degree. For example, DVDs and TiVOS could be considered to be the genealogical inheritors to
technologies such as the VCR and the remote control that revolutionized postmodern television. The expectation of what Jason Mittell identifies as “narrative complexity” within primetime drama is, too, nothing new at all – just the proliferation of the same techniques employed by *Dynasty* (and daytime soap operas before that).\(^{13}\) I insist, however, that rather than viewing the changes that occurred to television in the 1990s as postmodern television amplified, they must be viewed as reshaping cultural attitudes towards television through an evacuation of the mainstream. Put differently, television changed during this time such that what was regarded as influentially popular in both journalistic criticism and in television studies was either coded as culturally “high” or as culturally “low,” but not culturally “middle” (or what might be called “middlebrow” television).

Thus, while the idea that millennial TV is simply postmodern television gone awry is seductive, I read the difference through its reception among audiences, critics, and scholars; though traces of these changes can be found in the 1990s, it was in the most recent decade (the “aughts”) that millennial television was recognized as “something” different and unique to American culture. In a decade retrospective of the aughts, journalist Emily Nussbaum argues that this was the decade in which television “became art.” Her glowing tribute to contemporary television echoes the sentiment felt not just by her fellow critics, but by many consumers of American popular culture. Television’s position in the American cultural imaginary – that is to say, its status within a hierarchy of artistic mediums – no longer yielded only contempt (Nussbaum even cites Newton Minow’s notorious “vast wasteland” speech to this effect), but instead aspects of television seemed now to receive near-universal acclaim. In her words:
You could easily memorialize the aughts as the Decade of Reality TV, that wild baby genre conceived in some orgy of soap opera, documentary, game shows, and vaudeville – it was reality, after all, that upended the industry’s economic model and rewrote the nature of fame. Or you could mark this as the era of the legal procedural, or the age of Hulu and DVRs and TWOP [the fan website Television Without Pity]. But for anyone who loves television, who adores it with the possessive and defensive eyes of a fan, this was most centrally and importantly the first decade when television became recognizable as art, great art: collectible and life-changing and transformative and lasting. As the sixties are to music and the seventies to movies, the aughts – which produced the best and worst shows in history – were to TV. It was a period of exhilarating craftsmanship and formal experimentation, accompanied by spurts of anxious grandiosity (for the first half of the decade, fans compared anything good to Dickens, Shakespeare, or Scorsese, because nothing so ambitious had existed in TV history).  

In their book Legitimating Television, Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine have critiqued Nussbaum for essentially writing “one long auteurist celebration” in which “great art” is equated with a single visionary who serves as the guarantor of high art. Thus, Nussbaum can compare the aughts to comparable decades in music and film, and then to the Westernized canon of “ambitious” individual storytellers (such as Dickens, Shakespeare, and Scorsese). While I do not disagree with their interpretation, I wish to elaborate on it, claiming that what makes television “feel” like great art is not simply a result of the success of a showrunner or auteur. Rather, this feeling emerges precisely through an engagement of the viscerally uncomfortable.

The changes to television represent redefinitions of the medium’s technological, aesthetic, generic, industrial, and formal aspects, yet rarely do they denominate the larger changes to cultural and economic neoliberalism felt within American popular culture during this time period. When they come close, these accounts often invoke the demise of public-service television, or how commercial television has appropriated the function of
formerly public-service programming. Writing from a political-economic approach, Eileen Meehan argues that over the past several decades “television has become increasingly commercialized, privatized, and marketized – thereby emphasizing and globalizing the peculiarities of the American focus on markets constrained by advertisers’ preferences.” Such historical processes describe changes in television’s relationship to capitalism, from a historical period marked by an emphasis on post-Fordist modes of production and consumption to one marked by the fluidity of capital, the movement of multinational media conglomerates, and the rise of management discourse. This is also the historical difference between what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello describe as the second and third “spirits” of capitalism.17 Driven by commercialization, privatization, and marketization, capitalism – and, crucially, the television industry that capitalism is dependent upon in order to maintain its ideological hegemony – reshapes the dominant vector of consumption, from emphasizing the mass as public to emphasizing individuals as unique, mobile, and diversified consumers.

A political-economic approach is inherently also technological, as industrial and technological changes to consuming television intertwined. Practices of narrowcasting, or targeting niche audiences through a menu of expanded cable channels, gave the individual viewer of television more options to watch, and technologies such as DVRs and TiVOs and the capacity to stream online programs or sell individual episodes fractured once-dominant units of viewers such as the “family” into discrete and diffused audiences, as chapters three and four of this dissertation examine. The result of narrowcasting and technological advancement, as William Uricchio has noted, has been to recategorize the viewer-television interface such that broadcasting reflects “adaptive
agent mediations of individual tastes.” This has allowed for the expansion of the diegetic universe of a series – through online content that provides background information about particular characters or settings – as well as for the consolidation of authorship, as in when showrunners (as well as directors, writers, and actors) provide interviews and commentary on DVD extras. But this has also allowed for new logics of calculation in order to determine the new audience’s individual tastes, such that the algorithm has come to occupy an important space in organizing spectatorship and even the creative decisions behind production. Most famously, Netflix advertised its original hit series *House of Cards* (2013-present) in part by revealing how it was in part based off of Big Data: data collection by the corporation showed a correlation between the same subscribers who watched the original 1990 BBC miniseries and those that enjoyed films starring Kevin Spacey or directed by David Fincher.

While the scholarship on millennial television ubiquitously notes these kinds of changes, it rarely attributes or connects them to the changes wrought by neoliberalism as an economic and cultural philosophy. Neoliberalism is generally used to describe an economic relationship between free markets, the state, and civil society; historicizing neoliberalism is a difficult task, one that is ultimately not my project here. Most accounts of neoliberalism place its ascendancy during the 1970s through the implementation of free market economic policy in Latin America (propped up by the economics department at the University of Chicago) and becoming official state policy in America during the Reagan presidency. Michel Foucault devoted a whole series of lectures in 1978 and 1979 on the subject, in which he contrasted the German political philosophy of ordoliberalism with the Chicago-driven neoliberalism, formulates the free market as a
form of governmentality, or new organizations and expressions of state power (what he called the “conduct of conduct”).

Regardless of its precise historical antecedents, neoliberalism has been associated with a number of political, economic, and cultural discourses, namely an emphasis on individual rights, the privatization and deregulation of state assets, and new global scales of production, often through outsourcing. These discourses are what interest me most about how to study popular culture partially produced by neoliberal policy; I take seriously Elizabeth Povinelli’s assertion that what neoliberalism “refers to is not an event, but a set of uneven social struggles within the liberal diaspora.” Or, in the wise words of Wendy Brown: “neoliberalism has no fixed or settled coordinates…it is globally ubiquitous, yet disunified and nonidentical with itself in space and over time.” That is to say, while neoliberalism as an economic system has been implemented on both domestic and international scales since at least the 1970s, I maintain that its effects on popular culture and on everyday American life began to be felt in the late 1980s and early 1990s and acutely felt in the aughts. With the consolidation of economic and political power, the cultural effects of neoliberalism can be found in the ways that it reorganized American citizenship, with various policies affecting welfare and immigration restructuring the family as a target, an object, and an instrument of governmental power.

Neoliberalism thus can best summarized as a formula of economization: it gestures towards the transformation of human capital, energy, and rationality into economic ones. These transformations have resulted in the proliferation of neoliberal discourses into schemas of representation (such as television programming) and their attending decoding apparatuses (such as television criticism and even scholarship). Many,
if not all, of the following chapters, expose the neoliberal rationale behind these apparatuses, such as in the third chapter when I situate the intermediality of quality television against neoliberal culture’s logic of valuation, or in the conclusion when I interrogate the think piece as a surface criticism that trolls identity politics. While neoliberalism has within the humanities acquired a distinctively unpleasant stench in recent years, I situate this scholarship within neoliberal paradigms in order to expose the fascinating and pervasive breadth of neoliberal critique. Because of television’s wide reach and centralized artistic structure – somewhat challenged in recent years by the evolution of a participatory culture and in very recent years by the emergence of independent webseries – it is impossible to imagine many millennial TV programs originated and produced outside of neoliberal schemas. While I am skeptical of considering neoliberalism as only a synonym for the “popular” – insofar as it is signified by popular cultural texts or that it somehow represents populist expressions of political culture – television has always exploited its position as the dominant mass medium of the late twentieth century as an asset: it may not have been the most culturally valued or legitimated art form, but at least it was popular among the masses.

With its emphasis on new technologies of distribution and on corporate hegemony of such markets via the mergers of multinational corporations, neoliberalism has a specific resonance with millennial television. Jon Beasley-Murray explains this connection through a comparison to other mediums: “replacing the theatricality of traditional liberalism,” he asserts, “populism is cinematic; neoliberalism is televisual.”26 My dissertation might agree with the last few words of this provocative statement, but disagrees with the rest of it, insisting on the power of neoliberalism’s turn to negative
affect in millennial television. If, for Beasley-Murray, populism “is incarnated bodily” – what would also then be theatrical – I substitute “popular culture” for “populism,” demonstrating the way neoliberal ideology, and capitalism as a whole, becomes integrated into all genres and forms of television. Even if consumed in private or semi-private spaces, television spectators perform their pleasure and discomfort through their bodies, registering complicity and resistance to the status quo.

To Every (Affective) Turn, Turn, Turn…

This attention to a bodily incarnated populism grounds this project within the interdisciplinary field of affect studies, a field of thought that has gained quite a bit of attention within the humanities over the past two decades – not coincidentally, also the period of time in which I stake the sedimentation of neoliberal culture within the United States. The episteme of affect we currently inhabit requires the machinations of late capitalism and vice versa, such that in order to make sense of popular cultural texts and media technologies from this period, one must trace its affective atmospheres, reading their structures and effects alongside embodied performances of cultural identity. As a way to assert the body’s role after being largely absent from semiotic readings within structuralism and, to a lesser extent, poststructuralism, the renewed interest in affect across the humanities and social sciences covers much ground, cutting a wide swath with regards to its relationship to identity (in the designation of specifically queer or black affects, for example) and distributed agency (in the attention to non-human or environmental animacies). As Eugenie Brinkema cogently asserts, “we might be better off suggesting that the ‘turn to affect’ in the humanities is and always has been plural, a
set of many turning that are problematically lumped together in a false unity that imagine
that one singular intellectual arc could describe them all.”\textsuperscript{27} Such a description parrots the
categorizations of neoliberalism as similarly definitionally untenable, despite attempts to
map out its unfixed coordinates; both concepts appear to be stretched so wide as to defy
singular delineations.\textsuperscript{28} Although significant differences exist as to whether or not affects,
emotions, and feelings are distinct from each other, or as to the role the conscious
interpretation of affects play in their ontological state (differences I tender shortly),
common ground suggests that affects are mobile – that they move in between bodies and
things – and that they prompt some sort of action, even if that action is in their very
legibility. Affects disrupt, circulate, and recalibrate, working together to structure
psychical coherence through their very adaptability. They accumulate, foster, and act as
commodities in the new service economy, not unlike the service economy itself, which
requires its labor force to be flexible, contingent, and – following Gilles Deleuze’s
postscript on control societies – on the move.\textsuperscript{29} We might say that “after TV,” when the
cultural effects of neoliberalism began to “trickle down” into everyday programming, the
term “circulation” is a better descriptor of how television structures everyday life; it is, I
speculatively suggest, a more appropriate model for thinking contemporary televisual
flow.

The turn to affect in critical theory has created space for conceiving of embodied
individual experience beside the construction of knowledge; as Clare Hemmings has
observed, the affective turn has thus been positioned as a privileged “way out” of the
impasse between epistemology and ontology in cultural studies or between the binary of
inscription and incorporation in performance studies.\textsuperscript{30} Over the past two decades, this
turn to affect has coalesced into two camps. The first draws from Deleuze and Felix Guattari, themselves drawing from Baruch Spinoza, William James, Henri Bergson, and Alfred North Whitehead. This coterie views affect as pure potentiality, as a pre-subjective response in excess of consciousness; for Deleuze, “pure affects imply an enterprise of desubjectification.”31 Brian Massumi, recognized as a leading figure in this camp, views affect as independent from ideology, “irreducibly bodily and autonomic.”32 Here, affect occurs below the threshold of consciousness, although as Patricia Ticineto Clough has pointed out, this does not mean that affect “is not ’presocial.’”33 This camp draws an important distinction between affects and emotions: affects are nonsignifying intensities or forces split from the signifying functions of emotion. Signification is the problem to which affect is the solution; as Massumi writes, “emotion and affect – if affect is intensity – follow different logics and pertain to different orders…emotion is a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity…into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning.”34

The other camp culls from feminist and queer cultural studies to position affect as also deeply bodily, but without rigorously stressing presubjectivity. Here, affects and emotions are read interchangeably, and most of these thinkers (which include Eve Sedgwick, Lauren Berlant, Sianne Ngai, Mel Y. Chen, Kathleen Stewart, and Teresa Brennan) respond to a Massumian definition of affect by insisting on the importance of emotion as equally embodied. Consider, for example, Sara Ahmed’s justification: Certainly, the experience of ‘having’ an emotion may be distinct from sensations and impressions, which may burn the skin before any conscious moment of
recognition. But this model creates a distinction between conscious recognition and ‘direct’ feeling, which itself negates how that which is not consciously experienced may itself be mediated by past experiences. I am suggesting here that even seemingly direct responses actually evoke past histories, and that this process bypasses consciousness, though bodily memories.  

Both Massumi and Ahmed would agree that emotions are “qualified” somehow, perhaps distinct on some level from the raw, unadulterated state of affect. But Ahmed’s point is crucial here, insofar as she gives the body its due as a repository of meaningful functionality. For her, the body is not a clean system through which sensation and perception are complementary mechanisms; emotion may be qualified by “bodily memories,” but for her the physical body separate from consciousness carries these memories, and in fact traps affective forces in their webs as they are relayed to consciousness and recognition. Affects as emotions, then, enfolds sensation within the internal histories of the body; to claim a separation between presignifying affect and signifying emotion, then, would be to insinuate that emotions are somehow not always already part of the body, ironically de-privileging the body as a rich archive with the capacity to redirect and shape affective forces.

My project unabashedly places an uncomfortable faith in this latter viewpoint. I do so out of a consideration for the position of the spectator, who within television studies is signified as a statistical consumer without uniquely identifiable characteristics under neoliberalism. While television studies has significantly documented the changes to television, none have given thought to the
body of the televisual spectator and what kind of labor s/he performs in consuming these reinventions of television. To think about this labor differently is to recognize the way in which the body shapes affective perception as itself a recording technology. Writing from performance studies, Rebecca Schneider has called for a more thorough investigation into the way in which the body functions as an archive of performance and as a physical record of experience; what makes affect so seductive, she argues, is how it positions itself between bodies, rather between a body and a text.  

To claim that the body becomes a record of experience, however, is also to make a claim about temporality, since as Michel Foucault has persuasively argued, the body is always within history. In “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Foucault writes that the destruction of the body necessitates the emergence of the “dissociated” subject: “the body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perceptual disintegration.” Foucault takes his notion of the docile body and gives it a soul, with the subordination of the body (resulting in what he calls in Discipline and Punish “docile bodies”) allowing for the conditions of subjectivity. Moreover, that this body is “the inscribed surface of events,” with an epidermis of language that can be broken down and withered away by rational thought. This acknowledgment of the body’s capacity to incite action through its destruction is rather poignant, and it casts light on the ways in which affect and emotion can be thought of as conjoined categories, brought together by the weight of embodied history, entrapped in a circuit of “perceptual disintegration.”
In her attempt to yoke together psychoanalysis with the thought of Foucault, Judith Butler situates the body in a similarly productive valence for her own project. Reading the “constitutive loss” of the body in the name of subjectivity through a psychoanalytic theory of sublimation, Butler sees in the body a quilting point, before turning to the Althusserian account of interpellation: “If, according to psychoanalysis, the subject is not the same as the psyche from which it emerges and if, for Foucault, the subject is not the same as the body from which it emerges, then perhaps the body has come to substitute for the psyche in Foucault – that is, as that which exceeds and confounds the injunctions of normalization.” Such a substitution blurs the distinction between affect and emotion, or at least positions it within a shared structural logic, or as Sianne Ngai elegantly puts it, “the difference between affect and emotion is taken as a modal difference of intensity or degree, rather than a formal difference of quality or kind.” The viscerally uncomfortable operates through this co-presence, as discomfort is something both immediately sensed and acutely felt through a signifying chain of social discourses that can be read as the labor of the spectator’s body. In this sense, the deterioration of the body circulates with the particles of light transmitted from the television to comprise the affective atmosphere of discomfort common to millennial TV.

**The Feeling of Flow, The Flow of Feeling**

The viscerally uncomfortable is an initial attempt to think through the development of television studies and affect studies as both parallel and overlapping vocabularies for describing the representation of everyday experience. This can be
accomplished through a historical pairing of both disciplines. Television was initially conceived as a technological and cultural form, a “cultural technology” in the phrasing of Raymond Williams, who identified one of its distinctive qualities, “flow.” Responding to Marshall McLuhan’s technologically deterministic view of the medium, Williams infamously described the disorienting experience of viewing American television in a Miami hotel in 1973 as indicative of the medium’s definitive difference from other media forms such as print or film; the flow between segments instead of the content of programming is, in his view, indicative of the viewing experience. Williams’ notion of flow as segmentation has been revisited and modified by numerous scholars, but despite these reexaminations, the concept still stands as the primary term for capturing the experience of watching television. In Dienst’s words, flow “remains the blurry images of unresolved metaphysical impulses in the theorization of television.”

Of course, Raymond Williams is well-known for also documenting the junction of experience and everyday life in an entirely different register, one in which mass media is absent. I am referring here to his seminal essay “Structures of Feeling,” in which he insists on the historical structuration of social, commonly shared experiences. Structures of feeling generate affective epistemologies: they “are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt” that talk about “characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity.” To my knowledge, no substantial attempts have been made within television studies to stitch together Williams’ work on television with his work on affect; to a certain extent, the
viscerally uncomfortable relies on such a coupling. The structure of feeling, like the experience of watching television, must be perceived as emergent, serving as what Lauren Berlant describes as “a residue of common historical experience sensed but not spoken in a social formation, except as the heterogeneous but common practices of a historical moment would emanate them.” The “present” tense intrinsic to “practical consciousness” can be found in the way television organizes the spectator’s sense of time: from television’s deployment of liveness as its ontology and ideology, to its insistence of technology as a-live; from its backwards construction of “real time” in the reality genre, to, in the “present” day, convergence culture’s revealing of television as always already intermedial, the effects of television’s structure of feeling appears to echo the words of Mary Ann Doane, who asserts that “the major category of television is time.”

The effects of this coupling accommodate revisiting another key question within affect studies: namely, the role of ideology and representation. The lines are divided again into similar camps, with the theorists aligned with a strict distinction between affect and emotion (Massumi et al.) suggesting that affect is entirely independent from ideology, and because it is presignifying, prior to ideology altogether. As Ruth Leys has incisively pointed out, “the disconnect between ‘ideology’ and affect produces as one of its consequences a relative indifference to the role of ideas and beliefs in politics, culture, and art in favor of an ‘ontological’ concern with different people’s corporeal-affective reactions.” But television is, as Jane Feuer has canonically argued, defined by its liveness, both ontologically and ideologically, as even programs that are not recorded “live” are organized to appear exactly as a “live” broadcast. Indeed, this occupying of
both positions—ontology and ideology, and thus affectivity and representation—implies that the affectivity of television is experienced as immediate, present, and vital; furthermore, this is a necessarily ideological reading. Feuer frames this question differently, “at the level of aesthetic superstructure,” yet the contradiction she identifies within television as a text also employs the neoliberal language of affect studies: “is television a thing-in-itself (i.e. a specific signifying practice) or is it merely a means of transmission for other processes of signification (cinema, news, ‘live’ events)?” Indeed, to think of television as “merely a means of transmission” – as a conduit or, more aptly, a vehicle for other semiotic associations – casts the medium in a similar light to the inscriptive body in Foucault that is destroyed in the process of forming the dissociated subject. While Feuer demonstrates that the answer to her question is clearly both, her intervention helps me to articulate a claim about the viscerally uncomfortable (a claim that I unpack in greater detail in this dissertation’s conclusion): namely, that televisual affectivity is dependent on meaningful representation.

While the present tense of television’s temporal impulse is indeed important to understanding how it promotes a circulation of affect between TV text and spectator, the spatial construction of such a circulation must be equally as indulged. For Williams posits both watching television and structures of feeling as profoundly social experiences: television is not just a technical apparatus, for example, but a social technology, as evidenced in the subtitle to his book, “technology as cultural form” (emphasis mine). Here, I interpret the adverb “as” as testifying to the affective dimensions of the televisual. We can see cognates of this in similar attempts to delineate and trace the affective circulation of and between bodies. Writing about Latino/a performance, for example, José
Esteban Muñoz has maintained that “feeling” functions as a critical repository of politically cogent information that reside outside the public sphere of speech and action.\(^{48}\) In a similar vein (and drawing from Jacques Lacan), Teresa Brennan writes that the transmission of affect “alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject,” even if such assimilation into the individual is temporary. Her work points to how affects saturate the very space (as well as time) between bodies, forming an atmosphere.\(^{49}\) Thinking of affect as transmitted through social, and never solitary, environments insists on relational networks of community, however “imagined” (in Benedict Anderson’s terms) they may be.\(^{50}\) And, Kathleen Stewart has described how “a weirdly floating ‘we’ snaps into a blurry focus when one enters a mall, or when one is flipping through reality TV channels, watching scenes unfold.”\(^{51}\)

Two recent attempts to think through television’s relation to emotion merit mention here. Like my project, Kristyn Gorton wants to theorize the connection between television’s new viewing practices and the emotional engagement spectators have with their television programs. Her description of how audiences “get into” certain programs somewhat resembles the formulation I call in my first chapter “addictive spectatorship,” but the similarities stop there. For Gorton, emotion is an “aesthetic quality that makes for good television,” not an assemblage of self-reflexive industrial, institutional, and textual strategies for locating television’s affective potential.\(^{52}\) Perhaps more comprehensively, Sasha Torres suggests the work of televisually transmitted affects in structuring and managing cultural attitudes towards torture in post-9/11 America. Examining representations of Guantánamo in police procedurals, she analyzes (following Stewart) how “the notion of ordinary affects can help us understand the unpredictable transmission
of feeling that connect and uncouple citizens with and from both their government and the media they consume.” My own project dovetails here, but with a crucial difference: I am interested in not only how such affects (as part of the viscerally uncomfortable model) conjoin and detach citizens from both the state and popular culture, but also how they reconfigure our attachment as incorporated to larger cultural logics of neoliberalism.

**Scripts of Sexual Violence**

To illustrate these questions, consider the following two examples: one, an item of news that circulated in celebrity gossip and television news outlets, and the second, an immensely popular procedural encapsulating spectatorial discomfort. Tonya Cooley first appeared on the eleventh season of MTV’s *The Real World* in 2002 (filmed in Chicago), causing some mild controversy when, in the season premiere, she claimed that she had never interacted with African-Americans and gay people (her fellow castmates, of course, included members of both demographics). Cooley used her appearance on the program to become a “reality TV star,” using her status as a participant on the program to then appear on no less than eight seasons of the spin-off series *The Challenge*, in which former alumni of the MTV series *The Real World* and *Road Rules* compete in physical, and mental “missions” – with, naturally, the requisite amount of personal drama that one would expect from a mash-up of popular reality “docusoaps.”

According to a complaint filed on October 27, 2011 against MTV, Bunim-Murray Productions (the production company behind all three series), and *The Challenge* castmates Kenneth Santucci and Evan Starkman, Cooley alleged she was the victim of an
assault that took place during a 2009 filming of *The Challenge*, in which Santucci and Starkman “took another male participant's toothbrush and rubbed the toothbrush around [Cooley]'s genitals, including rubbing her labia and inserting the toothbrush into plaintiff's vagina” while she was passed out drunk (she reportedly learned about the incident after the fact from other female cast members, not from the program’s producers or crew). MTV’s parent company, Viacom (the world’s fourth largest media conglomerate), responded to the complaint thusly: "[Cooley] failed to avoid the injuries of which she complains. [She] was frequently intoxicated, rowdy, combative, flirtatious and on multiple occasions intentionally exposed her bare breasts and genitalia to other contestants.” The subtle recasting of sexual assault into mere “injuries” is not simply a strategic legal move meant to absolve the producers and the network of any responsibility for the incident, but also a transparent indictment of cultural stereotypes of reality TV: a cultural fascination with the excessive spectacle of celebrity, alcohol-induced revelry, and salacious sexual content as entertainment.

Such stereotypes of spectacle, however, are not limited to reality television, which has usurped “daytime” television as television’s bad object. The police and legal procedural, a staple of network television since the medium’s early days, also saw a number of changes to its shape in the recent decade: the development of particular “franchises” of programs, such as *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (on CBS) and *Law & Order* (on NBC). The only series in the *Law & Order* franchise, for example, to remain on the air is *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit (SVU)*, in which detectives and prosecutors investigate crimes against children and the elderly, primarily sexually based crimes. Consistently the most popular program in the franchise, *SVU* consistently depicts
rape, hate crimes, and the molestation and abuse of children as quotidian, almost casual occurrences in New York City.\textsuperscript{56}

\textit{SVU}, with its sensationalized plot twists, its representation of police and prosecutorial misconduct, and its latitude in dramatizing actual crimes “ripped from the headlines,” can be read as symptomatic of what Sarah Projansky has identified as the complexity and pervasiveness of rape culture and post-feminist discourses.\textsuperscript{57} Following this logic, part of what makes the sexual assaults portrayed on \textit{SVU} so popular is the unsettling responses in the audience generated by the program, responses that cloud the viewer’s seemingly predictable perspective of guilt and that ultimately rupture a conception of justice to where sociomoral solecism circumvents legal culpability. That all of this occurs on a major broadcast network within a procedural format in which individual episodes follow a similar narrative framework challenges the assumption of McCabe and Akass that serialized, “quality” programming on exclusive premium channels is the preeminent site for provocatively reprobate content. It might, however, demonstrate the effects of original premium programming on its network counterparts; \textit{SVU}, it could be argued, had to “evolve” in order to keep up with its more serialized competitors through a narrative and aesthetic excess that complicated any straightforward moral message about sexual assault.

Taken together, the examples of Cooley’s “real” assault and the ones staged on \textit{SVU} point to television’s role in constructing programming that makes audiences addicted to feeling squeamish. They gesture toward, I suggest, the importance of \textit{expectation} in structuring a viewer’s affective engagement with a program (as in \textit{SVU}) or a genre (as in reality TV). By expectation I do not only mean here the operational
aesthetics that structure how viewers follow a program’s narrative. Instead, I use the term to signify the ways in which popular discourses in both mainstream journalistic and academic criticism – and especially discourses anchored around a set of ideological assumptions about a series or network – script viewers’ affective reactions to a series. We have certain expectations about the representational messages these programs contain, so our negotiation of pleasure is always tempered with a disclaimer, occasionally one that expresses our ambivalence or resistance to a particular ideological message. Such expectation is, of course, built into the larger viewing economy, an economy that requires those very expectations in order to market and brand programs for different viewing communities constructed through contemporary practices of narrowcasting.

Robin Bernstein uses the term “script” as a way to describe the relational nature of material things and people (her examples range from museum exhibits to children’s alphabet books). For her, the term does not equate to mimetic representation or the rigid dictation of performed action but instead carries a resistant, performative, and improvisational valence: “dances with things, too, are performative in that they constitute actions: they think, or, more accurately, they are the act of thinking.”58 Turning to characterizations of choreography, Bernstein situates affective expectation what we might call here the viewer’s coming into being, or subjectiviation. The seductive light of the television, the lure of its bevy of programming (all targeted towards you, the consumer, and the multiple facets of your personality) functions, I believe, as a sort of “scriptive thing”:

The scriptive thing hails a person by inviting her to dance. The person ritualistically engages the matter, and in that process, subjectivation – how
one comes to “matter” – occurs. Interpellation occurs not only through performative utterances but also through thing-based enscription into identifiable, historicized traditions of performance from both the stage and everyday life.\textsuperscript{59}

And, just as for Bernstein the scriptive thing structures spectatorial behavior alongside cultural assumptions of identity (notably alongside racial violence), millennial television-as-scriptive-thing negotiates the construction of identity alongside the gendered and generational violence of late twentieth century and early twenty-first century rape culture. The slippage between narrative and reality, present in both televisual examples of sexual assault, are a part of this script. Indeed, this can be traced to the technological and industrial imperatives of the medium itself, which are premised upon the false construction of boundaries between visibility and invisibility, metonyms for dynamics of public and private, or of fiction and reality. As Richard Dienst writes, television “allows us to imagine new values for the visible image and visual realm without resorting to the ultimate privilege, or the ultimate evasion, of the invisible.”\textsuperscript{60} This project, then, recasts these “new values” into affective economies that unpack both the study of representation – how cultural taboos appear in millennial television – and the study of spectatorship – how viewers perform discomfort. Perhaps what makes viewers squeamish is neither the dramatic depiction (representation as re-presentation) of sexual assault, nor the televisual homomorphism (representation as in a legislative context) symbolic of a larger “culture” of sexual assault, but, instead, the affective circulation of both: a creepy dance that spectators consent to through turning on their televisions.
The Pleasure of the Viscerally Uncomfortable

As I said earlier in this introduction, this is really a dissertation about pleasure; the viscerally uncomfortable scripts our attention to the thrill of being made to feel a form of disgust: abjection, perversion, dread, the uncanny, and irritation. But such a model first requires explaining its relationship to pleasure. As befits the medium, television’s overall relationship to pleasure is multidimensional, refusing coherence. Industrial considerations view pleasure as quantifiable, measured through ratings systems, subscribers, and views. Feminist considerations summon the rich history of television’s relationship to melodrama, linking daytime soap operas to habituated domestic time and space and primetime soap operas to vibrant, active female audiences. Some view television as too pleasurable, as a dangerous substance that must be regulated (as in the case of a drug, which I explore in the following chapter). One notable attempt to sketch out new theorizations of spectorial pleasure comes from Brian Ott, whose provocative “alternative critical paradigm” for television studies is “one rooted in ‘erotics’ rather than ‘hermeneutics,’ calling for a re-viewing of the apparatus “as lover.” This practice culminates in the recognition of the notion of jouissance, which, Ott claims (while borrowing from Roland Barthes, anchors a spectatorial engagement with television in the current moment. Barthes’ distinction between two different forms of pleasure – plaisir, which stems from cultural identification, and jouissance, which occurs at the moment of cultural disruption – and their relationship to television was initially dissected by John Fiske, who claimed that “the conditions under which television is normally watched are not conducive to that intensity of experience which is necessary for jouissance.” Like Ott, I agree that changes to the medium require a revision of Fiske’s dismissal and,
therefore, demand that television studies acknowledge the work of *jouissance* in structuring spectatorship of millennial television. But *jouissance* in Fiske’s and Ott’s accounts of pleasure hew to Barthes’ definition of the term as akin to sexual ecstasy and ignore alternate theorizations of the term that stress its more uncomfortable dimensions. In a psychoanalytic register, for example, Jacques Lacan characterizes *jouissance* as a more deadly, intolerable excitation that breaches the psychic boundaries set forth by the pleasure principle, making it fundamentally transgressive, though he would later clarify that “*jouissance* obtained is distinguished from the *jouissance* expected.”64 Slavoj Žižek pushes this further, calling the imbrication of *jouissance* within the Lacanian Real as inherently paradoxical, and thus “*jouissance* does not exist, it is impossible, but it produces a number of traumatic effects.”65 While I do not wish to tread too deep in psychoanalytic waters, I would note here that the intensity of *jouissance* registers as brief, if ultimately unsatisfying, moments of both pleasure and pain. Patricia Mellencamp has discussed this somewhat in claiming that television spectators exhibit a certain masochistic position through television’s repetition and seriality, although again, recent changes to television demand additional revisions.66 How does the notion of a masochistic spectatorship premised beyond pleasure through seriality, for example, change with the increased serialization of primetime drama, or with the mobility engineered by watching programming on devices other than television, or, for that matter, with the constant circulation of celebrity within reality television?

Millennial television aspires to produce this *jouissance*, or at least its traumatic effects, through the viscerally uncomfortable. Parallel to the doubling of pleasure and pain is that of the popular and the perverse; the viscerally uncomfortable is manifested,
for example, through addiction, urban poverty and homelessness, the sexualization of young girls, abortion, and homicide. While not all of these phenomena can be considered “perverse” individually, they collectively challenge the normative models of citizenship and identity offered by the majority of televisual programming. To some extent, as the work of Foucault argues, the invisibility of such explicit content on television prior to the era of millennial television does not mean that such issues of violence, addiction, and sexuality were absent from the medium’s programming altogether. The paradox (or perhaps late capitalism’s ultimate joke on the viewer) is, of course, that “post-network” TV circulates in networked patterns of consumption, patterns that differently negotiate the boundaries of public and private. Within this matrix of liberatory individual consumption, erstwhile “private” and “secret” desires of viewers become publicized in provocative way. Topics that were once repressed, we might speculate, now had the opportunity to be broadcasted, incorporated into television schedules; television’s capitalist impulse was to normalize the formerly abnormal.

Studies of modern media have taken up the question of affect in profoundly different ways, with none quite precisely resembling the approach I advance here – and so, I borrow liberally from them all to cobble together the model of the viscerally uncomfortable. For example, Linda Williams has influentially conceptualized a trio of “body genres” in film – pornography, horror, and melodrama – that through psychoanalytic demarcation illustrate the mobilization of excess as an organizational system, inciting physical movements of sexual excitement, fear, or sadness, respectively. Her agenda here is to retrieve the concept of perversion as a category of cultural analysis: in this respect, we have similar political interests. Body genres, for
Williams, are also culturally “low”; indeed, it is only because of the symbolic foreclosure of such genres in popular culture that spectators can mimic, however imprecisely, the excessive sensations or experiences in the film. Yet given that millennial television has been heralded as a “golden age” in which new iterations of narrative realism dominate all forms of cultural representation, it seems inappropriate simply to expand Williams’ notion of body genres to include the viscerally uncomfortable.

Sixteen years later, Kara Keeling’s work on affect speculates a similar relation between bodily movement and reception. Drawing from Deleuze and Bergson’s work on perception, she argues that “affectivity is the labor that holds cinematic reality together.” For Keeling, “cinematic reality” consists of the “images that comprise the material world,” including, importantly, television. Keeling’s imperative to stress the affective labor that goes into processing and receiving media texts that have the potential to move and stimulate the body can be thought of as a spectatorial “reading” practice. Unlike Williams, Keeling posits affectivity as ordinary, pertaining to all genres and media forms (in this respect, “cinematic reality” can be thought of as analogous to intermediality). Her notion of affectivity highlights the labor invested by the consumer, but this labor, following the way in which capitalism rejiggers itself unbeknownst to the world, is never recognized as such from an economic perspective. The model of the viscerally uncomfortable seems to draw our attention to these processes of labor; that is to say (perhaps counterintuitively), expressions of negative affect best articulate the affective labor of millennial television.

The viscerally uncomfortable can also be characterized as an millennial take on “televisuality,” the “new aesthetic sensibility” of television identified by John Caldwell in
his reading of 1980s postmodern television. Driven by the “picture effect,” this sensibility produces a visually stimulated and obsessive viewer and the programs themselves require immense processing post-production. Seduced by the power of the image, viewers participate in an aesthetic economy associated with “postmodern” subjectivity, a self-reflexive revision of critical concepts to the way that television organizes time and space for the viewer (for example, “flow,” “intertextuality,” and “liveness”). Such a revision, of course, is also highly gendered, as the work of many feminist television scholars including Lynne Joyrich, Julie D’Acci, and Patricia Mellencamp have demonstrated.

Extending these attempts to periodize television aesthetics for “after TV,” we could then consider contemporary television’s relationship to authorship, tracing, for example, the shifts from the spectacular effects of post-production to discursive constructions of the showrunner and television auteur. This would resonate with rethinking the medium in its current form to feminism, or perhaps better yet, “post-feminism,” a seemingly apoliticizing prefix best reflected in so-called “feminist” media products, a consumptive cannibalization of feminism, specifically, but indicative of the mass media’s response (and influence on) the popularity of identity politics in American political discourse. And these (picture) effects might result in the viewer herself adopting a new critical posture towards her favorite programming, learning the epistemology of a series through an increased interest in serialized storylines and complex and overlapping character arcs. The abundance of “post-s” at play here (post-network, post-public service, post-feminist, and even post-postmodern) can only be processed, it might be suggested, through changing aesthetic and textual styles that are as equally visually excessive as before, albeit in more disturbingly uncomfortable ways.
Thus, when a critic such as Emily Nussbaum calls millennial television “ambitious,” I read this as epitomizing the feeling of millennial TV, synonymous with “intense” and descriptive of what a number of critics have elsewhere called the “new golden age of television” (a phrase I interrogate in the third chapter). “Something” happened to television, we fans can all agree, even if we do not currently have the precise vocabulary to describe it. (Apparently, we only have the language of trite, branded platitudes found in Nussbaum’s article, indicative of neoliberalism’s own lexicon.) Perhaps what is needed is a different set of descriptors coming from the body or gut, one that best captures the sense of impassioned “reality.” It might be helpful to remember the meaning of the word “visceral,” which the OED defines as “affecting the viscera or bowels regarded as the seat of emotion; pertaining to, or touching deeply, inward feelings.” In other cultural contexts, Lauren Berlant has called this something the “waning of genre,” distinguishing it from the waning of affect constitutive of Frederic Jameson’s account of the postmodern; for her, the waning of genre refers to how “in particular older realist genres (in which I include melodrama) whose conventions of relating fantasy to ordinary life and whose depictions of the good life now appear to mark archaic expectations about having and building a life.” Such a similar spirit animates millennial television: to twist Berlant, what we once knew of as melodrama on television (think of the incredibly soapy – and incredibly “postmodern” – Dynasty) has changed to the point of being unfamiliar as such.

I want to make a speculation as to how to use such an observation to think through present logics of television. That is to say, if television has historically privileged the heterosexual family and the suburban household as its intended audience, becoming
in the process the most influential form of mass media in late twentieth century America, it is because it helped construct those very ideologies (and ontologies) of family, community, and nation. Families on TV have, for the most part, historically been remembered as simultaneous producers and consumers of the myth of the American dream, the “good life” that Berlant wants to complicate and problematize. Thus as cultural logics of neoliberalism slip and slide into experienced feelings of crisis and precarity, so too does television’s dominant and most popular affect, resulting in the viscerally uncomfortable.

Television is a critical site for the circulation of discomfort precisely because of its status as the preeminent form of mass culture in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Earlier characterizations of television have framed the medium as a family-friendly medium designed for the white, middle-class suburban home, far from the provocatively uncomfortable programming available today. Yet popular culture has always had some sort of attraction to the perverse. The tension between the popular and the perverse exemplifies what Sianne Ngai has called “revulsion’s dialectical relation to the fascination we can glimpse even in a work as unambiguously critical of consumer society as Horkheimer and Adorno’s essay ‘The Culture Industry’ (1944).” Acknowledging that Horkheimer and Adorno so vociferously condemned mass culture on these material grounds of consumer capitalism and not from, say, the terrain of emotions and feelings, it is important to note that the two often work hand in hand in contemporary television programming, especially with respect to cultivating a devoted fan base. It should come as no surprise, then, that some of the most popular television series both in terms of ratings and in terms of “cult” status provoke spectatorial discomfort. In other words, the
circulatory dialectic of feelings of disgust and feelings of fascination with that disgust forms the very foundation of the popularity of such media, scripting us, compelling us – or perhaps infecting us with the compulsion – to watch.
Addictive Spectatorship

...one might extend the concept and the experience of drugs far beyond its legal, medical definition, and in a space at once idiosyncratic and public, arrange all sorts of practices, pleasures and pains that no one could rigorously show to be unrelated and without analogy to drug addiction. The possibilities are innumerable and quasi-idiomatic. Every phantasmatic organization, whether collective or individual, is the invention of a drug, or of a rhetoric of drugs, be it aphrodisiac or not, with production, consumption, semi-secrecy, and a semi-private market...

Jacques Derrida

“It wasn’t even like I was watching an addict; it was more like a person who just really sucked at acting.”

“mel”

Drugs, or the rhetoric of drugs? An addict, or one who cannot act, one who “just” sucks at acting? Is a poor performance of bodily misfortune required for spectators to gain pleasure from – or to “get high” off of – reality television? The addict and the spectator of reality TV: are these distinct subject positions, or might they converge in the uneasy space of popular culture opened up beyond any stable definition of “television”? We are not watching an addict, but instead someone who cannot perform her addiction adequately enough; while these metrics may not yet be clearly defined, it is obvious that Linda has problems. A former professional television extra, she allegedly developed the connective tissue disorder Ehlers-Danlos syndrome (EDS), which is marked by abnormal collagen levels that produce rather elastic and fragile joints, muscles, ligaments, and blood vessels. Some forms of EDS can cause severe musculoskeletal pain brought on by frequent joint dislocations; in Linda’s case, she was prescribed fentanyl, a synthetic narcotic analgesic approximately a hundred times more
potent than morphine. Despite her excessive use of fentanyl – she consumes seven 200 mcg lollipops daily, three more per day than what the FDA recommends – Linda claims that she continues to suffer from chronic pain, locating some of the sources of such pain as emerging from azalea bushes, the act of making left turns with her body, and cell phone towers located in Connecticut. Her Chinese immigrant parents have arrived to the city in which Linda lives, Agoura Hills, California, outside of the San Fernando Valley and thousands of miles away from the pain-inducing cellular infrastructure of New England. This sunny suburban community is the location of Linda’s intervention, which, typically for the program, is a carefully staged event that occurs in a generic, franchised hotel conference room. During the intervention, which is led by a trained specialist (called an interventionist), family members read letters that meticulously chronicle how the addict’s behavior has affected them: in Linda’s case, for instance, her history with fentanyl has depleted her parents’ savings and retirement fund and forced her younger brother to be her caretaker for the previous eight years. Linda’s intervention does not go well. Running from the hotel and into the parking lot in a burst of profanity, Linda desperately attempts to convince her mother of the intensity of her pain. But this, too, fails, and ultimately Linda, through the pleas of her family, agrees to go to a rehabilitation center in San Diego, where she is diagnosed with a delusional disorder two months into her treatment.

If this description reads as overly descriptive, this is intentional: the above summary delineates two bodies of knowledge as presented on an episode of A&E’s wildly popular and critically acclaimed documentary reality series Intervention (2005-2013 and 2015-present). The first body of knowledge is clinical – primarily, in this
episode, communicating scientific facts about fentanyl (its recommended dosages, possible side effects, and relative strength compared to other painkillers) and the connective tissue disorder that prompts its consumption. Beyond these direct facts—which are illustrated in title cards between segments depicting Linda’s fentanyl use—this body of knowledge also situates Linda’s consumption of fentanyl within medical and psychological discourses of addiction. The second body of knowledge is primarily narrative, depicting a carefully choreographed affair (and a series of events that leads up to it) that indexes not just a direct interference into the subject’s daily routine (typically abstinence from the addictive substance) but one shaped by a constellation of affective relations: emotional pleas, threats to withhold money or social support, and the recreation of the subject’s past while under the influence of the addictive substance. Highlighted in this body of knowledge is the performance of addiction—in this case, how Linda manages her chronic pain through the excessive use of narcotics—which is often edited to appear as spectacle or as entertainment. Ultimately, such a performance is doubly rendered unsuccessful: Linda’s family remains unconvinced that she suffers from such amplified pain, and some viewers, such as “mel,” whose comment on one blog serves as an epigraph for this chapter, see Linda not exactly as an addict, but as “a person who just really sucked at acting.”

Taken together, these bodies of knowledge contribute to the technologies of citizenship that promote self-sufficiency and self-discipline within reality television, which experienced an explosion of global popularity around the turn of the millennium. As numerous critiques of the genre have enumerated, the confluence between the genre and the transition from liberal to neoliberal forms of citizenship is quite extensive, from
the entrepreneurialism and agonism indicative of competitive game-docs to the cries of lifestyle empowerment, advanced through institutions of consumption, present in makeover television. While these neoliberal forms of citizenship often construct the “good” citizen as a competent consumer with uniquely individual tastes, this chapter focuses on the “bad” citizen who must be stigmatized (via processes of ironic viewing, perhaps) for the ease at which he or she excessively consumes generic products, as in the case of an addict consuming a drug.

This chapter thus annotates a model of addictive spectatorship as a useful frame with which to understand the popularity of reality television. Two interconnected goals animate my argument. First, I consider the representation of addiction on reality television through a subgenre I call recovery television, in which the behavior of compulsive or addicted individuals must be diagnosed by experts and corrected through an intervention. Exploiting reality television’s uneasy negotiation between the public and the private sphere, the chapter interrogates how the narratives of recovery television are told; if, as Anna McCarthy has asserted, reality television is indeed a “theater of neoliberal suffering,” than part of this chapter’s goal is to give shape to the mise-en-scène of recovery television, a subgenre of reality television focusing on addiction and recovery. Second, I position the addict spectator as a necessary counterpoint to the mechanisms of neoliberal citizenship inherent to reality television. Asking that scholars of television and popular culture take seriously the notion that television can function as a drug, I show how television’s drug-like properties have become a critical mechanism of neoliberal culture’s constant pathologizing of cultural affect. Here, I am interested
primarily in the resonances between what Jacques Derrida describes as the “rhetoric of drugs” and the composition and consumption of reality television.

These twinned assertions transform the once-iconographic figure of the television spectator – the sedentary, lethargic couch potato – into the hyperactive, amped-up TV junkie who gets high from multiple (and often duplicated) media platforms. While notions of the TV viewer as addict have frequently been used to disparage television, I ask what happens if, instead of using this image to dismiss television (and also television studies), we give it more consideration. This chapter positions reality television as an apt textual metaphor for American culture’s relationship to discourses of addiction and recovery in the decades before and after the millennium. This discourse, I maintain, can be traced first through the therapeutic daytime talk programs of the 1990s and then through the subgenres of “makeover” and “recovery” television that proliferated across networks in the mid- and late-2000s. Finally, I situate my reading of reality television’s addictive impulse within the larger scholarly terrain of analyses of media spectatorship. Using Linda’s episode of Intervention, I draw from these models’ formulation of affect and I modify them to the current conditions of television’s production and distribution in order to make clear how the genre produces an addictive impulse while also providing audiences with a motive to disidentify with the subjects of reality television – in essence, a spectatorial practice of embracing discomfort – in order to disavow one’s own addictions. The addictive, the neoliberal, the narcoanalytic, the affective, and the authentic (the “real” of reality TV): these all act in a circuit of embodied televised relation, a symptom of (and also a resistance to) how audiences consume and ingest television in the current moment of technological, formal, aesthetic, and textual change.
Binging on Reality?

At first glance, broadcast and cable reality television may appear to be an unusual genre with which to ascribe addictive impulses. Indeed, one trend among recent television criticism has been to discuss the practice of “binge-watching” in relation not to “low” TV like reality programming but to new technologies of distribution (such as the instantaneous streaming of entire series on online platforms such as Netflix, Hulu, or Amazon Instant Video) and to serialized, critically acclaimed dramas (in which the methodical construction of overlapping storylines and character development can be traced all at once, without a weekly wait in between episodes). Writing in the Los Angeles Times, television critic Mary McNamara gave this practice a dictionary definition, one that, in a moment of honesty, implicates practices of criticism: “Binge television: n. any instance in which more than three episodes of an hourlong drama or six episodes of a half-hour comedy are consumed at one sitting. Syn.: Marathon television and being a TV critic.” Though tongue in cheek, McNamara’s definition unintentionally underscores the synthesis of addiction and TV spectatorship, offering a layman’s definition to a question with which all addicts wrestle: how much is too much? Tellingly, as it is currently understood, to binge on television is not simply to watch television aimlessly, surfing idly from channel to channel to pass the time. Rather, the verb requires a consumable substance of a single series available on a streamlined platform. According to McNamara, these changes to the distribution of programming and to technological dissemination have changed the very character of the medium itself: “television has become something to be gorged upon, with tales designed to be told over
months consumed in a matter of hours. It’s television as novel rather than serialized story.”

The next chapter will specifically address the persistence among critics – both journalistic and scholarly – to claim “television as novel rather than [as] serialized story.” My focus here, however, is on the close association between “binging” as viewing practice and television’s narrative form. While one could argue – persuasively, I believe – that binging on serialized, narratively complex television is a propitious barometer of pleasure in the present televisual economy, I want to distinguish between the act of binging and the rhetorics of addiction and recovery that I employ throughout this chapter. In some respects, binging could be viewed as similar to the rhythms of addiction (and notably substance use and abuse); both promise short-term bodily gratification through immediate consumption while deprioritizing concerns over health over the long-term. In one feminist psychoanalytic account of binging, for example, Marlene Boskind-Lodahl implicitly stitches together the bulimarexic’s binging on food with the high that comes from the consumption of recreational drugs, writing that “…the binge brings about a union between the mind and body. One gives one’s self to the food, to the moment, completely. There is a complete loss of control (ego). It is an absolute here-and-now experience, a kind of ecstasy.” The transposition from appetite to viewing practices similarly surfaces in Michael Newman’s exegesis of the phenomenon, in which binging “makes one more conscious of the season as a narrative unit…as a meaningful narrative category.” Newman, too, is guilty of drinking the novelistic Kool-Aid, observing at one point that “watching all of a serial drama like [HBO’s Six Feet Under] on a binge is like tearing through a thick novel in a week at the beach.” Part of this, he concludes, has to do
with the collectability of televisual content: whether material (once VHS and now DVD and Blu-ray releases) or immaterial (streaming online from a subscription-based platform), contemporary television’s potential to be consumed and importantly re-consumed, multiplied with the sheer number of series on which to binge and platforms from which to do so, results in the figure of the TV viewer sequestered in front of a flat-screen or laptop, catching up on a series over the course of several hours, days, and weekends. Boskind-Lodahl’s observation that to binge is to immerse oneself completely in the present can be found in Newman’s own assertion that “binging intensifies the pleasure of [an engagement with characters] by making characters all the more present in our lives.” Binging elicits pleasure in the subject, but this pleasure stems from being out of control, of fully succumbing to the gluttony of excess.

But I want to take a step back and note that the distinction between binging on television and what I am calling addictive spectatorship is fundamentally a matter of cultural evaluation; and furthermore, that how these practices are discursively framed better illuminates the gendering of both addiction and reality television. First and foremost, it is difficult to imagine what the flipside of binging on media – that is, the “purging” part of the bulimarexic’s ritual – would resemble. Would it be, for example, to turn off the tube, to disconnect from online viewing platforms, and to refuse to consume media altogether? Dissociation from TV seems to run counter to the activity within purging, which requires an aggressive expulsion of the more sinful or impure elements of culture. According to Boskind-Lodahl, purging requires a separation of mind and body, the assertion of control via the subject’s ego, a preoccupation with future perfection, and the stubborn fear that past binges will result in undesirable bodily change. None of
these translate easily to the consumption of television in today’s age; in fact, one of these requirements of purging detailed by Boskind-Lodahl, the preoccupation with future perfection, would seem to be impossible if one just turns off the set, as this directly contradicts what might be construed as television’s epistemological drive, the intertextual references within programming onto which audiences latch, such that the more television a viewer consumes, the more television that the same viewer understands.11

Second, such media gluttony is forever enveloped in the discourses of “good” and “bad” consumption and of “quality” and “trash” television. To binge on television, to watch and re-watch it obsessively, is not so structurally dissimilar from the practices of fandom, in which members of a subculture associated with a particular text engage in activities surrounding their shared enjoyment, often producing their own artworks and commentary that reference the text they enjoy.12 Television studies has recently rewarded – and perhaps fetishized through the sybaritic title “acafan” – the viewing position of the fan, such that “fan studies” in and of itself has come to comprise a large and important sub-section of exciting scholarship. The act of binge-watching “quality” or even “cult” television texts is implicitly to valorize them as so-called “good” objects worthy of consumption, however compressed or latent the act of watching may be.13 These assumptions about binge watching – as a practice but also as a discourse – were corroborated by the corporation credited with introducing the term into the everyday spectator’s lexicon. In a study published in December 2013, the streaming content provider Netflix declared binge watching “the new normal,” enlisting the expertise of a cultural anthropologist, Grant McCracken, to explain its popularity.14 McCracken explicitly situated the phenomenon as a result of the aesthetic and technological changes
to television in the post-network era: “I found that binge watching has really taken off
due to a perfect storm of better TV, our current economic climate and the digital
explosion of the last few years,” he writes. Although McCracken does not clarify what he
means by “better TV” in the Netflix study, in a May 2013 article for Wired magazine, he
suggests that audiences are more likely to binge watch series out of a desire “to craft time
and space, and to fashion an immersive near-world with special properties,” and the
series he lists as immersive are all coded as “quality.”\footnote{Despite a post-recession
economic climate that has, not uncoincidentally, padded Netflix’s profit margins, this
ergodic increase of both technological innovation (more platforms and interfaces to
watch) and the quality of TV series results in a more assertive viewer: “now that services
like Netflix have given consumers control over their TV viewing, they have declared a
new way to watch.”}

As both McNamara’s definition of binge watching and McCracken’s liberated
viewer reveal, binge-watching is also a curiously self-aware practice, one often worn by
spectators as a badge of pride – at least when it comes to “quality” and “cult” television.
Reality television, by contrast, is seen as more difficult to binge-watch. Lacking the
narrative complexity of serialized, prime-time drama, and lacking the possibility for
widespread syndication that is typical with many sitcoms, reality television is in the odd
position of being one of the most popular genres of television while also being signified
as a guilty pleasure, frequently dismissed as too simplistic, too shallow, and too
ubiquitous. As television has (in, say, McCracken’s terms), gotten “better,” the medium
itself has bequeathed reality television its formerly low cultural status, such that, in the
words of critic Kelefa Sanneh, “reality television is the television of television.”\footnote{As}
technology columnist Rebecca Greenfield noted in *The Atlantic*: “Reality TV – the scourge of television programming – for example, doesn't play well on Netflix. The service dropped a slew of A&E’s “unscripted fare” like *Pawn Stars* and *Ice Road Truckers* because when given the choice of what to watch on their own time, its subscribers didn't binge on reality television.” Greenfield’s observation is based on the longstanding economic principle of commercial television that successful series require a large viewership; in this economic conceit, Netflix subscribers are the Nielsen families of millennial TV. Netflix, which famously ascribed the success of its original dramatic series *House of Cards* (2013-present) to the data analysis of its subscribers, is arguably one of the prime actors in the phenomenon of binge-watching, and Greenfield’s statement, while participating in the framing of reality TV as the black sheep of the industry, signals the corporation’s desire to be associated with “quality” original programming. Reality TV’s particular spectatorship – which, again, is not conducive to binge or repeat viewing – also derives from the fact that reality television has a privileged relationship to the live, particularly given the popularity of competitive reality series (think: *American Idol*, *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, *Project Runway*, or *Top Chef*) on broadcast television, in which a contestant is normally eliminated at the end of each weekly episode. Binge-watching at a later date risks the possibility that viewers could easily be spoiled as to the outcome of the season’s competition, making it similar to other live performative events – such as sporting events – that constitute a critical part of television’s appeal.

Thus emerges a discursive paradox of cultural taste: audiences do not want to binge on reality television, but will binge on quality programming. Here, the distinction
between binging and addictive viewing becomes crystallized; even though the two
practices might share structural features (uninterrupted viewing of multiple episodes of a
series, often on multiple platforms), the affective register of each both determines and is
determined by their reputation – in short, they feel different from one another. It is this
emphasis on visceral difference – why being addicted to reality television summons
conflicted feelings of guilt, shame, and excessive pleasure, for example – that my theory
of addictive spectatorship addresses. Binging on television and being addicted to
television may be two sides of the same coin, but my aim is to recuperate addictive
spectatorship as a meaningful way to watch television because of how it helps audiences
renegotiate their own affinities to “bad,” “dangerous,” and “obsessive” substances –
including, importantly, television itself.

**Obsessed with Mass Culture’s Obsessive Power**

I find addiction a compelling, if underinterrogated, framework for studying
television spectatorship because the medium has long been understood as requiring
moderation. The metaphor of addiction is nothing new to media criticism: from
Harlequin romance novels to soap operas, addiction to certain media forms has always
been colloquially and liberally read as a feminized, domesticated phenomenon. Victor
Fan, for example, has recently and astutely proposed a “poetics of addiction” that sheds
insight onto how Hollywood constructs a feminized spectatorship, finding in the *Twilight*
franchise (US, 2009-2012) an example of an addictive substance through its negotiation
of (a predominantly male) stardom refuse with sexuality that is both excessive and
destructive. Addiction is thus both an apt descriptor for how Hollywood brands a
franchise, but also a way to theorize the epistemological economy that undergirds the franchise’s representation of heteronormative sexuality; what this presumably feminized audience is addicted to, Fan argues, is not simply sex, but rather “the contradiction or structural incongruity in the way our society defines sexuality.” My own investigation into addictive spectatorship is orthogonally related to Fan’s: while we both view addiction as “a strategy and process of intersubjective negotiation between the spectators and the film, the business, and the marketplace” (31), here I emphasize the relationship between the social positioning of the addict and that of television (and reality television in particular). I would extend Fan’s concept to consider not only how being addicted to media – including celebrities, series, franchises, or an entire medium – dramatizes the negotiation of the spectator’s knowledge of desire, but how this negotiation is itself deemed a threat to the spectator’s health. Psychologists and neuroscientists, for example, theorize addiction to television in terms of its potentially detrimental effects on viewers, situating television as a singular object that dangerously acts on a consenting subject. Most famously, Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s *Television and the Quality of Life* frames “heavy viewing” as an affliction that may not fit the formal criteria of an addiction according to authoritative doxa such as the fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, but that nonetheless has perceptual effects. A *Scientific American* article by the two scientists makes several connections between television and addiction, claiming that “most of the criteria of substance dependence can apply to people who watch a lot of TV.”
As Jason Mittell has pointed out, the history of television has always been associated with metaphors of drugs and addiction, which frame television as a “social problem requiring political action.” In his challenge to this deployment of metaphors, Mittell gives a useful history of what he calls the “anti-television movement.” Present from the late 1970s through the early 1990s, the movement was led by the loosely organized advocacy group TV-Free America, and consisted of parenting groups, psychologists (including Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi), and cultural pundits. Under the auspices of advocacy, TV-Free America and its supporters framed television as a crisis of public health that primarily preyed upon children while mobilizing race- and class-based anxieties (though gender is notably absent from Mittell’s evaluation).

Such an anti-television movement is the inheritor to the anxieties provoked by the literal introduction of the medium into the family home. As Lynn Spigel has documented, the threatening aspects of television called into question who was really in “control” of the home (man or machine), and the instantiation of television as a living room medium stressed the dangers it could have on children. Spigel attributes these anxieties to the ambivalence Americans have had towards technology for the past two centuries, although she locates specifically in television the potential threat to the carefully organized temporal and spatial rituals that governed postwar American family life. Becoming “glued to television,” as one 1951 Better Homes and Gardens article cited by Spigel puts it, was the likely effect of this invasive medium, which distracted children from the learning processes of social development and encouraged spontaneous outbursts of aggression and violence. Civic advocacy promoting moderate viewing was therefore aimed at active parents – who would, in turn, control their “passive” consumer children –
through social scientific and medial opinion. If too much television creates addictive viewing habits and is indeed a crisis of public health, as psychologists, parenting guides, and the anti-television movement would lead us to believe, this crisis unfolds within the gendered space of the postwar American living room.

Yet while television has historically been situated as an addictive substance, excessive media consumption by and large has not always carried the same discursive stigma. As I mentioned above, fandom materializes as an attractive way to bypass the active-passive binary describing the spectator’s relationship to mass culture. Fandoms, however, carry with them attachments to gender stereotypes that are inherent in the discursive framing of different media forms. For example, a number of film scholars have drawn attention to the formalist and masculinist postures within a concept such as cinephilia.24 Similarly, Suzanne Scott has posited the influence of the “fanboy auteur” in contemporary cult TV series, whereby self-identification as a fan is instrumental to managing the relationships between fans and producers. For Scott, the fanboy auteur uses promotional paratexts to assert his control over the mythology of a series; he may encapsulate the quirks of a fan, such as having an obsessive eye for the detail of said mythology, but he also carries a sense of legitimacy and authority as he approaches the textual desires of other viewers.25 These differences shake out along lines not only of gender but also cultural value. That is to say, if binge watching, cinephilia, and fandom are worn as badges of pride, this pride is steeped in masculinist viewing attitudes.

A theory of addictive spectatorship for TV, then, must insist on new connections between gender, addiction, and spectatorship. I see Linda, the subject of the Intervention episode that opens this chapter, as an important figure for deciphering what, exactly,
about reality television makes it, like the fentanyl lollipops she ingests, so profoundly addictive. Her own reception among *Intervention* fans and online commentaries as someone “who just really sucked at acting” not only emphasizes the performativity of addiction but also of reality television, in which real life is edited to appear as sensational as possible in digestible segments in order to maximize reward in the current celebrity economy.

**Thinking Television Narcoanalytically**

Addictive spectatorship views the discourse of addiction as a critical metaphor for understanding the general affect of televisual neoliberalism. While from its very inception television has had to deal with a persistent anti-television movement intent on cleansing the living room of its unhealthy glow, that not all kinds of television are viewed today as equal with respect to cultural taste signifies the diachronic history of the addicted spectator. When all of television is considered by cultural elites to be the “bad object” of popular media, the medium as a whole can be a threat to the health of the family. Currently, television has been vindicated by those same elites, but this exoneration comes with classificatory strings: television may have “become art,” as critic Emily Nussbaum has claimed, but some forms and genres of television – daytime soap operas, daytime talk programs, and reality television – have not. The circulation of the cultural discourse surrounding these “bad objects” is persistent, too, in the possibilities engendered by addictive spectatorship, and prominently so in reality television. If reality television’s pedagogical imperative is to encourage individuals to undergo regimens of self-improvement, the discourse of addiction lends critical purchase not just to
understanding reality TV’s structuring logic, but also to understanding the affective spectatorial positions that these regimes foster. For example, to make sense of the claim that American audiences have a “Reality-TV Addiction,” in the words of a 2003 BusinessWeek article, the “bad object” of reality television itself must function as a drug.\textsuperscript{27}

Mittell, for one, decidedly advocates for denaturalizing the “metaphoric linkage between television and drugs,” referencing a rich cultural studies tradition steeped in ideological critique, and stating that this “may only be accomplished by intervening in the discursive process to fracture the truth claims of this metaphor.”\textsuperscript{28} Drugs, he argues, are inherently bad substances in the American cultural imaginary, and it would be best for television, reality or otherwise, to distance itself from any associations with such substances. Yet in making this argument, he enacts the drug metaphor in the same damaging way that he condemns: perceiving drugs only as social ills that require the kind of “war on drugs” that Richard Nixon initiated and that the Reagan and first Bush administrations used as an ideological trope rather than seeing drugs as substances with the potential to induce pleasure. Following Mittell, television should “just say no,” as Nancy Reagan’s campaign cautioned, to drugs writ large.

Rather than uncritically viewing the drug as a toxin meriting a crisis in public health (a discursive view shaped by a whole host of regulatory apparatuses, as Foucault reminds us), one might explore the variety of materials, operations, and affects involved in addiction, including addiction to and on reality TV. This is precisely the goal of narcoanalysis, defined by Dave Boothroyd as “the critical approach to culture from the perspective of its articulation with and by drugs.”\textsuperscript{29} As a conceptual rubric, narcoanalysis
stretches the boundaries of drug well beyond any physical substance (as in Jacques Derrida’s notion of a “rhetoric of drugs”), and shows how the notion of drugs itself is porous and elastic, encompassing categories such as therapeutic and recreational, legal and illegal, and public and private. However, such a scholarly reclamation of the potential for drugs can be seen in Boothroyd’s impassionate response to cries to “just say no”: “To theorise about drugs openly and open-endedly, without prejudice and free of the pressure to produce results that either confirm or reject in one form or another the current polarised politics of drugs, involves the attempt ‘to be true to drugs’ as agents of differentiation. It is to aim at a conceptual and critical thinking of them otherwise.”

Such a close relationship between drug culture and a theoretical analysis of culture has been extensively documented by the extant literature on narcoanalysis, from Freud’s cocaine experiments to the importance of drugs in Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “becoming.” While the term narcoanalysis historically has been used to refer to a mode of psychotherapy, I follow Boothroyd and Avital Ronell in their use of the term to signify a theory of and on drugs. Ronell, whose 1992 book Crack Wars was one of the first to use the term in this way, argues that “drugs resist conceptual arrest…acting as a radically nomadic parasite let loose from the will of language.” Language, it seems, cannot adequately capture the affective and embodied energies that drugs enable, and thus it is all too easy to dismiss these energies as insufficient bodies of knowledge – or insufficient reactions that prevent the body from attaining any knowledge – that do not fit into accepted figurations of the public sphere.

A narcoanalytic approach to studying reality television, then, would re-siteuate the genre’s drug-like properties within the terms of neoliberal culture, which define all
phenomena in terms of their potential for inhibiting or optimizing success, thus positioning the TV addict’s plight as a failure of free will. Even taking into account a rising cultural acceptance in recreational drug use, a difference must be maintained between framing television as a drug that audiences can use casually and the compulsive consumption of programming to adverse effects. Yet neoliberalism has successfully recast the terms of such a difference as a question of individual property and economic freedom. This is true for both arguments concerning televisual behavior (that of those in front of the TV set and those appearing on reality television programs) and arguments concerning drugs. Several prominent economists of neoliberal orthodoxy, for example, advocate the legalization of drugs, viewing drugs not as immoral substances but instead, perhaps rhetorically, as property subject to consumer choice and the rules of the free market, just like anything else in commodity culture. Writing in a controversial Newsweek article in 1972, Milton Friedman lectured readers that with respect to the prohibition of drugs, “even if you regard present policy toward drugs as ethically justified, considerations of expediency make that policy most unwise.”

Friedman, of course, was the leader of the University of Chicago’s experiments with neoliberal policy in Latin America, and would go on to win the Nobel Prize in Economics four years after the publication of this particular column, which then proceeds to assert that the legalization of drugs would create an incentive for their increased quality while also reducing “street crime” (a problematic denomination that Friedman refuses to define).

Similarly, a number of scholars, notably Ronell and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, have pointed out how addiction itself can be located at the extremes of personal freedom and responsibility. Sedgwick posits the ability to choose freely as the object of addiction,
though she clarifies that “addiction, under this definition, resides only in the structure of a will that is always somehow insufficiently free, a choice whose voluntariness is insufficiently pure” (EW 132). Sedgwick’s historicizes the emergence of an addict identity, opening her essay “Epidemics of the Will,” in fact, by substituting “the homosexual” with “the addict” in Michel Foucault’s famous adage from The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: “The [opium-eater] had been a temporary aberration; the [addict] was now a species” (EW 131). In her view, the transition from opium-eater to addict has been stretched to its very limit in the contemporary moment (or at least at the time of the essay’s original publication in 1991) such that one cannot even conceive of individual voluntariness without the impure qualification of addiction. An emphasis on impurity is important here, for it allows the rhythmic, habitual cycles of voluntariness and excess present in casual consumption to be diagnosed as disease, albeit one that can be cured with postindustrial consumer capitalism – including, I would note, reality television.34

Within this admittedly brief overview of narcoanalysis and its neoliberal intersections, I wish to emphasize three points. First, it is significant that the historical moment of the early 1990s gave rise to a number of interrelated events: the appearance of narcoanalytic critique, the sedimentation of neoliberal economic policy in the infancy of the Clinton administration, the widespread growth in use of psychiatric medication for managing emotional pain such as depression, and the beginning of a cultural shift from the “war on drugs” to a neoliberal subsumption of drug culture. Indeed, some drugs – notably pharmaceuticals and “medical” marijuana – helped manage both physical pain as well as public emotions throughout the 1990s and 2000s, as encapsulated in both pop psychology (as in Elizabeth Wurtzel’s Prozac Nation) and scholarly critiques (as in the
emergence of what Nikolas Rose calls the “neurochemical self”). Second, taken together, these events highlight the trope of addiction as a disease of the will, a notion of contaminated voluntariness that was present from early theorizations of the addict identity – the moment, Sedgwick says, when the addict becomes a species – and that became particularly rampant in the late twentieth century, with medical science and psychology showing more interest in finding root causes for addiction in addition to diagnosing and treating it. Third, and more relevant to television studies, this narcoanalytic detour exposes the importance of approximate language in describing, and thus categorizing and regulating, addiction as disease. Just as, for Ronell, drugs enable a reckless detour from the subjective constrains of language, Sedgwick finds that “the locus of addictiveness cannot be the substance itself and can scarcely even be the body itself, but most be some overarching abstraction that governs the narrative relations between them” (EW 131).

Following this, America’s addiction to reality television demands an interrogation of the governing cues that provoke and shape spectatorial response, a decoding of the narratives on reality TV so that we might better understand our addictive impulse. Television studies should not insist, as Mittell does, on the elimination of the drug metaphor for theorizing television spectatorship. Rather, television studies should attend to the resonances between drug culture and media culture so as to theorize television’s critical engagements with desire and affect – and, tellingly, with the structural logics that shape each.

Amped Up Programming: Locating Addiction in Reality TV
While the paradigm of addiction as disease and the models of recovery that developed to cure this disease emerged midway through the twentieth century, it was through the popularization of daytime talk programs in the late 1980s and early 1990s that discourses of therapy and self-help reached a mass public with narratives of addiction and recovery. Addiction was not repressed, the recovering addict shared a similar narrative temporality similar to the survivors of sexual abuse and the exploited children who were the focus of the early 1990s “memory wars” over the authenticity or fictionality of survivor testimony and who came to define that historical moment in terms of popular psychology, feminist identity, and national sentimentality. In this temporality, an individual comes to understand his or her belonging to a class of people who can reconcile past traumatic events through a regimen of therapeutic self-discipline. The daytime TV talk shows of the period – important genealogical antecedents of the documentary reality fare of the 2000s – often framed questions of addiction as both spectacle and as public therapy. While often reveling in the spectacle of drug economies themselves (for instance, Geraldo Rivera famously broadcasted a botched drug bust on a 1986 syndicated special), the programs also included drug users and addicts in various stages of recovery as on-air guests as well as among the hosts themselves (such as Oprah Winfrey, the queen of self-confessional talk, who confessed in 1995 to having used crack cocaine with a former lover). Confessional regimes – acts of disclosure in which personal secrets are revealed – help structure these programs both in terms of narrative (providing a moment of revelation followed by interpersonal discussion about it) and in terms of content (because such secrets are often about societal taboos like aberrant sexual behavior or drug use).
Scholarly work on these programs, as diagrammed by Jane Shattuc, Mimi White, Kevin Glynn, Joshua Gamson, and others, has demonstrated how television transforms confession in the very gesture of its production—another indication of its influence on recovery television, in which confessionals with addicts, family and friends, and experts move the narrative forward.39 Like in other culturally abject genres, such as the soap opera and (as I hope I have made clear by now) reality television, confessional regimes are deployed throughout daytime talk shows as a discursive strategy. As Mimi White argues, “confession and therapy are engaged toward finding one’s ‘proper place’ as an individual and a social subject, even as they are mediated through the apparatus of television. This proper place is overdetermined by family/gender relations and models of consumption.”40 On the one hand, Kevin Glynn argues that such confessional regimes—and, one might hypothesize, the logic of “daytime” television as a whole—are premised upon an affective charge linked to the resignification of electronic images that magnify discourses of aberrance or criminality. But on the other hand, Gamson notes that these programs also allow for the increased visibility of minoritarian subjects, maintaining that, despite the proliferation of discourses of “abnormal” or alternative sexualities in daytime programming, such programming destabilizes any hegemonic notion of the public and private, gesturing towards the conditions of possibility for alternative public spheres (or, following Michael Warner, what one might call “daytime TV counterpublics”).

While the confessional mode of address characteristic of daytime talk programs facilitates the first step towards recovery, it predates the emergence and explosion of the kind of reality television that works in tandem with neoliberal governmentality to reform compulsive behavior or substance abuse while providing audiences with addictive
spectacle. Reality television’s command over network and cable programming since the
turn of the millennium is indisputable. But the generic category of “reality” is, as many
scholars have noted, an inherently problematic category: such a genre could reasonably
include sporting events, news broadcasts, and other programs that rely on a live broadcast
to index their “real” components (“reality” here being used to signify a temporal
category). Similarly, the therapeutic daytime talk programs that reached their zenith of
popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s also appear to be a critical precursory part of
“reality TV,” as they emphasized the genre’s interest in so-called “ordinary” citizens,
often from minoritarian subject positions. Laurie Ouellette and Susan Murray, in one
scholarly anthology on the genre, define it “as an unabashedly commercial genre united
less by aesthetic rules or certainties than by the fusion of popular entertainment with a
self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real,” but to invoke the “discourse of the real”
is to invoke a tenuously constructed category at best. While reality television frequently
comes under attack for how scripted such “discourses of the real” appear to be, it is
precisely the way that reality TV plays with the distinction between the scripted and the
improvised, the unusual and the ordinary, and the exaggerated and the authentic that is
the genre’s strength, making it so easy to consume.

The proliferation of reality television across both broadcast and cable networks
brings us back to the BusinessWeek article pronouncing “America’s Reality-TV
Addiction.” Written by industry correspondent Michelle Conlin, the article makes
repeated reference to reality TV, then in the midst of its ascendancy, as “network crack”
and “crack TV” that affects both producers hooked on a business model of quick and
cheap production and consumers oversaturated with endless deviations on the same
The article’s use of “crack” here serves many functions: as a metonym for reality TV’s perceived audience of lower-income Americans and people of color; as an index of the low cultural status of this freebased form of programming (as both “free” broadcast TV fare and fare that, supposedly, can be mindlessly inhaled); and as symbolic of addiction par excellence. As Ronell notes, “as synecdoche of all drugs, crack illuminates an internal dimension of polemos – opening up the apocalyptic horizon of the politics of drugs.” Just as crack moved the polemics surrounding drugs toward the racially coded rhetoric of apocalypse, so too did reality television inaugurate similar fears among cultural elites convinced that these series were “weapons of mass distraction.”

**More than Just a Makeover: Viewing Recovery Television Ironically**

While not young in the history of television, reality television has grown to encompass a number of different subgenres within its elastic boundaries. To name a few of the most well-known: there are competitive gamedocs, hidden camera programs, docusoaps, celebrity profiles, legal programs, and makeover programs. I use the term “recovery television” to add another category to this incomplete list: a group of series that focus on subjects with some sort of practiced behaviors – rather than, as with makeover programs, physical appearances – outside the norms of acceptability that must then be tempered through professional expertise. These programs focus on habitual actions or patterns manifested through repetition and an endangerment of the subject’s health, from the exorbitant consumption of *Hoarders* (A&E, 2009-2013) and *Hoarding: Buried Alive* (TLC, 2010-present) to its inverse, the needless improvidence of *Extreme Cheapskates* (TLC, 2012-present) and *Extreme Couponing* (TLC, 2010-2012). Additionally, the
subgenre has concerned itself with habits of eating and not eating, as in the E! documentary series *What’s Eating You?* (2011), and misguided sexual energy, as in *Bad Sex* (Logo, 2011-present). There are also programs that profile people with aberrant and outlandish obsessions, such as an unnatural fixation with a particular object or practice, as in *My Crazy Obsession* (TLC, 2012-2014), *My Strange Addiction* (TLC, 2010-present), and in *Collection Intervention* (Syfy, 2012). There are programs that highlight an individual’s management of anxiety, as in *Obsessed* (A&E, 2009-10) and *The OCD Project* (VH1, 2010). And there are programs that explicitly center on an individual’s dependency on illegal drugs or otherwise unhealthy substances, such as in *Intervention*, *Addicted* (TLC, 2010), *Relapse* (A&E, 2011), and *Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew* (VH1, 2008-2012).

My aim in cataloging these programs is not only to document the emergence of this subgenre but also to think about the differences between these programs and the large number of reality programs that deal with self-improvement. Many of the aforementioned series, for example, have been categorized as “makeover” programs because of their emphasis on a personal transformation between an abject “before” subject and an expert-educated “after” subject.45 In her comprehensive study on the subgenre, Brenda R. Weber describes three “common themes” that unite seemingly disparate series under the header of “makeover television”: a narrative of progress through personal transformation; the use of shame to interpellate an imperfect subject into this teleological narrative; and a “big reveal” moment that celebrates the work of experts who located and reconstructed the subject’s sense of self.46 For Weber, the narratological structure of the makeover must correlate to definitive improvement, even if that improvement is incomplete or never
actually achieved. “Even when the makeover offers ‘where are they now’ updates,” she writes, “the imagined zone of reality TV does not allow for the messiness of real lives.”

Recovery television, however, tests the boundaries of this “imagined zone of reality TV” in its distinct narratological guarantee: the televised circuits of addiction, recovery, and relapse within these programs indicate a cyclical rather than linear relationship to progress. Just as in makeover television, experts, be they trained interventionists or clutter psychologists, offer institutional pathways to self-improvement. But there is a critical difference: rather than emphasizing the necessity of a successful transformation as necessary to the narrative, recovery television revels in the spectacle of the inappropriate behavior, offering only a vague commitment to change – a desire to de-clutter, a stint in rehab – as its narrative linchpin. The indulgent descriptions of the subject’s loss of control are highly gendered as well, feminizing the subjects through staged humiliations set to melodramatic music. The big reveal of recovery television, then, is typically the result of a struggle between the subject and the experts to accept a diagnosis or to admit to an obsession. Such a reveal may amount to a reconstruction of the subject’s sense of self (pace Weber), but one without any necessary material effects; subjects could fail to complete rehabilitation and relapse, or they could, following a reorganization of their living space with the help of an expert, break form and return to older habits of hoarding.

The “big reveal” constitutes the first step in recovery discourse: the well-known performative utterance of “Hello, My Name is ________ and I am an addict” (or an alcoholic, or a hoarder, or someone with a crazy obsession). This statement, coaxed out by experts, grants the addict a politics of visibility and identification, one in which group
solidarity can be formed. This identification cannot be divorced from the pathologization of addiction as a disease, however, in which the addict can pursue (or be coerced into) “self-help.” Such a neoliberal cooptation of identity politics requires that the freedom to identify as an addict be put to the services of the contemporary service economy, and thus an entire industry has emerged and developed to accommodate such a group. This industry includes twelve-step programs; residential treatment facilities; sober housing; psychologists, counselors, and therapists; and pharmacotherapies such as methadone and buprenorphine. Moreover, this list does not even begin to cover the wide assortment of ideological apparatuses that comprise drug abuse prevention, such as community-, government-, and education-based programs that target youth in order to inform them of risks involved with drug use.

Prior to the subject’s indoctrination into this industry of rehabilitation via the “big reveal” moment of the acceptance of diagnosis, of course, viewers are treated to crafted narratives that illustrate in great visceral detail the consequences that these detrimental behaviors have on its subjects: rotten food is graphically displayed to demonstrate the obscured functionality of a house on *Hoarders*, for example. These sequences are often the most memorable part of such programs, provoking affective reactions of disgust, pity, and laughter from viewers. Yet even beyond providing viewer affect, these moments also have immense value in the larger zone of popular culture, including ongoing narrative value, tie-in value (as these moments migrate to other venues and thus support additional advertisement), and general reinforcement value for neoliberal discourses. For example, in the case of *Intervention*, one of the program’s most well-known subjects, Allison, went viral in many digital outlets following her hallucinatory disclosure that she was “walking
on sunshine” after huffing aerosol spray cans of dust remover agents. Her popularity among both frequent and infrequent viewers partially stemmed from the shocking revelations of her personal trauma; in addition to her addiction, she confesses to being both anorexic, a survivor of parental abandonment and child molestation (an incident to which she later testified at trial), and someone who engages in self-mutilation. These events serve as a narrative justification for her addiction; she is an addict who is, as Ronell described Emma Bovary, “apparently a grand self-mediator.”

Clips from the episode in which Allison describes this self-medicating experience and the euphoria that comes from huffing Dust-Off have close to a million hits on YouTube. In addition to posting excerpts from the episode, a number of fans have uploaded remix videos in which they parodied Allison’s declaration, often set to the Katrina & the Waves song “Walking on Sunshine” (1983). In accordance with the contemporary media convergent era in which reality television easily lends itself to digital memes and repeatable .gifs (units carrying cultural symbols and ideas that spread rapidly from person to person via e-mail, social media platforms, and Internet blogs, forums, and imageboards), Allison’s “fame” within the larger population of reality TV subjects is notable for the ways in which the segment distorts paradigms of visual identification. In Figure 1, we see Allison under the influence of drugs, and her intoxication can be read on her face: specifically, in her splotchy skin and her intense, twitching eyes. She does not serve as an embodied index for the practices of abstinence and rehabilitation that denote a narrative of individual progress, but rather becomes the subjective shorthand for the extraordinary exhibition of her abject state.
Figure 1: Allison on Intervention.

Taken out of context from the episode’s interventionism, the segment invites viewers to laugh at Allison, not to root for her recovery. Framed by a mutated confessional mode of address – one that is both therapeutic and ironic – Allison represents reality television’s unique relationship to addiction: she reveals suburban domesticity gone awry as her body literally ingests the consumer cleaning products marketed by broadcast television. If makeover television resists, for Weber, the “messiness of real lives,” recovery television invests in the explicit spectacle of such messiness, which becomes the visual signifier of the deleterious consequences of compulsive behavior. Within the vernacular of popular culture, Allison is a “hot mess,” and the complex mix of empathetic identification and parodic disidentification that she incites for viewers (like all of the other addicts and obsessives that populate recovery television), is the central mechanism for inducing spectatorial pleasure while serving as a distraction from the success or failure of any expert-induced involvement.51

As another example both of the genre and its own diagnosis, consider a May 2008 ABC News profile of Candi Kalp of Easton, Massachusetts, a self-proclaimed reality addict who claims to watch an average of twenty reality shows each week.52 Kalp’s insatiable desire for reality TV encompasses not just an excess of programming but an
excess of the technology necessary to record and re-watch programs multiple times: the segment highlights Kalp’s two DVRs and several television sets, including one in the bathroom. Like many users, Kalp is addicted to reality television because it boosts her confidence. “The reason I watch reality TV is because it makes me feel better about myself,” she revealed. “You're looking at all these other people, and they’re really a bunch of losers. So, it sort of validates yourself, like, ‘Oh, I'm not that bad.’”

Kalp defends her viewing practices by proclaiming that she is “not that bad” when compared to the “other people” on-screen who, in her mind, are “really a bunch of losers.” Such a statement describes the atmosphere of reality television spectatorship, bringing the subjects of reality television (Kalp, the audience member) and the subjects on reality television (the “bunch of losers”) together in moral relation. According to Douglas, reality television is the ground zero of “enlightened sexism,” or the condition present within postfeminist logics by which an ironic tone culturally legitimizes ideologically sexist messages. For Douglas, the presumed spectator of reality television is, more often than not, female, and part of the pleasure that she derives from reality television is a renegotiation of her own viewer identity; this presumed viewer, like the meme of Allison, becomes akin to a self-perpetuating machine. Kalp’s statement could thus be read as suggestive of what Douglas specifies as ironic viewing, the reception effect produced when “reality TV shows use idiotic, arrogant, or self-destructive behaviors which we are urged to judge and which are designed to make us feel much better about ourselves: however dumb or selfish we were today, at least we weren’t like that.” This definition of ironic viewing resonates with Ien Ang’s 1982 description of how ironic viewing practices require knowledge of a program’s textual tricks and codes.
This knowledge works to naturalize the ideology of mass culture. In Ang’s writing about
_Dallas_ (CBS, 1978-1991), this naturalization comes about because “ironizing, i.e. creating a distance between oneself and _Dallas_ as ‘bad object,’ _is_ the way in which one likes _Dallas._”\(^55\) Kalp, for example, is allowed to indulge in the spectacle of reality TV’s “hot messes” – partying twenty-somethings, teen moms, and junkies in need of an intervention – only through a wink and a nod to the industrial, aesthetic, and promotional discourses that surround the genre of reality TV. As long as she knows that what she is watching is coded as a bad object, she can disavow her pleasure in such trash by self-identifying as an ironic viewer.

Kalp’s segment on ABC News aired three months prior to Allison’s episode of _Intervention_; whether Kalp watched Allison, or Linda, or any of the other subjects of recovery television is, of course, impossible to confirm. Had this situation occurred, however, Kalp would have no doubt watched Allison huff one of the 8-10 cans of Dust-Off she inhales daily, and, given Kalp’s own comments on her viewing pleasure, she would have done so within the parameters of a morally ironic spectatorship. Following Douglas, such a spectatorship could give Kalp a reassurance as to her own gender or class performance, but this reassurance obscures the addictive dimensions of ironic viewing, which becomes a sort of Trojan horse for the subject’s own addiction to reality television. For Douglas, the theory of an assumed ironic distance between a spectator and a text helps illuminate how reality television simultaneously flouts and buttresses social norms – but only with respect to conventional identity categories such as race, class, gender, and sexuality (and, presumably, the intersectional overlapping between these categories, though Douglas is not explicit on this). The identity of an addict, whether self-
acknowledged (as Allison eventually does throughout the course of the episode) or acknowledged behind the addict’s back by family and friends (as in the case of Kalp, whose two friends, the GMA segment explains, are “somewhere between concerned and appalled” at Kalp’s addiction), fits uneasily within claims of ironic viewing, as the addict could be said to latch onto any justification for her viewing compulsion. Thus, we must attend to the narrative of recovery, or how subjects are interpellated as addicts and how reality television performatively structures such a process, in order to understand better the seductiveness of ironic viewing as a dismissal of addiction.

**Demystifying and Documenting Narratives of Addiction and Recovery**

Addicts may suffer from a disease that causes them to forge inappropriate relationships to freedom and the free market, but they can find a redemptive path to recovery through rigid acquiescence to the practice of self-discipline and the mantras of personal responsibility. That is to say, addicts can be cured through the changing of their own subjective narrative. Addiction as a concept structurally resembles the narrative logic of many common reality programs. Robin Room, a sociologist who has written prolifically on drug and alcohol dependency, characterizes addiction as descriptive of “what is perceived and defined as a mystery: the mystery of the drinker or drug user continuing to use despite what is seen as the harm – such as causalities, damage to health, and failures of work and family roles – resulting from use.” Room’s ontological framing of addiction as a mystery implicates the cultural construction of a narrative in which the audience participates in the identification of the hidden institutional or individual factors that contribute to a decidedly unhealthy lifestyle. I read a certain
reverberation here with how Weber defines the makeover subgenre as utilizing an elongated televisual narrative that “offer[s] us a better context for understanding the typically invisible space between Before and After than that provided by magazine or talk show makeovers.” Reality series that profile compulsive behavior and the interventions that steer the subjects towards professional expertise and self-improvement use such mysterious narratives as a way to justify the subject’s participation in the program, with episodes punctuated by references to turbulent upbringings, catastrophic or traumatic experiences, and demographic factors that form an assemblage of source material for the compulsive behavior.

In this way, reality television incorporates the tropes of discourses of addiction. According to the psychologist Gene Heyman, the stories shared by addicts regarding their addiction “establish a larger narrative – a natural history of drug use, constructed from the contributions of individual drug users,” much as how recovery television has become a way to trace the topography of drug culture in neoliberal America. Similarly, sociologist Craig Reinarman has conceptualized addiction as a disease containing two processes that shape the individual subject’s identification as an addict and her trajectory through recovery. First, he identifies a pedagogical process marked by the acquisition of a specific terminology of disease and recovery from the multitude of licensed actors: social workers and counselors, therapists, judges, lawyers, correctional staff within the prison industrial complex (including probation officers, parole officers, and prison guards), non-profit workers and case managers, and, importantly, other addicts. Such a process causes addicts to “retrospectively reinterpret their lives and behavior in terms of addiction-as-disease,” a paradigm revolving around the aforementioned narratology of
mystery. Second, Reinarman describes a performative process in which “addicts tell and retell their newly reconstituted life stories according to the grammatical and syntactical rules of disease discourse that they have come to learn.” This is the discursive utility, for example, of the meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), a semi-anonymous gathering of individuals who ritually confess their narratives to the group as part of a regimen of sobriety. The twofold process described by Reinarman is, to some extent, naturally episodic. At each meeting, as in the case of AA, subjects recount narratives to influence or support other addicts but also to reinforce their decision to get sober; these testimonials are bookended by specific rituals such as the Serenity Prayer. and each meeting begins and ends with rituals that guide the confessionals that occur during the middle of the meeting. When televised, this narrative exploits the “anonymous” aspect of the therapeutic aesthetics of the reality public sphere while clearly acting in the service of commoditized entertainment. In the words A&E executive Rob Sharenow, “Interventions are quite dramatic. They come with a built-in climax, which makes for powerful TV.”

The aesthetics of reality television have often been negatively compared to those of cinema verité documentary, such that upon consideration of the first reality television docuseries, PBS’s An American Family, some critics (notably the famous anthropologist Margaret Mead) resisted calling it a “documentary,” believing that television was incapable of producing anything that “real.” (One could only speculate as to Mead’s reaction upon viewing, say, the families on Duck Dynasty or Teen Mom – she might reconsider her opinion on PBS.) As Susan Murray has compellingly noted, the unstable line between “reality television” and “documentary” situates audiences so that they may take into consideration the logics of commercialism and cultural taste, applying each
label as they see fit. The dramatic narratives of recovery television invert the formal conventions of “documentary” by injecting the sensational into the serious by allowing audiences the option of viewing the subjects of its programming ironically. Bill Nichols, in his textbook study of documentary cinema, attaches the “discourse of sobriety” to the genre, claiming that “sober” documentaries speak to social and historical realities within rational topics and disciplines (science, medicine, public policy, and economics). For these “social issue” documentaries, the discourse of sobriety dictates that “style is secondary to content; content is what counts – the real world as it exists or existed.” Nichols contrasts the social issue documentary with the “personal portrait documentary,” centered around a poetic of subjective discourse, in which form and style take at least equal, if not more, precedence than content. The personal portrait documentary, the categorization of documentary most like the kinds of docuseries present in today’s reality television, rejects discourses of sobriety; the emphasis on subjective narrative is thus a repudiation of a sober aesthetics and must be read, instead, as a kind of narcoanalytic text, a text that alters the affective atmosphere of the narrative.

Contrast the documentary’s discourse of sobriety with the genre of narrative cinema most frequently said read by narcoanalysis, a kind of “techno-cinema” in which the film’s narrative privileges embodied sensation as experienced by the viewer. Representation is important to these films only insofar as representation becomes a vehicle for the multiple distributions of movement and affect; thus a film such as Requiem for a Dream can position spectators to consume narrative as if it were a drug, through what Skye Bianco calls “intensive affects” that give the spectator access to the experience of being on heroin without any actual consumption of the drug. These
affects emerge from a number of narcoanalytic techniques; including the speed between
cuts and the close-ups of the consumption of drugs via different modes (such as injection
and snorting that utilize different props such as spoons, syringes, and powders). Affect,
here, is read through the concept of the movement-sensorium as theorized by Deleuze
and Guattari and Brian Massumi, in which affect is removed from direct linguistic
signification, thus preserving its bodily intensity. Yet my citation of this body of work
here should not be read as a full endorsement of this materialistic and rather narrow
definition of affect. In this vein, while Massumi has distinguished, for example, between
affects and emotions, saying that the affective “is not about empathy or emotive
identification, or any form of identification for that matter,” addictive spectatorship
challenges such a disjunctive affective deployment through the mode and context of its
reception. The bodily sensations that are prompted by both the narrative and form of
recovery television can never be distinguished from their documentarian context, in
which the desire to view “real” people and events allows for identification to occur, but
only in the abstracted space between the structure of the genre (a rhythm of addiction and
recovery) and the personalized subject (the ordinary individual with a specific, contextual
narrative of compulsion). Addiction, here, is not merely the narrative subject of
recovery television but also its primary affective category, too, replete with somatic
investment. Put differently, audiences must identify – or critically disidentify, in the case
of ironic viewing – with the addicts on reality television in order to justify their
consumption.

Hallucinating Authenticity: Affective Interventions
Ironic viewing may provide certain audiences with the justification for excessive consumption, but sometimes that justification is not convincing to friends and family. The authenticity of the addict is always a factor in recovery television, because often the addictions are so extreme they do not possibly seem real enough. Remember how, as “mel” wrote on an *Intervention* bulletin board, when watching Linda “it wasn’t even like I was watching an addict; it was more like a person who just really sucked at acting…” What is, Linda’s specific narrative of addiction and recovery, and why was “mel” unpersuaded by her (failed) performance of failed management?

“Linda” was the season premiere of *Intervention’s* eighth season, immediately following a win for Outstanding Reality Series at the 2009 Emmy Awards. Yet *Intervention* operates by disavowing – at least to its on-air subjects – its status as reality television. Each episode follows one or two participants who believe that they are being filmed for a documentary about addiction, and the participants are supposedly unaware that they will be subject to an actual intervention by their close family members and friends (although some figure it out immediately prior to the actual intervention). This sleight-of-hand inscribes a certain degree of authenticity into the participant’s narrative, since the program proclaims from its opening credits that it is a documentary of sorts (or, more accurately, that is aspires to the cultural status of documentary). The majority of addictions covered on the series are drug and alcohol-related, though the series also covers addictions to gambling, shopping, video games, sex, plastic surgery, and exercise. Episodes tend to follow a particular form: first, the program introduces the subject and documents the addiction; next, it portrays the addiction’s impact on the individual’s family and friends; and then there is the actual intervention, in which family and friends
read aloud letters to the individual that specifically outline the consequences if treatment for the addiction is refused (such as divorce or being cut off from one’s family and/or children). At the end of each intervention, the individual has a choice: go immediately into rehabilitation or continue the addiction with the specified consequences. Each episode closes with an update on the individual’s condition – whether the subject has beaten his or her addiction or not – and the program occasionally checks in with former subjects in subsequent episodes and online webisodes. At the time the series received its Emmy Award, A&E claimed that 112 out of 138 interventions conducted since the series premiere in March 2005 were successful, ultimately resulting in sobriety from the profiled substance.  

“Linda” is organized around Linda’s addiction to fentanyl, but it is also narratively broader, as it documents her odd management of pain and questions whether the pain stemming from Ehlers-Danlos syndrome is even real – thus raising queries about both addiction and reality television as a whole. The episode restages this generic problematic, making the moment of revelation a confrontation between Linda’s Chinese immigrant mother, who desperately wants to believe that her daughter truly suffers from EDS and is not merely acting, and the rest of her family, who do not believe that Linda is in pain and instead view EDS as an excuse for fentanyl prescriptions. Linda’s family backstory narrates a familiar immigrant tale: her parents emigrated from China following the Chinese Revolution of 1949, struggling to make ends meet, opening up a laundromat and a daycare center, and managing rental property in order to gain entrance into the American middle class. Linda’s mother is depicted as a very frugal woman, and Linda expresses resentment towards her mother at multiple points throughout the episode,
claiming that she was denied a “normal” childhood because she had to spend her childhood working in the laundromat: “I did wish I was more like my American friends and their families,” Linda says, “it didn’t seem as if they had as many expectations.” In this way, Linda marks the source of her problems as national and racial – rather than medical – difference.

The racialized language that Linda uses to construct the narrative that will later serve as the basis for her eventual addiction is of note here. Linda’s father explains that “…in China, children help parents. It’s as a matter of fact. It’s nothing unusual about it,” and his broken English and the required subtitles serve to reinforce the dichotomous value systems of two different nations and ideologies of parenting. The episode thus references a larger archive of contemporary cultural texts that frame Chinese parenting as overly disciplinarian in nature, with debates about the appropriateness of the neologism “Tiger Mother” to describe strict Asian women who exert great control over their children.69 After Linda’s parents arrive in Agoura Hills for the intervention, they call Linda to tell her they are nearby, and Linda freaks out, yelling at an off-screen producer that, rather than helping, the presumed documentary about pain management is “risking [her] life” by bringing her parents so close. Within the segment, shots alternate between Linda’s parents in their hotel room (with subtitles to translate both language and cultural difference) and Linda, who interrupts her father with bursts of sound indicating pain. This continues until the episode cuts to commercial following a handheld camera moving frantically around her bedroom as Linda yells “get out!” underneath a nondiegetic cacophony of shrill xylophone tones.
When the episode resumes, Linda confronts her parents at their hotel, explaining that her parents carry radiation and electricity from Connecticut that trigger her joint pain. As her mother sits in front of a blue screen for an interview, Linda forcefully pounds on the door, interrupting the shoot and causing the producers to attempt to calm her down. Throughout this scene, it is as if the camera cannot decide on what, exactly, to focus its lens: some shots are of the arranged mise-en-scène of the presumed documentary, with corresponding props within the frame that allude to this metatextual set, and some tracking shots are of Linda’s erratic movements outside of the hotel conference room (at least, until she proclaims “we’re done” and places her hand over the camera’s lens). Most shots, however, have some kind of obstacle to a clear, uninterrupted view of any of these characters, with walls and angular corners serving both to block our access even while, paradoxically, announcing access. These impediments seem to guarantee the episode’s narrative as spontaneous, unexpected, and therefore authentic.

Figure 2: Linda confronts her parents on Intervention.

The affective excesses present within the narrative and mediated through the unpredictable camera movements and the chaotic soundtrack preclude the possibility of rational, direct address and thus appear symptomatic of the poetic discourse present in
personal documentary: whether one believes her addiction or not, Linda is certainly not “sober.”

In this way, the unpredictable camera movements evoke the cinema verité documentary aesthetic that is so important to reality television while also mimicking Linda’s own inability to control her body, with the camera’s quick motions analogous to her own motions under fentanyl. This excess – of both camera and of Linda’s character – is instructive for the audiences of reality TV. Misha Kavka links such uncontrollable expressions of televised subjects to the affective climate engendered by reality television, in which spectators rely upon affect to determine the authenticity of the performance that they are watching: “the reality of the camera-performer relation in reality TV is thus twofold: it inheres on the one hand in the affective syntax of performative gestures, those ‘tics and gestures and wrinkles,’ at the same time it registers the everyday negotiations of being watched by an unowned gaze, which structures subjectivity itself.”

Linda’s capacity to disrupt the narrative and to exceed the racialized and gendered strategies of containment sticks to the episode’s framing of addiction through overlapping (and, at times, competing) dynamics of citizenship, the family, and medicine. These dynamics yield affective excesses, which primarily produce spectatorial disgust in two ways. Linda is first figured as an addict requiring moral judgment, an object to be viewed ironically. As television critic Melanie McFarland writes of Intervention, “The viewer is not left to contemplate the subject’s healing process as deeply as how messed up that person is. We get 25 percent recovery, 75 percent chaos.”

But disgust is also registered through Linda’s inability to perform her addiction competently. In Linda’s case, the affective signifier addict (implying her own
exacerbation of her symptoms by her own drug use) becomes an impediment to taking
her embodied pain seriously, even to the extent to which she is read as an addict – and an
addict of some knowable substance – by fans of the series. The episode conjures up a
spiraling of (bad) performance and addiction, epistemological uncertainty and televisual
reality: on the one hand, if Linda’s pain is faked, it “really” proves her addiction to
fentanyl; on the other hand, if her drug addiction is “faked,” it “really” proves that she is
addicted to attention from spectators, including her family, doctors, and viewers.
Television, in this case, is the cause of her pain (as she tries to evade the camera that she
claims are doing her harm), but also the obstacle to its believability. The episode informs
the audience, via a title card following a montage of still photographs of Linda with
various television celebrities from the late 1990s, that Linda experienced her first
instance of joint dislocation while working as an extra on-set (thus leading to her fentanyl
prescriptions). Linda’s reputation as a failed actress who appears only on television’s
periphery is a position overdetermined by her race and gender. Indeed, Linda’s televisual
identity is doubly “extra,” both in terms of her profession and in terms of the affect she
displays, and this extra remainder comes to define the habitual rhythms of compulsion
and voluntariness present in recovery television.

**Tactile Glances, Addictive Gazes**

As spectators consume this remaineder narrative, they become dependent upon a
rationale of synesthetic affect that functions as the guarantor of the operations of
neoliberal governmentality prevalent within reality television. This affect coordinates the
processes of distantiation (such as ironic viewing) that allow the ideological imperatives
of the text to go unnoticed by the spectator. Addictive spectatorship is, for example, partially explained by Bernadette Wegenstein and Nora Ruck’s formulation of the physiognomic “cosmetic gaze,” a gaze “through which the act of looking at our bodies and those of others is already informed by the techniques, expectations, and strategies of bodily modification; it is also and perhaps most importantly a moralizing gaze, a way of looking at bodies as awaiting an improvement, physical and spiritual, that is already present in the body’s structure.”

Wegenstein and Ruck utilize the term “gaze” trans-historically, constructing a media archaeology of cosmetic surgery and body modification through a physiognomic reading of the body.

Their formulation of the cosmetic gaze is helpful for framing the larger narrative action of the makeover (a process of making over), in a somewhat analogous way as that of the addict, with the equally as complex mechanisms of moralization and disavowal present. As a process of making over, the cosmetic gaze reveals the physical, mental, and affective labor necessary to the makeover’s goal of self-transformation: write Wegenstein and Ruck, “The beautiful body in makeover culture thus reveals that it is anything but lazy; rather, it is the new site of inscribing a late capitalist culture’s ideals of self-realization: besides the ‘beautiful’ outcomes of the renewed bodies, what we are supposed to see is hard work.”

The same logic is clearly at work, here, when transposed to the register of recovery, with the experts constantly reminding the addict, the addict’s friends and family, and the audience that getting clean is hard work. But this kind of labor is not given significant screen time on recovery television; what recovery television actually demonstrates is, instead, the labor the addicted body must enact in order to perform its addiction proficiently, the affect required to convince friends and family that
such a transformation is needed. When one sees an addict on television, the “techniques, expectations, and strategies” of recovery are always already present; the end goal of recovery – sobriety – acts both as transformative goal (what the addict aspires towards) and as the true nature of the self (what the addict always was, until the addictive substance came along). “What we are supposed to see” in these mediated narratives of addicts is the affective labor required to maintain an addiction and to move towards recovery, while mirroring our own affective labor required to manage our own consumption of television. This recognition thus renders the subject positions of on-screen addict and off-screen spectator unstable; the addicted spectator’s dodging glances (between the screen and another point, perhaps another device) allow the look to be projected onto a ‘screen’ exemplary of society.

In this schema, the subjects of reality television function as the screen. Kaja Silverman offers one definition of the screen that is recognizable to addicted spectators: the screen is “the site at which the gaze is defined for a particular society, and is consequently responsible both for the way in which the inhabitants of that society experience the gaze’s effects, and for much of the seeming particularity of that society’s visual regime.” Silverman’s definition harmonizes with theorizations of reality television (and of makeover television specifically) that comment on how easily the genre lends itself to moralizing spectatorial positions, as in the case of ironic viewing. Spectators see this in how the subjects of reality television are introduced: in Linda’s case, for example, there is the juxtaposition of her background narrative (her work as an extra in Hollywood) and her current state of dependency on fentanyl. The contrast between past and present locates addiction very clearly as a form of moral disorder.
indicative of imperiled selfhood, as title cards providing medical facts about the drug also reveal the dirty secrets of Linda’s ability to sustain her addiction (that she obtains her prescriptions, for example, by having visited over fifty physicians in the last eight years). No matter his condition, the spectator of these kinds of programs exercises a certain moral superiority necessary to shore up the affective definition of an addict: spectators may also be a recreational drug users or social drinkers, but they are positioned as confident that they do not inhabit “rock bottom,” as do those they view. Subjects are presented on these programs as always already more excessive than the presumed spectator precisely through the program’s scripted cues: their stories can only be told through a trajectory from rock bottom to rehab via the intervention.

Yet it is worth exploring how spectators also serve as the “screen” in this configuration. In his famous assessment of television as a “cool” medium, Marshall McLuhan advanced the notion that the TV picture’s low resolution resulted in constant, reflexive, perceptual closure responses on the part of the viewer. Because the image is visually low in data, spectators perceive it through mosaic work. Furthermore, this mosaic work involves a “convulsive sensuous participation that is profoundly kinetic and tactile,” one attentive to embodied gesture and movement. While McLuhan’s idea, here, cannot be easily transposed onto today’s televisual landscape punctuated with high-definition programming (although such high resolution is still dependent upon units of pixels), I want to hold onto his assertion that there is something tactile about the TV image. This tactility can be read less as a perceptual response to a technological specificity than as an affective register of the image equally indebted to gesture and movement as to pixelated light. The spontaneous, rapid movements of Linda, for
example, require the same kind of synthesis to decode as mosaic work while, at the same time, they reveal their complicit participation in the ideological operations of the text. Akin to Teresa Brennan’s idiom of affective transmission as atmosphere, a substitution of pixels for molecules that connects spectator and screen, the affective outbursts on recovery television help determine the spectator’s ability to manage his or her viewing, with addict and spectator inhabiting the same atmospheric ethos of self-transformation.⁷⁷

While at times incredibly speculative, McLuhan’s arguments about television oddly point to the structural formula of reality TV: how the genre devotes a significant amount of camera time to the process, with an emphasis on the behind-the-scenes rather than on the product or end result. Writing in a different context, that of performance and dance studies, Kate Elswit argues that the behind-the-scenes process in reality television enables a set of possibilities for personal engagement beyond the experience of the staged event, such as in her example of a dance performed on a series like Fox’s So You Think You Can Dance.⁷⁸ This same kind of process occurs in Intervention. Linda participates in a staged event, an “intervention” deliberately constructed and scripted by the producers and by the expert, the trained interventionist. The event is staged to the point where a “pre-intervention” occurs, allowing for the interventionist to brief family members and close friends on the precise process of how the intervention will unfold, to recap information from the first part of the episode, and to detail what threats need to be made by the group to entice the subject to enter rehab. In this sense, the pre-intervention functions as a sort of dress rehearsal, an opportunity for the family to work out any inner conflicts and to emerge prepared for the intervention as a unified unit dedicated to individualistic self-discipline. Importantly, this event behaves as a dress rehearsal not
only for the addict’s support system but also for the audience, who must prepare
themselves for the “big reveal.”

But Linda’s intervention improvises from the script. As Linda rushes out from the
hotel conference suite, we see several shots of the behind-the-scenes machinations: a
camera operator, the blurred-out face of a producer, and the accidental inclusion of a
hotel housekeeper who almost falls victim to Linda’s sprint down the hall. The affective
excesses, too, still linger, the stickiness of addiction a testament to its persistence in the
act of recovery (and, in Linda’s case, to recovery as an act). The scene is characterized by
chaos, with Linda yelling over the voices of family members, experts, and producers who
are attempting to begin her journey towards recovery through the performative
acknowledgement of her addiction (and through her addiction to performance). Space
becomes crucial, here, as the affective energies that characterize Linda’s breakdown
cannot be confined to the non-descript hotel; thus the narrative action moves to a strip of
lawn in the parking lot, where Linda, stretched out on the grass, finally hears her family’s
pleas for help.

Figure 3: Linda leaving her intervention.
Notably, Linda’s mother is absent from the final moments of the intervention, as she is sent away by Linda’s other family members on the suspicion that she would “believe” her daughter’s claims of pain via EDS. On the grass, her body wildly contorted, she unleashes a flood of excessive gestures, only to acquiesce, finally, to her family’s demands to enter the proper channels to self-transformation. The intervention may have technically been successful, but the sense of Linda’s intervention having failed, to some extent, persists, as the spectator works mosaically through evaluating her authenticity prior to being able to deploy ironic judgment or compassionate association. In refusing the script, hers is a failed performance (“mel” is watching, we may recall, someone who “just really sucked at acting,” after all), which, paradoxically, makes her seem like more of an addict to TV performance itself, if not to drugs.
Linda’s intervention is indicative of what Anna McCarthy terms the “affective-civic relationship” in reality television, in which trauma and suffering are instructive public affects that simultaneously secure and expose the limits of neoliberal rationality. Linda’s resistance to be incorporated into a coherent narrative of addiction is instructive insofar as it demonstrates the power of that narrative as public feeling. For McCarthy, the onslaught of suffering – the telling and retelling of traumatic pasts, the exhibition of physical pain, the transformation of flesh into various extremes – represent the production of critical knowledges of self-organization that reality television exemplifies. But makeover television’s affective influence on the narrative lays bare how these texts perform “an extended meditation on the nature of making-over – encompassing governmentality’s imperative to make oneself over and the ‘making over’ through which traumatic memory returns, again and again, to constitute its subject afresh, in the rawness of the past moment, frozen in relation to others and to history.”

I locate a model of addictive spectatorship within this form of mediation, such that as audiences watch and rewatch reality TV, they find themselves constituted as addicts “again and again,” fixated on the economies of addiction and recovery but never within a linear history of true recovery. In watching the breakdowns and carefully staged interventions, the addicted spectator witnesses the spectacular payoff of reality documentary when the televised subject acts so unpredictably that, paradoxically, she seems scripted, reminiscent of the double narrative at play: the narrative of Linda’s breakdown, with its truth being stranger than fiction, and the narrative of the program, with its ideological instruction of self-transformation. The addicted spectator must maintain and manage both narratives simultaneously, and in so doing, I believe, the
viewer herself becomes an addict who must find out Linda’s fate, and the fate of the subject after her, and so on. Each episode of *Intervention*, after all, lasts forty-three minutes, and each is so formulaic (structured through the introduction of the subject, the pre-intervention, and finally the intervention), yet also so capricious (accentuated with affective irruptions that undergird moral abjection) that it is not until the final ninety seconds that the addicted viewer receives the kind of narrative resolution or spectatorial fix she has been craving all along. Did the subject successfully make it through rehab or not? Did the subject relapse? Has he or she been sober since the intervention? These questions are secondary to the dramatic highs of recovery television, for as soon as they are answered, another episode begins anew, with another addict on whom to fixate.

**Coming Down, Again and Again: Recovery Television’s Mise-en-Abyme**

I have demonstrated how a commitment to understanding addictive spectatorship and to a critical narcoanalysis of reality television requires a theoretical embrace of elasticity, of stretching the surface of television to reveal its drug-like potential. To invoke McLuhan again (almost compulsively), “the TV experience is an inner trip, and is as addictive as many known drugs.” Once could attribute this to the expansiveness of television, to how television itself stretches temporal and spatial boundaries through intertextual references and cross-promotional campaigns; through the temporal governance of flow; and through the accumulation of a televisual archive enabled by the exponential growth of cable channels, digital interfaces, and participatory platforms that facilitate new viewing practices such as binging and addictive consumption. Eugenie
Brinkema has recently labeled this particular modality to studying television its *intertextelasticity*:

This model insists that the skin on the surface is not a plane to be broken, that richer treasures underneath might be mined, pillaged, and plundered, but that gloss, speed, sensation, and distance are themselves worthy of theoretical insight and time…Taking the obvious seriously – not anterior to but as doing the work of theory – is one way to insist on the flexibility of a theory of surfaces, the only sort that can stretch in time along with televiual polysemy and flow as such.82

By way of attempting some closure to my theorization of addictive spectatorship – however impossible that may ultimately be – I offer a satirical web video of *Intervention* that debuted on the popular website Funny or Die in August of 2009, a few months before “Linda” aired.83 Directed by Amy Heckerling (*Fast Times at Ridgemont High, Clueless*), the segment opens with a direct invocation of *Intervention*’s title text, the familiar disclaimer that “this program contains subject matter and language that may be disturbing to some viewers.” Viewers then see the comedian Fred Armisen, then famous for being a cast member on *Saturday Night Live* (a series build upon intertextual parody) in a car and in his house, his face grotesquely exaggerated in the act of spectatorial fixation as he watches the screens that are always nearby.84 “Fred,” the segment explains, is addicted “to *Intervention*,” and as the segment progresses, viewers see Fred arguing, pleading, and empathizing with the real addicts from the series through his television set and laptop. To the consternation of his then-fiancé, actress Elisabeth Moss, Fred watches *Intervention* in bed, and voice of Allison “walking on sunshine” emerges from the laptop computer underneath the sheets. Moss then reveals what is most disturbing about Fred’s addiction to her: “He doesn’t just watch, he gets all involved with the people. It’s like they’re more ‘real’ to him than people he knows.”
What should we make of this “real” comedian and his “real” fiancé participating in a parody of *Intervention* – one that uses “real” footage from the series as well as its fonts, music, and aesthetic design? And what to make of Moss’s statement that Fred is incapable of “just” watching, that recovery television requires an investment in its subjects in order to authenticate their “real” nature? As parody, the Funny or Die clip accurately – perhaps too accurately – mimics the narrative logic of the recovery genre, condensing the action of a full-length episode into less than five minutes. And while the segment is constructed around the kind of inside jokes that require a knowledge of *Intervention* (Fred expressing disappointment that his favorite interventionist, Candy Finnegan, isn’t leading his intervention, for instance), the message of the clip is clear: lest viewers think that they operate at a safe and perhaps even a critical distance from recovery television, the programming is simply too obsessive; disengaging fully from the repeated narratives of addicts requires an intervention of one’s own.

The Funny or Die video, appropriately titled in repetitious fashion “*Intervention Intervention Interven*,” illuminates the necessity of theorizing addictive spectatorship, of taking seriously the proposition and possibility of television as drug. If makeover television is, as some scholars have pointed out, neoliberal America’s version of a fairy tale, in which the self becomes improved only with the help of a benevolent private sector, then the abstract space between fable and real is precisely the space in which the Funny or Die video intervenes. Indeed, this space resonates as the justification, as Sedgwick explains, for “[taking] seriously the self-help proposition that, understood logically, the circumference of addiction attribution is nowhere to be drawn.” (*EW* 133). But for me as a scholar of reality television and as someone who desperately wants to make sense of its
affective excess, such an annular video hit nightmarishly close to home, prompting a reassessment of my own viewing practices. Do I binge? Do I consume addictively? Do I justify watching television in its various temporal and technological forms as the labor necessary to unpack the medium? Does the collapse between addict and spectator affect my own epistemological desires, my own obsession with reading a text again and again?

Curiously, as the development of this chapter progressed (at times quite slowly), I began to notice how much television I consumed, often in order to procrastinate from writing. I was always able to defend such voracious consumption as research, but now I am not so sure such an apologia sticks. Academics, at some fundamental level, resemble the addicted subjects of recovery television: their personal libraries of unread books and their stacks of paper accumulate to *Hoarders*-like levels; they become intoxicated with the frustrations and satisfactions that come from solving some sort of conceptual problem. “We imagine that the drug addict-writer,” Derrida notes, “seeks to discover a sort of gracious and graceful inspiration, a passivity that welcomes what repression or suppression would otherwise inhibit,” and thus the specular rhetoric of drugs could be supplementarily extended to the compulsions of theory and research. In this way, too, Linda’s story is not just Fred’s, or Allison’s, or Candi Kalp’s, but also our own as scholars and cultural critics; our viewing is a way to skim the televisual surface and to enter the narratives of recovery, again and again.

It is not that recovery television traps us within a ceaseless circumscription of suffering and self-improvement, of empathetic identification and of ironic disidentification. Nor is it that the addicted spectator stands as a failed citizen, with her lack of control a reminder of the evils of mass culture. Rather, the figures of recovery
television invite us to own our addictions and to come to terms with them through the narratives on-screen, such that we may better understand our own relationships to television itself. As an indicial paradigm of neoliberal culture, addiction may signal the crisis of free will caused by the overexposure of economic and consumer freedom – the free market taken to a habitual extreme. But this nonpareil structuration of our relationship to freedom, the way it conditions us to absorb, devour, and exhaust cultural texts, is contrasted against an amplified pleasure that comes from fully interrogating the elastic potential of those very texts, instructively intimating to addict, viewer, and scholar alike how freedom, like other conceptual and representational substances, should be taken in moderation and enjoyed responsibly in order for us to perform the role of the good (TV) citizen to prodigious acclaim. The moments when that intimation fails, however, serve to punctuate addiction’s excess, which remains unable to be underestimated, no matter how often one attempts to disavow its ideological and affective power, again and again.
"What the televisual names then is the end of the medium, in a context, and the arrival of television as the context."

Tony Fry

Recently, a number of American television series have been cited as examples of a new “golden age” in television. As a general rule, these series tend to be shown (though not exclusively) on cable networks or premium cable networks and are often heralded (though not always) for their attention to visual detail and narrative structure, attributes that result from an increased production budget. The metaphoric deployment of the metallurgic terms of classical antiquity is primarily used as an index of cultural value, but this deployment is not limited to the current moment; since the first commercial television broadcast in the United States in 1941, television has had a number of “golden ages”: at least two and probably three. That more than one golden age exists is indicative of the fluctuation of the perception of cultural value among different art forms. Television may have “become art,” in the words of critic Emily Nussbaum, but how television expresses its “artness” – what is specific to television that renders it legible as “art” in the eyes of critics, historians, and, perhaps, the general public – is a product of the social climate surrounding the emergence of the discourse of cultural value.

The possibility of locating multiple times in the history of American television that have at various times been labeled a golden age by critics and scholars alike squarely critiques the position of television as a “bad” object in the American popular imaginary. To qualify as a golden age, a period of history relating to a national, artistic, or
technological culture must be at its peak, a textbook definition of excellence. In the case of television, this peak is always the mountainous territory of “drama,” often tied to journalistic excellence: the first golden age of television, for example, is associated with the hour-long anthology series that dominated network programming upon the medium’s inception (spanning roughly from the late 1940s and into the mid or late 1950s), series that often directly adapted works of opera, ballet, classical music, and Western theatre for live broadcast (dramatic in artistic weight if not explicitly in genre). The second golden age of television – though one that is not universally agreed upon by critics or scholars – encompassed the “serious, literary, writer-based drama[s],” in Robert Thompson’s account, of 1980s primetime programming. While these series were not the most popular on primetime, critics praised their incorporation of elements of serial narrative while taking pains to distinguish these series from the primetime soap operas that dominated the Nielsen ratings of the time.

This chapter examines the discourses surrounding cultural value of the current historical period, the third “golden age” referred to, primarily, by television critics. The series so distinguished are, with few exceptions, shown on cable networks or premium cable networks and are, like the previous two eras, comprised of dramatic programming. To be talked about in such auriferous terms, according to critics, a series must showcase its construction of narrative and the talents of its writing staff, with one figure, the showrunner, managing the narrative. Showrunners shore up the anxiety of critics who wish to ascribe an authorial voice to a series, complicating the ways in which television has traditionally been perceived as an ensemble medium. Seriality is emphasized within the narrative structure of the new “golden age” drama, but with a bounded premiere
(introduction) and finale (conclusion). Yet these programs are characterized not only by their narrative specificity but also by the specificity (even if disavowed) of their lead figures: this reemergence of “quality” has also been centered on white male protagonists who grapple with moral or ethical decisions. Dubbed “anti-heroes” by some, these men stand in for the tragic pathos of the neoliberal moment; they are figures who perform national angst in the 1990s and 2000s. In many respects, the anti-heroes of the current golden age stand in for the series themselves, eclipsing other cast members as an approximation for the ur-white male of a so-called post-racial and post-gender America.

Thus the series that constitute this golden age – most notably *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001-2005), *The Wire* (2002-2007), *Deadwood* (HBO, 2004-2006), *Mad Men* (AMC, 2006-present), and *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013) -- are defined by their conflicted protagonists – Tony Soprano, Nate Fisher, Jimmy McNulty, Seth Bullock and Al Swearingen, Don Draper, and Walter White, respectively. As journalist Brett Martin writes in his hagiographic study of the third golden age, *Difficult Men*, “not only were the most important shows of the era run by men, they were also largely *about* manhood – in particular the contours of male power and the infinite varieties of male combat.”

The “contours of male power” (and, although unmentioned by Martin, white supremacy as well) dramatized in these series correspond to claims made about their mediality. Critically, intermediality has emerged as the metric by which some series are perceived as “quality” both by journalists – plainly seen, for example, in the *New York Times Sunday Book Review* article “Are the New ‘Golden Age’ TV Shows the New Novels?” – and by scholars of literature – as in Jennifer Fleissner’s contention that
literary scholars should turn to studying quality TV texts under the rubric of the “novelistic” in order to study objectively, the “face-off between a ‘charismatic’ structure of authority (the mob, the gang) and a modern one (the legalistic bureaucracy, the school).” Such a contention seemingly stands in contrast to television studies scholar John Caldwell’s notion of televisuality, or the aesthetic sensibility of television that in turn produces a visually stimulated viewer who participates in an aesthetic economy associated with postmodern subjectivity and who is obsessed with programs that require immense post-production processing. Rather than emphasizing the refined image (a given in the current golden age, in which all of these cable series are presented in HD), the language of the novelistic favors crafted narrative.

The televisual and the novelistic, we might say, produce spectatorial stimulation that might appear to resemble the oppositional categories of form and content. Indeed, as Susan Sontag warns us, “it is hard to think oneself out of a distinction so habitual and apparently self-evident.” Yet neither visual/narrative nor form/content divisions can explain the terms by which “quality” TV becomes discursively divided from “regular” TV. Rather, “quality” seems to mark a kind of intersection and interaction, even as this becomes reframed as a singular “distinction.” Thus the challenge of this chapter is to rethink contemporary quality television in terms of its intermediality, examining the appeal of the intermedial as a marker of cultural value. This chapter takes up the thrust of critical assumptions about television of the golden age through some of its most cited examples and through some of its pivotal theorists of literature and film: series such as The Sopranos, The Wire, and Breaking Bad, all of which are routinely listed, somewhat ahistorically, as contenders for the pop culture title of “best TV series” of recent times.
Following the legitimation of certain forms of television – forms that achieve such legitimation through their very disavowal of the medium – I analyze what I term the *appropriative intermediality* of quality television – a form of intermediality by which one media form appropriates others through the work of cultural legitimation – through readings of intermediality and cultural criticism on HBO’s *The Wire*, one of the most critically acclaimed television series of the contemporary era. Series such as *The Wire* epitomize a sort of literary neoliberalism (or a neoliberal literariness?), according to theorists such as Frederic Jameson, Slavoj Žižek, and Linda Williams. But rather than fetishize this program (and its siblings) for its realism or the ways in which it challenges conventional aesthetics and politics on television, I am interested in how brief moments within the series contradict the feelings of comfort that generally come from audiences (figured within these discourses as white) who rhapsodically view *The Wire* as larger than television, as total social narrative. Despite being a series that regularly portrays poverty, homicide, and drug use as endemic to urban life, *The Wire* relies on racialized empathetic identifications to its characters in order to establish itself as a quality text that defies televiability; yet moments of abjection persist, a reminder of the ways in which race marks the reception of the series. If, as this chapter’s anterior epigraph by Tony Fry signals, the televisual shifts attention from a defined medium to an aesthetic context, I critique the discourse of *The Wire* for making audiences too comfortable with institutional corruption, shrouded by the veneer of golden, novelistic antiheroism.

We should not watch *The Wire* through a symbolically characterological gaze, ripe for the extraction of meaning in the name of optimizing cultural value and prestige, as the champions who insist that television is just now emerging as “art “would have it. Rather,
viewing quality television on the surface – a critical interrogation of its intermediality – reveals why a dislikable protagonist is a necessary component for narrative risk-taking and why both have been branded as “art.” That is to say, as the previous chapter demonstrated, if reality television is saturated with the rhetoric of risk management and governmentality, series heralded and marketed as “quality” valorize the individual estranged from his or her family as both protagonist and ideal spectator. Appropriative intermediality, quality, estrangement from the American nuclear family: this is the topography of the third golden age. It is one in which disassociated individuals both willingly flee and are forced from the once-stable defenses of the family; such a description applies both to individuals on the screen and those outside it, suggesting that neoliberal constructions have shifted the very ground of television’s operations.

**Situating TV as Literature**

To hear critics tell the story of television’s third golden age is also to hear a sigh of relief that the medium has become something other than itself. Brett Martin, for example, begins his own history in *Difficult Men* by stating the obvious: television has had a low cultural position throughout most of its history, even as it quickly became a mass medium and the most popular form of media entertainment in the second half of the 20th century. Citing instances ranging from then FCC chairman Newton Minow’s infamous “vast wasteland” speech in 1961 to HBO’s longest running network slogan, introduced in 1996 (the same year the premium cable network premiered its first original dramatic series, *Oz*), “It’s Not TV. It’s HBO,” Martin parrots the usual talking points of “this maligned medium.” Television was stunted technologically in its early days, with
“clunky, immovable cameras and limited recording capability.” Echoing the historical critiques of the medium covered in the previous chapter, television was deemed a threat to the American family and especially to children (at the same time it was also heralded as a technological apparatus that would keep all family members home and together). Furthermore, according to Martin, other cultural agents – authors of literature such as Ray Bradbury and E.B. White and filmmakers such as Orson Welles – constructed television as necessarily trashy, apocalyptic, and technically alien.

Indeed, Martin’s framing of television unintentionally reveals the work of the critic in assessing cultural value; while professional critics (including Martin himself) can make careers out of appraising cultural products, such labor circulates omnipresently in and out of the culture industries. His consideration of the comments from Bradbury, White, and Welles as evidence of television’s low cultural status testifies to the impossibility, as well as the inevitability, of the task of criticism itself. It is, I would additionally argue, highly suggestive of what Barbara Herrnstein Smith outlines as a denial of the objectivity of value. Writing about literature, Smith states:

…the value of a literary work is continuously produced and re-produced by the very acts of implicit and explicit evaluation that are frequently invoked as ‘reflecting’ its value and therefore as being evidence of it. In other words, what are commonly taken to be signs of literary value are, in effect, its springs.”

Smith points to the way in which criticism that attempts to establish value constructs arbitrary criteria that affirms the position of the critic. She notes how the “test of time” – the persistence of certain texts throughout history that becomes a mechanism for canonization – serves the social, economic, and political interests of the institutions of criticism, creating an echo chamber of sorts.
Smith’s claims shed light on a beloved staple of media criticism: the “best-of” list, perhaps the best example of her notion of the “contingencies of value” described in her eponymous work. The mere presence of a text on such a list guarantees its potential for future citation, a projection of its endurance. The best-of list is authored by a single critic or controlled group of critics, differentiating it from awards given by democratic guilds or industrial organizations (such as in television’s Emmy Awards). While the list form predominates, especially at the end of a calendar year or decade, some print and media outlets have used unconventional means of ranking texts according to their criteria. In March of 2012, for example, concurrent with the NCAA college basketball tournament, Vulture.com, the online pop culture presence of New York Magazine, ran a bracket competition of its own, asking the question “What’s the Best TV Drama of the Last 25 Years?” While a quarter-century may seem an appropriate length of time to periodize contemporary pop culture (and, it should be noted, such a periodization might also extend to my own characterization of millennial TV), such a time length was not arbitrary. Vulture enumerated that the premiere of the critically acclaimed drama Twin Peaks (ABC, 1990-1991) as the beginning of television’s “new golden age.” Yet this moment of historical abstraction already carried signs of what, exactly, would qualify a series of the past quarter-century as a contender for the “best”: it would need not to be legible as television-as-such. In introducing the bracket, Brian Raferty situated Twin Peaks as “a TV show that didn’t seem to know it was a TV show, and its mere existence conveyed a strangely empowering message to TV viewers everywhere, people who’d long been content with neuron-dimming procedurals and plod-heavy soaps: You’re smarter than this. The “best” TV is “smart” TV, if it is “TV” at all.
Vying for this title of this “Drama Derby” were sixteen series, all of which involved “neatly tangled story lines, grimly hilarious dialogue, and characters who inspire loyalty, love, and the occasional fan-fic dispatch” (though Raferty here contradicts himself, as this criteria obviously also extends to the two genres of “not smart” TV he cites earlier: the procedural and the soap opera). Notably, the series selected by Vulture were predominantly male – only two featured female protagonists (My So-Called Life and Buffy the Vampire Slayer) – and while the sixteen were split between broadcast and cable/premium cable networks, the “final four” all came from cable, with the championship round between two series from HBO, The Sopranos and The Wire.

In arbitrating this final match between these two programs, New York television critic Matt Zoller Seitz offered six criteria for the “best”: influence and transformation; philosophical sophistication; characterization; formal daring; influence on the medium; and consistency. What is apparent from Seitz’s explanation of the criteria is that what, in this view, makes a television series the “best” is not relative to attributes unique to television – that is, whether or not such a series embodies an essentialized notion of “television” – but instead relative to attributes recognized as “best” in other forms of art – that is, in its ability to be misrecognized as something other than television. Such an approach sleights television over generalized artistic greatness in the Drama Derby: The Wire, Seitz concludes, is “one of the most intelligent, moving, and politically astute dramas ever aired on American TV, and a rare series that truly deserves the adjective novelistic,” while The Sopranos “is novelistic, but it’s also short-story-like, and poetic, and at times has qualities of stage drama, opera, and even Renaissance painting and great twentieth-century pop music.”
This kind of intermedial comparison has graced the newsprint pages of television criticism since at least 1995, when Charles McGrath published a lengthy article in the *New York Times Magazine* declaring the “triumph of the prime time novel.” Like clockwork – or perhaps more appropriately, in a rather serial fashion – the past two decades have been punctuated with headlines that spur such comparisons, such that to claim that quality television programs are the “new novels” is not, in fact, that new of a claim. Digital media studies, itself a significant influence on millennial television via convergence, has emphasized the role of the “new” as one indexing repetition, such that so-called “new media” can only emerge against its opposite, “old media” (indeed, this has been the whole crux of media archaeology as methodology). In this vein of criticism, television is rendered as old, trapped within its pedantic laugh tracks and annoying commercials, while TV-as-literature, with its complexity and ability to be consumed in large blocks of time, has revitalized an even older form of narrative: the novel, or even, as Sean O’Sullivan has claimed, “oral performances” such as poetry, “narratives governed by metrical organization, iteration, and variation.”

Elsewhere, Michael Newman and Elana Levine have advanced cinematization (as opposed to invoking the comparison to literature) as the most prominent strategy for a larger project of legitimating certain kinds of television, arguing that a number of factors activate a move to the cinematic. Among these are the emergence of high definition television that shifted the aspect ratio for broadcast programming, the collectability of programs via the DVD box set and its attending ‘bonus’ disc of special features, and practices of spectatorship that shift the screened temporality of a series, as in binging. Such factors, they contend, mean “certain kinds of television and certain modes of
experiencing television content are aligned with movies and the experience of movies.”

Newman and Levine’s astute analysis offers many correctives to the teleological narrative that television has somehow “gotten better” throughout its history, but they omit any recognition of the fact that claims of legitimation require attention to affect. Their use of the word ‘experience’ in the above passage, for example, suggests that there can be an identifiable set of affects that certain television texts and certain films share. While they do not view such parallel experiences as affective, I wish to emphasize the role that experience plays in cinematization, extending it to all processes of intermedial criticism.

This is to ask: what does it mean for a program to feel like cinema, or to feel like literature? And more importantly, stitching together this affective form with its corresponding content: why are feelings of intermediality tethered to such unlikeable protagonists, the antiheroes with mired ethics and unsavory behaviors?

**Appropriative Intermediality as Legitimation: *The Wire***

In the spring of 2013, my own institution offered a course on the winner of the Drama Derby, HBO’s *The Wire* (which edged out *The Sopranos*, Seitz decided, because he had “to strain less when arguing the greatness of *The Wire*”). This fact in and of itself is not really that noteworthy; as Newman and Levine explain, one sign of the legitimation of television can be found “in the spread of attention to television beyond radio-TV-film and communication studies curricula,” and they single out courses on *The Wire* in other disciplines to note that “it is significant that these kinds of television courses are oriented around specific or individual series (as series, more than genres of media, are most often legitimated) and that the series so chosen are among the most lauded of contemporary
Brown’s lecture course, called “Storytelling in The Wire,” was not offered in my own media studies department, but instead in an orthogonal one, Comparative Literature. The course syllabus opened with a quote from Mark Twain’s The Gilded Age before proceeding to encapsulate the course’s goals, covering questions of disciplinarity and urbanism:

*The Wire* has received attention from fields like sociology and urban studies, which tend to read the work as a fictionalization of their observations about cities. It has not received as much attention from departments of literature, although it should. In our course traditional categories of literary study will be wedded to the investigation of contemporary problems that emerge from the work.

The syllabus covers a wide range of texts, genres, and mediums: Greek tragedy (Sophocles’ Antigone), Marxist economic history (David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity*), urban social policy (William Julius Wilson’s *When Work Disappears* and Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*), and cinematic Westerns (Sam Peckinpah’s film *The Wild Bunch*). Frederic Jameson’s gloss on the series is included (“Realism and Utopia in *The Wire,*” an article that I address later on in this chapter), but a single reading that focuses on the text as a television series or on the question of representing “contemporary problems” on television does not appear in the course. Indeed, such an absence emphasizes how the study of technological media and its possibilities for formal analysis fall outside “traditional categories of literary study.”

The syllabus encapsulates what this chapter terms as “appropriative intermediality,” or when one media form or discipline appropriates an art object belonging to a different media form through an active disavowal of that art object’s medial specificity. It is more often than not used as a tactic for cultural legitimation, in which “high art” forms such as literature and visual art can cannibalize select texts or
genres of mass culture in order to claim them as their own. In George Lipsitz’s account of cultural appropriation in popular music, these tactics are always already grounded in the racialization of the audience, as in the case of white audiences actively consuming genres of popular music stemming from black musicking traditions, such as in jazz or the blues. Such an act of consumption, Lipsitz contends, is dependent “on the ways it erases its cultural origins and suppresses its original social intentions.” Similar work of erasure and suppression are present in appropriative intermediality, in which a legacy of low-cultural status prevents certain mass media forms from being recognized as art, at least until they are recognized as such through a renunciation of their media specificity.

Although Lipsitz foregrounds this racialized appropriation through a desire to forget the material conditions of production – the labor of the black bodies that wrote, sung, and performed the blues, for example – he extends his claim to thinking about categories of popular culture more broadly:

…audiences and critics want to ‘own’ the pleasures and powers of popular music without embracing the commercial and industrial matrices in which they are embedded; they want to imagine that art that they have discovered through commercial culture is somehow better that commercial culture itself, that their investment in the music grants them an immunity from the embarrassing manipulation, pandering, and trivialization of culture intrinsic to a market society. In an evocatively intermedial move, one could nearly substitute “television” for “music” in the aforementioned quote without a significant change to Lipsitz’s characterization of the mental gymnastics required for an audience to disavow its participation within the eminent cultural industries of modern capitalism. Appropriation, then, is as much a spectatorial practice as it is intrinsic to the production of popular culture (or syllabi, for that matter); because it is a deliberate strategy for determining cultural value, however
unacknowledged or non-conscious such a strategy may be, it puts into place a set of actions on industrial processes and institutions (within the sphere of production, namely writing; within the sphere of reception, namely criticism) that single out individual texts as worthy of praise while eliding their genealogical lineage.

In this particular case, *The Wire* is not thought of as television, nor is the discipline of television studies thought to contain the methodological tools that are helpful in order to unpack the series critically. Such a cultural position stems, partially, from the description of the series and its creative process by David Simon, the series’ showrunner. Like other showrunners of HBO series marked as “quality,” Simon assumes a necessary distance from his craft: “If there’s anything that distinguishes *The Wire* from a lot of the serialized drama you see,” he said in one interview with VICE magazine, “it was that the writers were not from television” – a curious statement, given his own previous writing for the police drama *Homicide: Life on the Street* (NBC, 1993-1999). Similarly, he contends that the ideal writing atmosphere for TV is one full of “journalists and, to an extent, the novelists who wrote for the show who write in a realistic framework, like researched fiction.” This distance is not unique to Simon, but endemic among many of the showrunners who have become brand names in the third golden age; David Chase, the creative force behind *The Sopranos*, has often been characterized as disdainful of the medium, thinking of himself more as a film auteur (a career of artistic integrity) instead of a television showrunner (a career for sellouts and hacks). Film (in Chase’s case) and journalism (in Simon’s) offer opportunities for risk-taking and creative license, rather than the constraints imposed by institutional Hollywood.
Such an attitude has been rightly critiqued by Newman and Levine for how it renders the televisual text as authored by a single individual, the showrunner, rather than as a collaboratively authored text between showrunners, writers, producers, and occasionally actors.\textsuperscript{24} The emphasis on writing is a hallmark of “quality TV,” as it showcases an array of narrative storytelling techniques described by Jason Mittell as an “operational aesthetic” that both presents a “realistic narrative world” as well as the process behind such delicate narrative construction. In the third golden age, writing is the equivalent of cinematic special effects: techniques that attract audiences who wish to “marve[l] at the craft required to pull off such narrative pyrotechnics.”\textsuperscript{25} And while the labor required to execute these didactic fireworks, however effaced by Chase’s paratextual comments (comments, it should be noted, that were only circulated in the news media precisely because of the authorial status afforded to his position as showrunner in the first place), has been ultimately recognized in industry awards ceremonies and by some television critics, the showrunner’s status as author is never challenged by institutional criticism.

But what is the relationship between a showrunner and an author? According to Michel Foucault, the author has been replaced by the “author-function,” a form of classification that transcends physical subjectivity (an individual as author) to characterize “the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society.”\textsuperscript{26} Television may be collectively authored, with individual episodes written by individuals or pairs of individuals and then rewritten by a group or by the showrunner. This process varies by series, with showrunners instituting different criteria as to what constitutes “credit” for an episode; Chase, for example, gave himself more
credit for authoring episodes of *The Sopranos* as the series progressed after feeling frustrated with a perceived lack of industry acknowledgment. Matthew Weiner, the creator and showrunner of *Mad Men* (AMC, 2006-present), instituted a policy “that if more than 20 percent of a writer’s script remained, he or she would retail sole credit. If not, Weiner added his name.”27 Within the television industry, credit counts because of residuals and eligibility for trade awards; both Primetime Emmy Award and the Writers Guild of America, for example, give 100% writing credit to a sole author of an episode, give 50% writing credit to each author when the writing credits list two people, and split the writing credit 60% for the teleplay and 40% for the story writer, with Emmy Awards rules specifying that only individuals “either by themselves or in conjunction with other story or teleplay writers” with “at least 50% credit-share of the entered program” are eligible for nomination in writing categories. In this context, the creator and showrunner of a program becomes identified as the author through awards programs, regardless of industry credit. The showrunner therefore becomes solidified in the popular imagination as what Foucault calls the result of “a complex operation which constructs a certain rational being which we call author,” with the turn towards auteurism in quality television making that “rational being” legible within its industrial reception.28

The consolidation of the author-function around the showrunner also results in the calcification of another function, that of the novel-function. Emily Steinlight, writing on advertising discourse of Dickens’s *Bleak House*, uses such a term to signal how the novel is presented as an imagined whole in periodicals even as it was being published over twenty months starting in March 1852. Observing that the serial Victorian novel was always already a commodity situated within the contours of print capitalism but also
situated within a matrix of literary narrative, she writes: “If there is something like a text-function, or more particularly, a novel-function, it operates as a claim for the unity, singularity and autonomy of the writing. Under the sign of its title, the writing assumes the shape of an imagined totality called a novel long before it is complete.”

What is fascinating about millennial American quality TV is not only how it has redefined (always a redefinition, its origin in definition of repetition) the parameters of broadcast storytelling but how its novel-function produces such an effect. *The Wire* is, as so many critics persistently remind us, the title of the program but also is an exemplary metaphor for the importance of surveillance culture to late capitalism, as Dan Kois, writing in Salon in 2004 prior to the premiere of the third season notes. “As wiretaps provide the cops in *The Wire* a look into a secret world,” Kois writes, “so does *The Wire* offer us that same look into places most television viewers never see.” (The first three words of Kois’ review are, perhaps unsurprisingly at this point, a quote attributed to David Simon: “It’s a novel.”) The invocation of surveillance shifts the problem of representation and visibility to the audience from the industry; it is not that *The Wire* offers audiences a look into places prohibitively hidden from viewers by Hollywood creatives, after all. Surveillance is thus tied to cultural value, as the privilege of looking “into places most television viewers never see” is figured by Kois as meritorious, although such privilege requires access to a premium cable network: this is not a populist form of surveillance, but one that already exists within audience hierarchies of class. Kois’s review both works to figure the series as social metaphor but also as artistic totality. In this respect, the novel-function in the case of the third Golden Age is two-fold: it announces the series through its critical legacies – its representation of race relations in
a post-industrial urban metropolis, its documentation of the failure of social institutions, including that from which it borrows its signature style, journalism and the press – at the same time that it brands itself as the successor to the Victorian novel. Yet the novel-function and the author-function are never discrete from one another; they both precede the scene of production and indeed serve as metonyms for each other: *The Wire* is shorthand for David Simon, and vice versa.

A profile on the series (and on Simon, but after reading so much journalistic criticism on *The Wire*, one cannot tell the difference anymore) in the *New York Review of Books* brings together all of these questions of the labor of writing and the novel-function, although it concludes by unwittingly reasserting *The Wire*’s televisuality. Lorrie Moore writes:

> Certainly the series’s creators know what novelists know: that it takes time to transform a social type into a human being, demography into dramaturgy, whether time comes in the form of pages or hours. With time as a medium rather than a constraint one can show a profound and unexpected aspect of a character, and discover what that character might decide to do because of it.³¹

Moore positions *The Wire* as a medium of time, and not necessarily of television, or of literature (although the passage hints at a mixture of both). Her use of time as medium might be read as a larger point about genre, since the increased serialization that promotes such rich character development is primarily found in contemporary drama, though it also is, and has been for decades, present in the daytime soap opera, a genre that received virtually no attention in television criticism, save for stories about its impending death.³² But I would read Moore’s attention to time as a reinforcement of the televisual. Mary Ann Doane’s canonical formulations about the medium – “The major category of television is time,” she wrote about its relationship to liveness and repetition – already
gestures to this point. To be sure, a category (even a major one) is not the same as a distinct medium, but Moore’s oppositional framing of medium and constraint endorses intermedial storytelling: *The Wire* may be television (or at least not be “TV”), and it may also be novelistic (or at least hail from a shared logographic genealogy), but its temporality encompasses all of these forms while also defining the series and giving it its greatness.

**An Intermediality that Flexes its Theoretical Muscles**

I realize that from the perspective of a territorialistic media studies, a course such as “Storytelling in *The Wire*” might be looked upon antagonistically, a cannibalization of a medium so easily appropriated into the preeminent cultural medium of university campuses. Such an adversative claim, however, is not my goal here. While the absence of any media studies texts in the syllabus frames the body of knowledge delineated by *The Wire* as symptomatic of the text’s content (race relations in neoliberal urban cities; the incorporation of surveillance technology into everyday life; the corruption within social institutions) rather than its form (serialized premium cable television), I do not suspect that the invocation of intermediality as hermeneutic practice reflexively necessitates this slant. Instead, my focus is on the engagement of intermediality as an epistemological practice and how the deployment of such a practice resonates with the perception of *The Wire* as the archetypal neoliberal novel. That is to say, if *The Wire* must be perceived as literature in order to extract better its commentary on the effects of neoliberalism on social institutions (primarily but not exclusively relating to questions of urbanism and
race), then these epistemic efforts foreground how intermediality itself is trenchantly a strategy of neoliberal ideology.

To begin, the concept of intermediality itself depends on a certain epistemological flexibility. Intermediality can be thought of as part of a lexicon of media nomenclature that describes the interaction between different media forms. This lexicon has diversified with the advent of digital technologies, as in Henry Jenkins’ coinage of “transmedia storytelling,” or the various terms used to describe the distribution of commercial media across multiple platforms and technologies. Intermediality, as Irina Rajewsky has claimed, might be better thought of as an umbrella term, one that encompasses multimediality, plurimediality, crossmediality, remediation, media convergence, and hybridization (in addition to transmediality). While Rajewsky offers a revised definition with which to group and categorize intermediality’s various forms, she is not alone. W.J.T. Mitchell has most notably argued that “there are no visual media,” with a corollary argument that “all media are mixed media,” though he does not dismantle medium specificity in such claims but rather permits for a “more precise differentiation of mixtures” with respect to the medium’s affective and formal language. This is, perhaps, a more nuanced, though no less polemical, version of Jacques Derrida’s proclamation that every medium being “on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself.” The racialized overtones of such figurations of intermediality – in which a medium is disseminated as it is “mixed” with other “related” media forms – are evident here, as is the alignment of metaphors of mixture with discourses of universality and “post-” media (or post-race) that resonate with neoliberal ideology. Intermediality is thus figured as stemmatically expansive yet incestuously combinative.
Intermediality also produces what Katie King has called “flexible knowledges” (a term owing a great debt to the work of Donna Haraway and women of color feminists on “situated knowledges”) about the role of media today. As emerging in the 1990s with an emphasis on technological innovation and management discourses, flexibility was heralded as an improvement for the labor force, with management attending to the specific needs of individual workers, thus making labor itself mobile, fluid, and tailored to the needs of both company and worker – though in practice, flexible labor processes have also resulted in substantial increases in contingent and temporary labor positions. King uses the term as a preferred synonym for interdisciplinarity, and she cites an intellectual project shared with, among others, Haraway and Bruno Latour in which committed scholars “‘break the Enlightenment Contract’ that requires us to keep separate our purifications and our hybridities as the condition for practicing both.”

Rebecca Schneider also uses the term in her own argument for intermediality, one that “engages in a certain slipperiness and imprecision.” For her, the object of study and the discipline from which scholars evaluate such an object require a diffuse research topography, and such a landscape refuses even the limitations of medium specificity: “That there even should be a discrete ‘field’ of study of anything, or a medium that can be contained, is to presume a privilege of field over forest, plotting over foraging, agrarianism over nomadism, history over genealogy.” Schneider’s emphasis on a “certain slipperiness and imprecision,” encapsulated by failed performatives, hollow possibilities, and targeted misfires suggests a particular indeterminateness, one that can be productively harnessed to legitimize lived experience as material, as in the case of feminist or queer studies. It can also be read to practice a healthy skepticism with regards
to medium specificity in general, as in her claim that “to accept uncritically a hard line between binarized divisions in our thinking, and to maintain confident distinctions between medial forms, hampers our abilities to expand the conditions of possibility for flexible ways of knowing.” Schneider does so out of a disciplinary call for performance studies to attend to its theatre history, and she expands such a rich body of work to other media forms such as photography, television, and cinema. I will return to the question of theatricality later on in this chapter, focusing instead on the desire for flexible knowledges, here framed as an imperfect – and necessarily so – approach to opening up new directions in a field or paradigm of study. Tethered together, intermediality and interdisciplinarity do indeed expand the boundaries by which the production of knowledge occurs, even in a so-called “knowledge economy” in which the site of academic knowledge production occurs in an increasingly corporatized environment.

From the disciplinary perspective of literature and film studies, The Wire has attracted attention largely as a critique of neoliberalism. Just as (following its conclusion in 2008) the series has become a celebrity text within cultural criticism, so too has the series attracted attention from titanic figures within critical theory and in the study of two of the intermedial forms to which The Wire gestures: literature and film. Specifically, a trio of scholars – Marxist cultural theorist Frederic Jameson, psychoanalytic theorist Slavoj Žižek, and feminist film theorist Linda Williams – have all migrated to television (as opposed to television studies), or at least to The Wire as a text, seeking to claim the series as exemplifying artistic mastery while synchronically offering a commentary on social questions even on and the very question of the social (“the Real of our times,” Žižek declares). While they do not reach similar conclusions about the series, most
obviously with respect to its genre, some assumptions govern their inquiries, and these assumptions are not dissimilar to those accepted by journalists who practice a more popular cultural criticism. To be clear: I am not necessarily challenging any of these assumptions but rather document them to demonstrate the way in which the cultural value of both form and content determine each other and shape the affective reception of the series.

First, they all believe that *The Wire* is innovative storytelling. For Jameson, the series “dramatically unsettles out typological expectations and habits by at once drawing us into an epistemological exploration that greatly transcends the usual whodunit,” and through such revision and reinvention becomes “original and innovative.” 42 Žižek contends that the writing room “represented the nascent form of a new collective process of creation,” with Simon serving as head “curator.” 43 The first part of Williams’ monograph (in which she explores the media forms that are within *The Wire* – in her reading, namely city desk journalism and television melodrama) is titled “World Enough and Time: The Genesis and Genius of *The Wire*,” and she unabashedly owns her position as an adoring fan throughout her analysis (*OW* 11).

This, in and of itself, is not surprising; in what might be a more analytical version of the Drama Derby, the contributions of these three authors unquestionably assume the greatness of the series for a bevy of reasons, including its transformative impact on narrative form. 44 What is distinctive about the embrace of the series is its figuration of form as a remainder, an excess that makes *The Wire* so genius. Žižek proclaims a few sentences into his essay on the series that “It is as if the Hegelian *Weltgeist* had recently moved from the cinema to the TV series, although it is still in search of its form. The
inner Gestalt of *The Wire* is in fact *not* that of a series – Simon himself has referred to *The Wire* as a single sixty-six hour movie. Furthermore, The Wire is not only the result of a collective creative process, but something more…” (*WD* 91). And Jameson pinpoints such excess as Utopia “without fantasy of wish fulfillment,” which then “adds something to *The Wire* that cannot be found in most other mass-cultural narratives” (television is, of course, the predominant medium in which ‘other mass-cultural narratives’ can be found). (*RU* 371). Plot construction is figured here (primarily in Jameson and Žižek’s readings) as “something” in excess of its actual form (serialized television), constituting an ironic disavowal. The arguments read something like this: *The Wire* is technically a television series, and yet is great in spite of this; it is great because of its innovative formal qualities, which may or may not already be present in serialized television, just not in the police procedural, a genre that the series intermittently occupies. As David Simon has said in an interview: “It could have – if we’d done everything wrong – been a cop show.”

I do not wish to accuse esteemed theorists such as Jameson or Žižek as being anti-television, the academic equivalent of the parental activists of TV-Free America that I described in the previous chapter. But they – along with Williams, despite her heightened attention to television’s seriality – ascribe to the series yet another uninterrogated claim: that *The Wire* may, in fact, start out as a police procedural but becomes narratively excessive because of the crime story’s offender, presented not as an individual criminal but as an institutional whole. Compounding the “usual whodunit formula,” Jameson identifies the ultimate culprit of the series as “a whole milieu, the world of a whole society or subsociety cordoned off from the peace-loving bourgeois civilian public (of
whatever color.” (RU 363). For Žižek, this is precisely (and predictably) totality, which is “always the ultimate culprit” within the abstractions of late capitalism. Thus the series is marked as realist (because it represents the complexity of social institutions in the service of capital) and yet is also excessive of that very realism at the same time. Crucially, this remainder falls in between delineated notions of form and content, such that the serial form both determines and is determined by the totality of institutional failure to challenge racialized capitalism.

“Something” More Than a Series: The Wire’s Televisual Form

If The Wire is a police procedural yet also something more than a police procedural, it becomes important to identify the formal characteristics of this nebulous “something” – a something that, in the words of Jameson, Žižek, and Williams, is also more than television. Three specific features come to mind that contribute to this “something.” First, each season of The Wire focuses on a social institution or industry: season 1 depicts the Barksdale drug trade, season 2 the trade unions at the Port of Baltimore, season 3 the city’s political machinery and its relationship with the police department, season 4 the educational system, and season 5 the press, exemplified by Simon’s former employer, the Baltimore Sun. This is not to say there is as a self-contained narrative within each season, but rather to assert that each season sheds light on a microcosm and component of a larger network of social institutions within Baltimore. The majority of the season’s plotlines occur within such microcosms, and each season’s narrative more or less engages with how that microcosm interacts with the other institutions central to the series (and thus to urban modernity). We might speculate that
this form is the progenitor of a broader resurgence in “anthology” dramas that tend to blur the generic lines between a drama “series” and a contained “miniseries.” The topical emphasis allows for seasons to be considered as a unit, rather than individual episodes, which has the added effect of adjusting the series’ perceived temporality, in addition to contributing to the marketing of the program and the overall brand strategy of the network. Critics often talk about the series in terms of its seasons, ranking or hierarchizing them (the fourth season in particular receives the most critical praise). For instance, Jameson and Žižek both use the second season as an example of the production of a non-phantasmatic Utopia (curiously, the second season is also regarded by critics and fans as the worst of all five seasons). The second season focuses on the relationship between organized labor and the drug trade, with Frank Sobotka (Chris Bauer), the Polish American leader of the port workers, assuming a pivotal role in the season’s narrative. Jameson’s mobilization of the second season teases out the series’ relationship to race, since the season is the “ whitest” visually (anchored around the white, ethnic, working-class longshoremen and stevedores), but he primarily uses it to illustrate the glimpses and pulses of Utopia that he sees as present within the disintegration of the labor movement. Sobotka’s corruption, Jameson argues, is not in fact about money and wealth, which one might expect from a corrupt labor union, but instead about the promise of the redevelopment of the Port of Baltimore, which would lead to a more secure future for the union. In a version of Lauren Berlant’s formulation of “cruel optimism” – in which she interrogates our attachments to objects and situations that ultimately harm us – Jameson frames the revitalization of the Port as the “idle dream that will eventually destroy [Sobotka] and his family,” but this Utopian project is unique to the season, as the promise
of the port disappears in the third season (replaced by a zone in the projects, “Hamsterdam,” in which a police major experiments with the legalization of the drug trade) (RU 371). In other words, this Utopianism is already one contained by the temporality of the TV season.

Nowhere do Jameson and Žižek mention the technological and industrial changes to television that might also account for this shift in narrative organization: for example, the DVD release of seasons for consumer consumption, which later became manifested in streaming distribution platforms to create the process of binge watching I discussed in the preceding chapter. HBO was one of the first cable networks to pioneer the release of its original programming on DVD. In fact, more viewers have seen The Wire through these means than when it originally aired; the series has been cited as one that suffered from low ratings yet became rediscovered, in a delayed critical temporality, through these changes in TV distribution and reception. Nor do they acknowledge the fact that HBO broadcast the series free of commercial interruption, without needing high ratings or commercial sponsors to ensure new seasons. Because it is marked as “creator-centered” programming, the network gives more flexibility to showrunners, which allows them to develop controversial content that would never have evaded network censors.48 (This does not mean that The Wire is devoid of corporate sponsorship, however; the athletic apparel Under Armour, a corporation headquartered in Baltimore, prominently features its logo on the police force’s casual wear.) Yet in ignoring such issues, Jameson and Žižek frame the season as an organizational unit as proof of The Wire’s innovative storytelling, rather than as enabled by factors specific to its production as a television program.
Another formal feature of the series that contributes to its narrative remainder is its ensemble cast, with screen time devoted equally to the criminal organizations and the police tasked with apprehending them. For Williams in particular, this is significant because “there is no single, central protagonist in *The Wire* and...the series’ focus on institutions and networks of relations, rather than on unique individuals and their personal will to power is one of its most remarkable features” (*OW* 194). Such a move allows for the elasticity of criminality, as many members of the police force are shown throughout the series violating the law or referenced as having done so at one point in their pasts, be it in the form of corruption, skimming money on the side, or in manipulating the city’s crime statistics (called “juking the stats” in the Baltimore vernacular). The blurry line between cop and criminal or between incorruptibility and crookedness is constitutive of the social totality revealed in the program, the result of late capitalism’s reorganization of social institutions in its service rather than that of the law. Again, Žižek: “From the ‘absolute standpoint,’ it becomes clear that the (legal) system not only tolerates illegality, but indeed requires it, since it is a condition of the system’s own ability to function” (*WD* 107). The boundaries between the contingent subject positions of legal and illegal are indeed flexible throughout the series, such that the weight of institutional corruption persistently hangs over Baltimore as the series progresses, becoming a part of the series’ atmosphere and thus a body of knowledge in its own right.

Williams goes further, sleuthing around the series’ narrative in order to determine the “exact moment when *The Wire* becomes multisited and ceases to be an ordinary police procedural.” Through a close reading of the pilot episode, she reads the plotline of the mid-level drug dealer D’Angelo Barksdale (Larry Gillard, Jr.), whose uncle, Avon
Barksdale (Wood Harris), is the kingpin of the largest drug dealing organization in the city. Following D’Angelo’s acquittal for shooting another dealer in the lobby of the high-rise project tower that he oversees, he is taken by other members of the Barksdale organization to a strip club for an apparent celebration, but this jubilance at evading the law’s grasp is cut short. The function of the “law” is replaced entirely by the criminal organization itself, as lieutenants in the organization as well as kingpin Avon himself lecture D’Angelo on his supposed lack of discipline, and Avon subsequently demotes him to a less lucrative public housing complex. Williams recaps the scene to differentiate between a basic police procedural and The Wire’s narrative topos, finding the equal time spent on the criminal organization and its characters significant: “the equally important procedures of cops and dealers are thus established, from this moment on in the first season, as the two fundamental ‘sites’ of the series” (OW 17). Equal time is thus foregrounded by Williams as the entrance into the different ethnographic “sites” of the series, since audiences must follow different narrative threads belonging to a multitude of groups (cops, dealers, politicians, dockworkers, journalists) within the institutional labyrinth that is Baltimore. Time is the measure by which character development occurs in serialized television: characters accrue diegetic experiences in successive episodes, opening them up to change. But the impact of The Wire’s equal time, I suspect, is not only the opening up of spatial universes but also the examination of criminality as a necessary part of juridical neoliberalism and vice versa. Put differently, the series documents not only how the legal system requires illegality (in Žižek’s terms) but also how the systems of illegality use the same structures of discipline and managerial organization as the legal ones do.
That the series dedicates equal time to cops and to robbers and exposes this shared neoliberal logic does not, however, mean that it frames each of these groups in equal fashion. The series has been read as focusing on what Williams calls “networks of relations” or what Patrick Jagoda calls “a distributed system of social relations” that align “with the core insight of social network analysis.” The idiom of a network is attractive to any analysis of *The Wire* precisely because of how the series introduces multiple worlds of Baltimore (however temporally organized, as previously noted, around the season as a narrative unit) through an impressively large ensemble cast. As a seemingly “networked” serial drama, the program is thus able to focus on the relationships between characters and institutions, as well as nonhuman agents, primarily embodied through mechanisms of technological surveillance such as the eponymous networks of telephone “wires” that are used by police detectives to solve murders and map out Baltimore’s drug trade. A networked optic also stitches together the temporality of the series – its serialized complexity and its commensurate focus on social institutions and their criminal counterparts – with the language of spatial imaginaries. A number of readings of the series point to its capacity to “map” social relations: there may be no clear protagonist of the series in its many characters, but the atlas of social interrelationships constructed by the series locates the city of Baltimore itself as such a protagonist. If Baltimore represents an imagined totality, then the series represents an effort to map, cognitively, the network of relations that govern the neoliberal city.

Yet it is difficult to reconcile such a structural grammar with televisual form. As a point of comparison, consider the similarities between *The Wire* and the generic soap opera. In the soap opera, an ensemble cast spanning generations offers multiple points of
identification for audiences that hew somewhat closely to the lived experiences of its primarily female viewers. It would not be incorrect to say that soap operas share with *The Wire* the lack of a delineated protagonist in favor of a networked, expansive family. In most feminist work on narrative form, a single protagonist within a series is seen as rendering narrative pleasure as predominantly masculine and orienting the action towards resolution and closure; by contrast, as Tania Modleski has eloquently written, soap operas tend to follow more feminine textual strategies through multiple storylines that often resist narrative closure and audience omniscience.\(^{51}\) The soap opera’s commitment to the family (as character) and the home (as setting) can be seen in the metonymic associations between soap opera title and family, since, as any longstanding soap viewer will attest, “General Hospital” less designates an actual hospital and signifies instead the families that inhabit and rule the program’s diegesis.

*The Wire* rearranges many of these associations and textual strategies: its multiple characters are overwhelmingly male, and offer not a variety of identificatory positions that mirror everyday life (despite their coding as ‘realistic’), but figures designed to alienate and unsettle. And while the focus on institutions might share a similar function as that of the family in the soap, institutions have narrower charges (for example to educate, to report, or to legislate) that do not have analogues within the structure of the family. *The Wire* is not a soap opera, despite sharing with it a number of formal similarities. Williams proffers serial melodrama as central to the series’ genius, as it simultaneously allows for the legacy of serial television while balancing character suffering with demands for a more equitable and just society (fulfilling a similar function to Utopia in Jameson and Žižek’s readings of the series). In her recent monograph on
masculinity and millennial television, Amanda Lotz makes scant reference to *The Wire* despite making a persuasive claim that male-centered serials constitute a mutated version of the soap opera for male audiences.\(^5\) I would maintain that to call *The Wire* a feminist text (because it plays with this gendered form) or to claim that, through that form, it broaches substantial questions about the role of gender (even intersectionally with race), would be a stretch, and that its noticeable disinterest in broaching such questions is a calculated attempt at distancing itself from the genre. In other words, a networked structure allows the series to appropriate elements of a longstanding and influential televisial form while retaining the cultural prestige of a drama on a premium cable network.

The comparison to soap opera summons the third formal characteristic of *The Wire* that generates an extratelevisual remainder: the lack of a clear resolution to the series. In the finale, a montage sequence depicts a number of characters making transitions to new careers: the mayor of Baltimore, Thomas Carcetti (Aidan Gillen) becomes the governor of Maryland; Slim Charles (Anwan Glover) assumes his role as the head of the New Day Co-op and negotiates with the Greek suppliers of overseas drugs; the interracial couple of Cedric Daniels (Lance Reddick) and Rhonda Pearlman (Deirdre Lovejoy), formerly a police lieutenant and (briefly) commissioner and an Assistant State’s Attorney, respectively, are seen in a courtroom in their new roles as a public defender and judge. Younger faces replace the roles with which viewers are familiar, but in a largely cosmetic way, without changing the tenor or the description of social labor. The final montage makes clear that individual characters may come and go and may be promoted or demoted within Baltimore’s institutional frameworks, but it is, in essence,
business as usual. As Williams remarks, “it is not possible to portray this ending as either happy or unhappy, or even, for that matter, as much of an ending at all, if by that we mean something that does not continue” (OW 212). The Wire ends eerily not that different from how it began, thus prompting the question if it can legitimately be thought of as conclusion. Jameson and Žižek, too, read business as usual through their own emphases. For the former, the television serial is incapable of producing closure, and thus the thrill of the chase endemic to police fiction is preserved in a move that consists of “the appropriations of these dissatisfactions for high culture or high literature.” (RU 362). For the latter, the shift from antiquarian tragedy to the tragedy apropos of late capitalism enables television to achieve narrative synchronicity with the rhythms of late capitalism: “The TV series as a form also finds its justification in this shift: we never arrive at a final conclusion, not only because we never discover the ultimate culprit (because there is always a new plot behind the current one), but also because the legal system is really striving for its own self-reproduction” (WD 100).

Truthfully, the aforementioned verdicts on the ending that is not quite an ending puzzle me as a scholar trained in television studies. Because television has traditionally been conceived as having two primary forms: the episodic series and the continuing serial, narrative resolutions have always tended to occur on a “micro” level, through clinches, architectural beats, and repetition. In the case of an episodic sitcom, for example, the diegetic world is often “reset” at the conclusion of each episode following the threat to the stability of the sitcom family (as familial group), leading to the only temporary reconciliation of such conflict (since viewers know similar conflicts will reappear next time). In the case of a serial narrative such as the soap opera, the
decentered nature of the narrative and the melodramatic logic of accumulation and crisis resist the imperative to wrap up multiple and complex storylines completely – as if such a task was even possible in the first place! – in favor of concluding *in medias res*. *The Wire* stubbornly ends in a manner similar to the soap, but again, there is something different about its refusal to provide closure. Here, such a refusal is cited as evidence for the series’ televisuality, and yet this comes across without the same polarizing feelings elicited by the endings of previous HBO ‘quality’ series such as *The Sopranos*, in which Tony Soprano sits down with his family in a diner, the screen cuts to black for ten agonizing seconds, and the audience cannot definitively tell whether or not the antiheroic mob boss is alive or dead. The rote criteria by which narrative closure is assessed by viewers boils down to the affective response to a series’ final moments. That *The Wire* ends ambivalently documenting the status quo testifies to the habitual reorganization of capital in a way that generates pleasure. There is no ambiguity regarding business as usual, and without gestures of radical change, the spectator cannot not be disappointed (this is the point, after all, of Jameson’s formulation of Utopia without wish-fulfillment). The ultimate effect of such inconclusion is the status of the text itself; the series ends as formally incomplete yet this does not feel unsatisfying, and completion is a feeling projected by the spectator onto the series as a whole, as totality.

Taken together, these three formal characteristics mask *The Wire*’s status as a televisual text and position it instead as “something” that escapes the formal restraints of television. This “something” is not easy to define, nor is it given precise form by cultural and scholarly critics. Rather, this “something” is the narrative apparatus by which intermedial appropriation occurs: *The Wire* is always borrowing from police procedurals
and from soap operas while branding itself as an improvement over both of these longstanding television genres. This is not to say that *The Wire* has not successfully taken generic, architectural, and temporal tropes of television’s past and reincorporated them into a series that elastically accommodates multiple TV iterations, but to assert instead that through its flexibility, it is able to transform itself into the apotheosis of the narratives of networked neoliberalism.

**Dickensian Aspects, Dickensian Affects**

I have avoided delving too deeply into the nitty-gritty of *The Wire*’s multiple narratives out of an insistence on treating the discourses about the series as a text in its own right, perhaps even a text that metanarratively exceeds the program itself. Such a treatment, however, risks missing the forest for the trees; while critiquing the discourses surrounding *The Wire* might explain its neoliberal aspects, it does not explain why what is frequently called one of the best television series of all time is oversaturated with graphic depictions of gang violence, institutional racism, drug use, and urban poverty, depictions that could not be permissible on network television precisely because of their explicit nature. Put differently, what is it that makes *The Wire* uncomfortable? To the vast majority of the scholars I have cited, the series does not traffic in affects of discomfort or disgust, because of the extratelevisual remainder; as something always greater than the televisual medium, the spectator’s attention is drawn to the failure of totality and the totality of failure and not their consequences. If the persistent metaphor of *The Wire* is “the game,” originally referring to the drug trade but extending to all social institutions, then game logic might be employed by audiences to shrug off otherwise uncomfortable
feelings, for agonism foregrounds competition and valorizes playing the game at all costs. Just as many characters within *The Wire* express a desire, however momentary or fleeting, to exit “the game” yet find themselves trapped within its circuits or come back to it willingly out of perceived security and comfort, so too might audiences overlook the series’ less savory representations in favor of the game’s – that is to say *The Wire’s* – tautological pull.\(^5\)

What are the cardinal affects of *The Wire*? In identifying possible answers to such a query, the question of genre emerges as compelling, and for good reason. Generic categories can be used as descriptors of a series’ formal qualities (a sitcom is typically 23 minutes in length, as opposed to a dramatic series, which is typically 43 minutes in length) or industrial practices (reality television programs typically utilize non-union, freelance production crews), but they also describe how a series *feels*. In Lauren Berlant’s words, “genres provide an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or in art.” She then proceeds to claim that neoliberal culture might suffer from the “waning of genre,” which can be corroborated by genre’s own flexibility and ability to mutate and mix in order to be transformed into something else (a situation tragedy, a dramedy, a docusoap).\(^5\) The consensus amongst critics and scholars has been that *The Wire* is a series belonging to realism, overdetermined by the weight of its “whole”: the large ensemble cast that liberally borrows from “real” characters and actors (the character of Snoop in particular is cited to this effect). The all-too-“real” portraiture of street life, and a minimalist aesthetics all promote the series’ claims to realism, though here the primary metric of what constitutes “realism” is authenticity.
Yet realism is, to a certain extent, dependent on affect. In her exploration of televisual realism on The Wire’s parental antecedent Homicide: Life on the Streets, Bambi Haggins compares that series’ “commitment to realism” with the ‘RealFeel’ indexes commonly used in meterological reports. Even though a thermometer might read one temperature, these indexes take into account other factors such as humidity and wind speed to speculate as to what the temperature “feels like,” which often leads to a different number than the “official” temperature.56 The paradox of realism – that it signifies a direct connection to reality when it actually simulates the characteristics of reality – is also present in communication theorist Alice Hall’s theory of a continuum of realism, in which a series feels “real” to an audience based on three elements: plausibility (whether the events could have happened), typicality (whether the characters are identifiable), and factuality (whether the plot is based on actual events that occurred).57 To claim that a series is “realistic” is to accede that it is on some fundamental level plausible, typical, and factual, even though these criteria are still subject to a large degree of manipulation by producers and to a range of affective responses that help support or subvert the “realist” form.

The Wire’s own reflexivity also contributes to, rather than undermines, a sense of realness. Specifically, the way in which the series frames ethnographic worldviews – networks that require mapping by the audience – allows for realism as it mimics the detective work performed in the series’ narrative. Realism as a generic feeling or as affective category signals a process not dissimilar to the mystery structure of the police procedural. Formerly circumscribed by empirical assumptions about the nature of reality, notions of realism’s sensorium have depended on the material conditions of the
representation’s referent. Yet television studies have always argued for the perceptive qualities of realism, as in John Fiske’s claim that a program is realist “not because it reproduces reality, but because it reproduces the dominant sense of reality.”\(^\text{58}\) This reading of realism is one without any sort of ontological loyalty to the empirical or the actual conditions of the world, but instead dependent upon the various discourses that construct a sense of reality. Even before the immense popularity of the genre of “reality television,” then, the general consensus among scholars of television was that television programs generate, rather than emulate, reality, thus forcing audiences to interpret texts actively in order to situate themselves in reality’s produced effects. 

Such an understanding of realism can productively complicate our approach both to media culture and cultural theory. For example, the study of realism complicates the strand of affect theory that insists on cleanly detaching affect from ideology, as evidenced in the cognitive materialist approaches inspired by Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, and Alfred North Whitehead.\(^\text{59}\) If affect is indeed nonsignifying and presubjective, as this thread maintains, it operates on an entirely different level than the processes by which meaning is made. What to do with realism, then, which effortlessly traverses visceral responses and the material conditions that condition our affective expectations? In *The Wire*, realism is often cited as the feeling that the institutional failure endemic to Baltimore is accurate, that the deck is stacked against people of color and that, as Williams notes, “the rules are not the same for everyone.” The affective dimensions of realism are, in this case, a sense of synchronicity but also one of uncertainty, as the affect rests in the space between referent and representation, and to some extent they asymptotically approximate one another.
Another kind of space also exists in discourses on *The Wire.* Realism may account for the viscerality of the function of totality within the series, but there remains the stuff that elicits fidgeting and discomfort in other contexts (and genres, perhaps) but not in *The Wire.* One could chalk up such dissonance to the contexts of audience reception, in which a male spectator is presumed, a spectator who carries with him a certain amount of privilege that inoculates him from having to take seriously the visual representations of systematic violence and police brutality against people of color, the homeless, and the urban poor of Baltimore. In Amanda Lotz’s study on the “male-centered serial” dramas that are practically synonymous with original primetime cable programming, routine and graphic violence is a common, though unexplained, theme, with the vast majority of the antihero protagonists engaging in criminal activity that necessitates violence or in which violent actions lie within the series’ destiny. So much of this violence is highly racialized, yet this, too, becomes disavowed by much of the discourses surrounding the third golden age. That so many of these series aired on HBO, the leader of premium cable content, allows for more explicit content, as Janet McCabe and Kim Akass have demonstrated.\textsuperscript{60} Rather than being acknowledged, however, violence in millennial quality television becomes recoded as “risk”: it risks both alienation and spectacularization lest programs be accused of being gratuitous. Gang or turf warfare, present in many of these male centered serials such as *The Sopranos, Breaking Bad, Sons of Anarchy, Oz,* and including *The Wire,* highlight interracial tensions that frequently result in gun violence and the death of a crew member, but this comes across in the series’ subsumption of the discourse of criminality.
To provide a specific example of this, let us consider an episode from the final season of *The Wire* that negotiates between realism, staged violence, and even intermediality. The fifth season of *The Wire* interrogates the role of the press in reporting and manufacturing the events that mediate interactions between the various institutions that the program has explored. As, perhaps, textual revenge on the newspaper in which David Simon was once employed, the *Baltimore Sun*, the season introduces a reporter, Scott Templeton, who is shown to fabricate stories entirely and repeatedly in order to advance his career (perhaps gaining a job at the more prestigious *New York Times* or *Washington Post*). Unassuming yet ambitious, Templeton further lies when suspected of lying by city desk editor Gus Haynes, and his prose is consistently described as overwrought and embellished, descriptors that fit well within the purview of critical writing on the series as a whole despite the claims of realism. The plotline of Templeton’s fictional news stories runs parallel to detective Jimmy McNulty’s attempt to secure resources for Homicide detectives tasked with solving the row house murders credited to Marlo Stanfield’s crew and for the off-books efforts of Lester Freamon to catch Stanfield through an illegal wiretap. McNulty’s plan, conceived when he is intoxicated on the job, is to create a belief in a serial killer in Baltimore who ostensibly targets the homeless of the Southern District. Through an elaborate code of a red ribbon (the killer’s “signature”) and the technique of post-mortem strangulation, McNulty’s fictional serial killer eventually attracts the attention of *Sun* reporter Alma Gutierrez, but the story is unable to gain serious traction in the press. Fictional killer then meets fabricating reporter in a bizarre bit of synchrony. As McNulty is about to fake a phone call from the killer, Templeton fakes receiving such a call, and the crossed wires and
Templeton’s resulting story generate the appropriate amounts of media buzz and further the goals of each: McNulty is granted a wiretap, which is then redirected and masked so that he and Freamon can then tap Stanfield’s phone, and Templeton becomes a cause célèbre among the national press.

Of all the storylines present in *The Wire*, McNulty’s fake serial killer is to some extent the most “unrealistic.” McNulty occupies an interesting position in the series diegesis insofar as he is figured, problematically, as the protagonist of the series; in a large ensemble cast he is largely positioned as the series’ protagonist even when his storyline receives little narrative attention. In an episode appropriately titled “The Dickensian Aspect,” McNulty finds himself in the position of needing to fake another murder in order to secure his wiretap. He must change his scheme and alter the serial killer’s own profile while preserving his signature; rather than leaving the bodies to be found by the police with a red ribbon tied around the wrist, the killer announces that he will dispose of the bodies, never to be found, while providing the public with a photo of the victim sporting a red ribbon. McNulty uses a mentally ill homeless man (William Joseph Brookes) as a pawn in this strategy, photographing him with the ribbon and then driving him to Richmond, Virginia and giving him a stolen identity card and $100 to assume a new life in a local shelter.

Violence, here, functions on a delayed or deferred register, as McNulty is merely dressing up and appropriating the acts of violence that occurred in the past and are therefore forgotten. Whereas riddling the men of the street with bullets has been, over five seasons, cast off as quotidian and just a part of the game, the absence of violence in McNulty’s scheme noticeably stands out, perhaps, for its affective discomfort. The
combination of the homeless man’s whiteness and his recognizable mental illness renders him a completely innocent victim, even if one takes the Žižekian road of seeing the entire ensemble as collective victims to a totality corrupted by late capitalism. McNulty first encounters Larry, as he is called, stumbling down the middle of a traffic-clogged street carrying a sloppy cardboard sign. The camera primarily serves McNulty’s point of view, providing a mid-shot of the busy street with Larry centered yet perspectivally distant and with the camera slightly tilted to the right, emulating the curvature of McNulty’s car and its impact on what he is thus able to see.

![Figure 6](image_url)

**Figure 6. Larry’s first appearance.**

The minor difference in angle situates the shot as realistic, as it establishes a direct identification with McNulty and therefore introduces the character of Larry as mediated through the perspective of the police. But it does more than this, too; it exaggerates Larry’s already contorted appearance due to his mental illness, thereby introducing him as unstable on embodied, psychological, and textual levels. From the start, the camera frames Larry as not completely level, rendering him both narratively harmless (his exaggerated gestures signifying his mental illness rather than criminality) yet not narratively irrelevant. He occupies, then, a precarious middle space, one in which he
“slips through the cracks” (due to cuts to state-sponsored care) but is harmless enough not to merit the wrong kind of attention from the police.

Indeed, in subsequent scenes Larry is always positioned at a significant angle, tilted away from the vertical axis that typically structures human posture. On the one hand, the askew body of a mentally ill homeless man triggers the episode’s RealFeel index, as nowhere does Larry appear to be stable nor capable of supporting himself. This is a common visual framing technique throughout the series, in which characters who lack the means to improve their situation due to institutional failure are often blocked with their heads and/or upper bodies inhabiting an ever-so-slight tilt. Compare the shots in which Larry appears – when he accompanies McNulty to the former Major Crimes Unit where Freamon is running the wire, when he ride with McNulty to Richmond, Virginia, and when they arrive at the shelter – with a scene in the same episode in which Detective Bunk Moreland (Wendell Pierce), the “good po-lice” investigating the row house murders, pays a visit to Raylene Lee (Shamika Cotton), the addict mother of Michael Lee, a youth who has become an aspirational enforcer in the Stanfield Organization. In every shot Larry and Raylene are both framed askew, a clear nod to their economic and cultural statuses as broken citizens, asymmetrically excluded from the brief flashes of utopia that the series may offer.
Figure 7. Larry and Raylene, side by side.

Implying impaired motor skills, the almost-slouching positions of the mentally ill and the addict render these subjects even more abject than the other citizens of Baltimore; they are not even allowed to play the game, and their destinies have already been authored by neoliberal governmentality.

But on the other hand, the positions of Larry and Raylene’s bodies seem to be to be saying much more than the mise-en-scène implies. They may boost the RealFeel
metrics of plausibility and typicality that signal an authentic representation, but unlike many of The Wire’s characters left behind on the social margins, they are types: simplifications of populations that the series attempts to address throughout its five season run. What is striking about the very minor characters of Larry and Raylene is their lack of complexity, their resolute commitment to inhabiting the execrable spaces of unresistance. Here, in their unrealistically simple forms, they stand out for their total defeat.

What I would like to suggest through the incredibly brief introductions to these characters that the series affords us is that a countertheatricality emerges in their askew realism, a dissonant form of becoming that may be what is most uncomfortable about The Wire. By countertheatricality I mean a theatricality that fails through a stubborn realism, a theatricality that stands out for being too real. As entrenched types, Larry and Raylene push realism to its extremes, blind to the glint of the moderated and contained affective impulses of winning the game through constant hustle. In their landmark study of theatricality, Tracy Davis and Thomas Postlewait position the term as constitutive of the “inevitable ‘failure’ of mimesis to produce a true likeness.” Theatricality cannot pretend that it is anything but artifice, and, as scholars of theatre and performance have wrestled with what its critical purchase might be, calls to theatricality have emphasized its productive capacity as failure or as a failed performance. A countertheatrical realism can be located in Larry’s cameos in the fifth season, for he barely registers at all, and comprehensive studies of the series (such as Williams’s) do not even recognize him by his character name. He is a “failed character” precisely because he indexes realism all too well, making him – as he slips down visually, narratively, and affectively – impossible to
root for within the fannish reception of the series.

As Schneider asserts, there is something very infelicious about intermediality, something that can be gleaned from the slip. “Becoming is in precarious (un)balance,” she writes, “tilting not necessarily forward or backward but very possibly falling to the side.” We might further clarify that the precarious subjects of *The Wire* are beloved by critics and scholars because they may be the victims of late capitalism, but that our melodramatic identifications prop them up, offering a sort of utopic promise through the affective investments to the text. And yet when the series presents us with characters that cannot receive such investments, who in fact are deprived of recognition, audiences are jolted from their secure positions as mere witnesses to neoliberalism, becoming complicit in the characters’ abjection and enabling them to fall to the side.

If, by now, I leave the impression of being an unsympathetic reader of *The Wire*, not simply cynically repudiating its discursive intermediality but perhaps exhibiting a hostility towards its ethnographic imaginaries, I can only respond that this is not my point. According to Alison Landberg, historical filmic or televisual representations of historical events carry the potential to connect a viewer to some other person while maintaining a sense of difference (as she explores, the way in which a viewer can access a historical figure’s memory through representation). Landsberg uses this form of “prosthetic memory” to claim that it is through this unique form of spectatorship that the structural condition for empathy may be located. Sympathy, she writes, is different from empathy: it assumes a “preexisting connection between sympathizer and sympathizee.” Empathy, by contrast, negotiates compassion and distance, an imagination of another’s situation and an approximation of the affects involved while recognizing differences in
subjectivity. I read *The Wire* and the discourse surrounding it – a discourse that, as I have hoped to demonstrate, runs dangerously close to assuming the status of a metanarrative about race and neoliberal urbanism – empathetically, cognizant of the difference between myself as a white male spectator and the predominantly minority viewpoints expressed in its storylines and by its characters. To become entangled in *The Wire*, to become lost in its network of characters, risks the distance necessary to understand the racialized spectatorship inherent to the series and its reception.

As an example of this, consider a 2013 *Saturday Night Live* sketch, “How’s He Doin’?” that parodies a Sunday morning political news program but is geared entirely towards the political feelings of African Americans. “How’s He Doing” features ensemble members Kenan Thompson and Jay Pharaoh as the program’s host and Ronny Williams, a writer for *Ebony* Magazine, respectively, and guest host Kerry Washington plays Alice Rogers-Smith a political science professor at Spellman College (clearly modeled after MSBNC commentator and Tulane professor Melissa Harris-Perry). The joke of the segment is relatively straightforward: no matter how much African Americans may disagree with President Obama’s policies, they will still support him unequivocally. Within the banter typical of political punditry, however, a brief joke is exchanged, with the National Security Agency wiretapping scandal as the context:

**Williams:** Well personally, I thought white people would be more excited about having their phones being tapped considering how much they like *The Wire*.

**Host:** I like the Wire. They LOVE *The Wire*.

**Williams:** They love it! I mean white people watch *The Wire* acting like they doing us a favor.

**Host:** It’s like you watch *The Wire*, you ain’t volunteering at a school.
Rogers-Smith: Have you ever been to a party and a white person approaches you with a smile and you know they just want to talk about *The Wire*?

Host: I had a white friend who wrote episode recaps of *The Wire* on the internet. I mean, can you imagine – he would watch it, write about it, and then other people would read it!

Rogers-Smith: Did you read it?

Host: I didn’t need to read it. I watched it. I mean, that would be like somebody telling me about my day.66

How might this innocuous bit, not even the primary joke of the sketch, better inform our understanding of the series? The joke implies that white people are the target audience of the series and comprise its most diehard fans. It resonates with George Lipsitz’s critique of the series as a magical Uncle Tom story for the neoliberal age, in which white audiences are recruited “to inhabit subject positions as analysts and managers of urban life, not as interactive participants of it.”67 Lipsitz does not contradict the adoration of the series as great television in his reading of the series, yet he criticizes it for operating within neoliberal logics of cultural co-optation; in his words, “the ‘otherness’ portrayed in *The Wire* remains fully enclosed with a white spatial imaginary” in which the ghettoizing effects of white flight, racial segregation, and the failure of public housing is largely left uninterrogated by the series. If *The Wire* provides viewers with an entrance into its ethnographic imaginaries, the *SNL* sketch appears to imply that the vocal fans and lauding critics are almost always white and that the ethnography resembles a colonial anthropology in which the social ills of urban life is voyeuristically presented without accounting for their historical causes.

Linda Williams defensively rejects such criticism, claiming that because the series does not pretend to exist in a colorblind world and that because the series is deeply
generically melodramatic, a black racial imaginary sits at the series’ cultural center. For her, “The Wire is too aware of the neoliberal hollowing out of discourses of rights to follow this trajectory of racialized victims and villains” (OW 188). Williams seems to discount Lipsitz’s criticism about the progressive capacities of the series because, she argues, his reading relies on an older form of racial melodrama in which white villains oppress black victims and vice versa. The Wire, she believes, undoes this circuit through refusing to keep score in the “game” of racial victimhood. She acknowledges that the series may fall into the trope of “stuff white people like,” in the words of one popular satirical blog, but because the series depicts a majority-black world, she is able to dismiss this criticism, as “it makes a big difference if a majority-white audience is invited into a multisited world that is itself majority black” (OW 190). Yet just because the majority of the characters in the series are black does not mean that the series depicts a “majority-black world,” let alone a black perspective; the fact that the series was created and produced by numerous white men for an affluent premium cable network augurs the selective framing of Baltimore as a metropolis symptomatic of contemporary race relations. The discomfort of a black person at a cocktail party when approached and asked to talk about The Wire – an imperative to socialize based on a perceived racial affinity for a program primarily consumed by white audiences – remains a blind spot in Williams’ otherwise astute observations about the series.

Indeed, if Williams’ own reflexively defensive posture is of any indication here, it provides the link between intermedial appropriation and cultural appropriation: just as the series is something more than television, so too is it something more than blackness. Williams’ account, along with that of Jameson and Žižek, are sympathetic accounts,
presuming spectatorial similarities based on a perceived common politics. As totality, the series presents neoliberal rationality as a given, as having “won” the game, and indeed, as having written the new rules of the game. *The Wire* partially fits the criteria of what Wendy Brown has eloquently described as the left’s tendency to cling melancholically to the tenets of liberal democracy, insofar as its tempered realism finds its heroes in figures such as Frank Sobotka (for Jameson) and Omar (for Williams). Instead, I have offered an empathetic reading of the series through characters like Larry, who inhabit neither romanticized positions of nostalgia for a Baltimore past nor middle spaces of near-survival under the rules of the neoliberal game. *The Wire* may not, ultimately, be the kind of “television” text that I, as a scholar of television, want it to be, although it approaches this through alienating characters such as Larry. Intermediality offers *The Wire* the opportunity for it to be held accountable to the histories of other media forms, genres, and styles, but it also entraps it in the epistemic affects of neoliberal ideology. The final montage of the series, showcasing changes within generations yet also the resistance to overall change, culminates in McNulty driving Larry back to Baltimore from the Richmond shelter. As networked television that is also post-“network,” *The Wire* brings Larry home, and in doing so, perhaps, pushes television and television studies in new, slippery directions.
“As far as this question of consent is concerned, I prefer the terms used by Michel Foucault: listen to what the child says and give it a certain credence. This notion of consent is a trap, in any case.”

Guy Hocquenghem

“As Eden plans to become Miss America, the President of the United States, and win an Academy Award all before she is twenty because she will be too old after that.”

the announcer of the “Rumble in the Jungle” pageant, introducing contestant Eden Wood, in an episode of Toddlers & Tiaras

“Television won’t let you not catch a predator.”

Kathryn Bond Stockton

As seen in the above quotes, Guy Hocquenghem tells us to listen to Michel Foucault, who tells us to listen to the child, but the child in the case of televised beauty pageants does not actually speak – instead, an announcer summarizes her aspirations. Eden Wood cannot be President of the United States until the age of thirty-five; her incorrect knowledge – a child’s error, really – comes through in the announcer’s introduction, such that in order to listen to her, we must hear an adult’s voice. Listen to Eden, Foucault suggests, even though she is wrong. But this is of small consequence compared to what we might “hear” (that is, sense) through her appearance: she has a lavender dress adorned with jewels; a frilly tutu; what appear to be blond hair extensions or perhaps a wig; heavy makeup; bronzed skin.
Listen to what the child says through her self-presentation, and give it credence. She wants to be Miss America someday, but for now, at age five, and in this ballroom of a Louisville, Kentucky hotel, she wants to win the title of Grand Supreme.

As a genre, reality television thrives on its “low art” cultural status; part of its appeal is that it functions as an apparatus that transforms lowly ordinary individuals and families into celebrities who perform their branded “real” selves across the multiple platforms that metatextually comment on the industry, such as print tabloids, online gossip websites, and entertainment news programming. The controversy that inevitably accompanies such programs relies upon what Kevin Glynn calls a “continuous accretion of victimized bodies” that “construes contemporary social life as having gone so hopelessly out of control that we are at risk in nearly everything we do and thus in constant need of ‘protective’ agencies, however inadequate they may ultimately be.”

Stepping in as one of these protective agencies, reality television replaces not only some state functions offering public services and a social safety net, but also some of the functions previously performed by certain ideological state apparatuses such as the family. If reality television requires the image of a body in crisis, we could say that this
image extends to encompass the body politic of the family, making the genre both part cause and part symptom of the so-called “culture wars” that have played out within the American media over recent decades.

But as the family stages its constant peril as surveillance spectacle, it does so as both target and threat. The family very well may be under attack according to many cultural pundits, but often it appears to be under attack from the very people charged with protecting it from external harm: parents whose questionable child-raising practices become the object of reality spectacle. While representations of dysfunctional families and “bad parenting” abound within non-narrative television programming, this chapter examines a particular figure that incites scandal: that of the child beauty pageant contestant, whose presence triggers frequent accusations of the exploitation and sexualization of children or interrogations of what constitutes appropriate family leisure activities.

Take, for example, two episodes of Toddlers & Tiaras (TLC, 2009-2013) that aired in late August and early September of 2011. In the first episode (“Hearts and Crowns”), four-year-old Madisyn Verst appeared dressed as Dolly Parton, wearing a tight pink dress accentuated with padding that emulated the country legend’s large breasts and buttocks. A week later, another episode (“Precious Moments Pageant”) introduces audiences to three-year-old Paisley, who competed in an outfit (including knee-high boots and a midriff-revealing dress) resembling that of prostitute Vivian Ward, the character made famous by Julia Roberts in Pretty Woman (dir. Garry Marshall, 1990). These successive episodes elicited reprobation from a number of advocacy organizations, such as the Parents Television Council, and from media outlets, but one commentary
stands out for its framing of the series. On the September 8, 2011, episode of ABC’s daytime talk series *The View*, panelist Sherri Shepherd hijacked the discussion of the program, questioning the motives of the program’s audience:

> Listen, you know what I want to say? We gotta stop in the name [sic] because the mother thought it was okay to dress her daughter like a hooker; she said she thought it was cute, it was over the top, and the lady who dressed her daughter like Dolly Parton – when are we going to stop sexualizing our children in the name of being silly and over the top? Your job is to protect your child. Who do you think watches this show?...Because all shows go by demographics, they try to get the young people. Eighteen-year-old girls are not watching three-year-old girls trying to dress like eighteen-year-old girls. But pedophiles do – if you think pedophiles aren’t watching this show, I got a bridge I want to sell you.4

Shepherd’s tirade succinctly encapsulates the controversy that a program such as *Toddlers* carries, casting the premise of the series – in which families compete via young daughters in organized pageants across America, though primarily in the South and Southwest regions of the country – both as silly and over the top and yet as also inviting the threat of the sexual predator into the American home. Like any network executive, or, perhaps, like any industry studies scholar, Shepherd asks the crucial question: who, exactly, watches a program such as *Toddlers*? Her conclusion, that “if you think pedophiles aren’t watching this show, I have a bridge I want to sell you,” articulates both a key discourse and concern about the program: that intentionally or not, it presumes a sexual predator as its ideal spectator.5

While one could dismiss such a conclusion as solely hyperbolic (the kind of rhetoric typical of daytime talk programs in which incendiary accusations promote spirited dialogue between panellists), I find something rather uncannily apt about Shepherd’s offhand remark. Put differently, this chapter asks what it means to take seriously the notion that the ideal spectator of such a program is a sexual predator, or to
embrace Kathryn Bond Stockton’s claim that “television won’t let you not catch a predator.” To do so, this chapter explores the spectatorial relationships present whenever the figure of the child beauty pageant contestant appears on television, advancing the claim that the predatory spectator partially structures representations of childhood and sexuality in millennial reality television. As a viewing position, the predatory spectator instigates fear, shame, and dread within audiences in ways that speak to neoliberal family values. Thus, this chapter considers a number of concomitant issues: the theories of the uncanny outlined by Ernst Jentsch and Sigmund Freud, the doll-like appearance of child beauty pageant contestants, and how the uncanny might offer a new perspective on the notion of consent. It also charts the relationship between the family and reality television in order to reassess the consenting family’s (in)stability. This includes, too, interrogating the culture of child molestation partially produced by media pageantry over the last thirty years, especially the news coverage surrounding the 1996 death of JonBenêt Ramsay. I close this chapter by thinking about new negotiations with consent alongside recent interventions into “haptic cinema” within film theory, proposing that the child beauty pageant contestant triggers a series of “bad touches” that structure spectatorship in unexpectedly dreadful yet also unexpectedly pleasurable ways. In examining the family dynamics present on an episode of Toddlers & Tiaras (“Rumble in the Jungle”), I argue that programs such as Toddlers & Tiaras generate a haptically uncanny affect while facilitating the absent presence of the predatory spectator. These programs evince the production of both the child beauty pageant contestant and that of her presumed aggressor through the representation of dysfunctional parents. Indeed, an analysis of the child beauty pageant contestant’s televisuality lays bare how watching – or perhaps
touching – millennial television might entail consenting to the predatory spectator’s affective co-presence.

**Olympia at the Beauty Pageant, or the Uncanniness of Consent**

The question of consent is key to the affects of programs such as *Toddlers & Tiaras*. In Sherri Shepherd’s remark on *The View*, consent is and is not a factor: neglecting the normative role of protecting the child, parents exercise all forms of agency in putting their daughters in these positions, but in her reading of the program, the young girls themselves do not negotiate their consent in any legible way. Implicit in the remark is a unidirectional and hierarchical relationship between mother and daughter, establishing mothers as the force that drives episodic narrative and controversy. But programs such as *Toddlers* appear to involve consenting subjects: parents legally consent to being followed by TLC’s cameras, and nearly all of the young girls find pleasure in participating in pageants on some level. This is established at the beginning of each episode, in which the two or three individual contestants followed through a pageant are introduced, typically framed by previous pageant trophies, tiaras, ribbons, and other prizes. The contestants, parents, coaches, stylists, pageant directors, judges, and other staff all consent to their image being reproduced by the network, but these characters also consent to having those images organized around the logic of transformation embedded within reality television and enacted by the premise of the beauty pageant. Young girls are transformed into polished pageant contestants, and their parents, usually mothers, become the agents of transformation. It is through the transformation of these two groups, as well as of their relationship, which hazards an uncanny form of consent.
Toddlers adheres to a certain narrative notation: aspiring pageant winners are introduced at the beginning of the program and then followed around as they prepare for the demands of the pageant, which may include rehearsing a dance number, learning how to stand still and pose for judging, and a number of other rituals that transform an ordinary young girl into a polished Grand Supreme (the ultimate title coveted by many contestants). This process of preparation comprises a significant portion of episodes, which frequently depict extraordinary hair sculpture, the application of heavy makeup, the addition of a flipper (a dental accessory that provides the allusion of full teeth to cover up any baby teeth the contestant may have lost), spray tanning, and eyebrow waxing on the aspiring contestant. These rituals have attracted the most attention from advocacy groups and tabloid media, as they are represented on the surface level of each contestant through her appearance (the “beauty” portion of the pageants). Importantly, however, they also render an artificial subjectivity onto the young girl, who must both perform her natural personality on camera and her idealized pageant self onstage. This often-unsuccessful conversion from hyperactive subject to still object (at least, who only moves at particular regimented times, such as during the “talent” portions, and in particular regimented ways) has been frequently described as transforming the contestant into a doll. In the profile of the series following the aforementioned controversies in People magazine that featured Madisyn on its cover with the headline “Gone too Far?” (though, of course, the linguistic construction of the headline presupposes an appropriate amount of sexualization), one social worker, Mark Sichel, commented that “Little girls are supposed to play with dolls, not be dolls.”6
Child psychology experts, however, are not the only ones to make this comparison. In one episode, set during the Louisville, Kentucky “Rumble in the Jungle” World Championship Pageant, Cristy, the mother of three-year-old contestant Isabella and a former beauty queen herself, prepares Isabella for battle at the nail salon. A crying Isabella puts up a fight, and Cristy, using a pointedly aggressive (and vocally deeper) tone, carries her into the salon. As what appears to be a traumatized Isabella receives her French manicure, a telling voiceover by Cristy encapsulates the pageant mom’s goals: “The whole concept is to have that little girl look like a perfect little doll.” While this borderline bullying may appear to be compelling grounds for the charges of vulgar parenting that accompany child beauty pageants, Cristy’s formulation of the aspirational imperative of the pageants as a “perfect little doll” summons to mind Ernst Jentsch’s paper “On the Psychology of the Uncanny” (1906), which was written thirteen years prior to Freud’s better-known advancement of the affective concept. Readings of both of these essays crystallize Cristy’s desire for Isabella to be rendered as doll, but such a process has the unfortunate effect of transforming Cristy herself into a little girl who plays with dolls, shifting the position of consent in uncanny ways.

According to Freud, the uncanny is “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.” His entanglement of the frightening and familiar – of unheimlich and heimlich, though a clean translation is only applicable to the former term and not the latter – relies, in part, on readings of ETA Hoffmann’s short story “The Sandman” (1816), which features an exquisitely beautiful young girl, Olympia, who is revealed to be a lifelike automaton; it also relies on an engagement with Jentsch’s essay. For Jentsch, the uncanny is defined by the erosion of the boundary
between human and automaton, or the “doubt as to whether an apparently living being is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate”; this doubt is later referred to throughout the essay as “uncertainty” or “unease.” While Jentsch only parenthetically references Hoffmann’s stories without offering his own reading of Olympia as character, his structuring of the uncanny as uncertainty noticeably highlights the contexts of reception inherent to Olympia’s presence in the story; what would appear to be uncanny about Olympia for Jentsch (were he to provide a reading of Hoffmann) is not only that Nathaniel cannot tell that she is a doll, but that she inhabits a liminal space of animatedness that generates such ambivalence. Put differently, she is neither perfectly doll-like nor perfectly human-like in her appearance: she approximates both.

This approximation would later be taken up by robotics professor Masahiro Mori in 1970 in his theory of the uncanny valley, in which human likeness exists in an asymptotic relation to familiarity, which itself can be measured on an spectrum from empathic to revolted responses. It has received attention within media studies for proposing avenues in which to read technological advances in animation, such as through CGI characters. But reality television operates in a fundamentally different relationship to the “real” than do the special effects of Hollywood blockbuster films: central to reality television’s popularity is the uncertainty generated between watching documentary or surveillance footage and the layers of performance and post-production editing that creates a recognizably constructed narrative. It is unclear, for example, what motivations precisely drive Cristy’s insistence on the automation of her child: a desire for redemption for her own truncated pageant career; a desire to fashion Isabella in her own image and as
part of the “family business”; or a desire to perform the role of the stage mother present in many musicals (e.g. *Gypsy*), films (e.g. MGM’s 1933 *Stage Mother*), and television programs (in addition to *Toddlers*, Lifetime’s *Dance Moms* and other such programs) – or, more likely, some combination of all of these.\(^{10}\)

Yet that the question of authenticity or of performance is even present in this staged scene in a physically real nail salon already produces spectatorial uncertainty; as Isabella approximates both her animatedness (through her temper tantrum) and her inanimatedness (through her eventual docility), Cristy approximates both the performance of the stage mother and that of immature child. Dread appears across multiple points of identification, from the unease of determining whether or not Cristy is intentionally exaggerating her questionable parenting techniques to the unease felt on behalf of Theresa, the nail salon employee who is both witness to and participant in Isabella’s taming. Uncertainty becomes ambulatory, moving through the salon and between different registers of performance, recalling the kind of narrative “made servicable by the virtuosic manipulation of the author” that Jentsch stresses as working in tandem with automation in underpinning the “doubtful tension created by any uncanny situation.”\(^{11}\) It is important that consent operates on a formal level similar to Jentsch’s definition of the uncanny as uncertainty: consent often falls into the intermediate area between animated agreement (an active “yes”) and inanimated resignation (a passive “no”).

But whereas for Jentsch uncertainty alone drives the notion of the uncanny, for Freud, “intellectual uncertainty” is a minor form of the uncanny, second to that elicited by the threat of losing one’s eyes – a loss of the conditions of spectatorship itself. Freud
quibbles with Jentsch’s definition for reasons that are themselves uncertain: he agrees
with Jentsch more often than not, finding that “we know now that we are not supposed to
be looking on at the products of a madman’s imagination, behind which we, with the
superiority of rational minds, are able to detect the sober truth.”¹² But such uncertainty is
overdetermined by its own awareness – since, for Freud, all readers of a text exhibit “the
superiority of rational minds” – and thus cannot explain the impression of uncanniness
saturated within Hoffmann’s tale (even as they also, of course, exhibit effects of the
irrational unconscious). To fill this gap, he turns to the scopic drive, thus establishing
what Joan Copjec has identified as the “privileged relation uncanniness maintained with
the gaze.”¹³

But true to form, Freud does not see in Olympia the mechanical embodiment of
the uncanny, finding it instead in the figure of the Sand Man and in the fear of being
robbed of one’s eyes that marks the return of repressed psychosexual events: that is, the
fear of castration. As Samuel Weber observes, it is through this essay that Freud works
out his theory of anxiety, which shifted its being from unbound psychic energy stemming
from the result of repression to the effect of the specific threat of castration that actually
produces repression.¹⁴ As the essay progress, as a number of feminist critics have pointed
out, Freud thus reduces Olympia to the mere threat of castration without taking seriously
the possibility that the doll could, in fact, become a woman. Hélène Cixous, for example,
correctly notes that because Freud dismisses Olympia as no “more than just a detached
complex of Nathaniel,” he forecloses the possibility that the spectator’s own gaze might
even trigger the process of animation: “What if, in looking at her, we animated her?”¹⁵
But Cixous’ imagined audience might also be located in and through the multiple
pathways of dread that comprise the affective atmosphere of “Rumble in the Jungle”: in Cristy’s dominating gaze that subdues Isabella at the nail salon, for example.

To reverse and reframe this reading, what does it mean for a mother to demand inanimation from her own daughter – indeed, to tame her childish unruliness into a still being to which nail polish can be applied? In the process of transforming Isabella into a polished contestant, she may become more automated, expected to perform a hyperexaggerated femininity that is equally as alien as it is familiar. Isabella thus loses a sense of her status as child, as she becomes disciplined into a performing doll, a common way in which programs such as Toddlers legislates the mother-daughter relationship.16 This performance, however, is an oscillating one, in two senses. First, it oscillates on a level of subject/object, between that of animated child and that of inanimate doll, through corrective techniques administered by the parent and hired experts who serve as rational authorities on pageant worlds. Second, it oscillates on a level of generation, between that of unruly child and that of grown up adult. The aforementioned experts instruct little girls on how to conduct themselves maturely in pageants, thus controlling their bodies into fixed poses and by rehearsing answers for interviews, but they also do so by modeling and mimicking those poses and answers, often appearing childish themselves. The final result is a narrative of simultaneous maturation and personal growth and regression, a point documented in Sarah Banet-Weiser’s authoritative study of the Miss America Pageant. As she explains, as the pageant grew during the 1920s, its contestants “eventually became recognizably mature and experienced adults.”17 In other words, as a contestant becomes more doll-like through acquired accessories and behaviors, she also emulates adulthood. This last point is seen in the “Rumble in the Jungle” pageant in the
introductions of the contestants at the beginning of the pageant (approximately halfway into each episode), which often describe the child-contestants in terms of their often unrealistic future goals, such as in the introduction of Eden Wood.

The methods by which Cristy forces Isabella to get a manicure in preparation for a pageant produces what Foucault has identified as docile bodies – that is, bodily forms of subjectivity generated by discourses of power. Yet as a number of feminist critics such as Sandra Lee Bartky and Susan Bordo have astutely pointed out, Foucault’s description of docile bodies in *Discipline and Punish* presumes that no difference exists between how men and women find their bodies tamed. As a prescriptive to this omission, Bartky outlines three kinds of practices that specifically produce feminine docile bodies: “those that aim to produce a body of a certain size and general configuration; those that bring forth from this body a specific repertoire of gestures, postures, and movements; and those that are directed toward the display of this body as an ornamented surface.”18 And although Bartky fails to historicize the category of “recognizably feminine” (as well as reinscribing its whiteness), a body caught between doll and woman, it would follow, exhibits specific metrics, physical positions, and conditions of spectacle, aggregating a catalogue of techniques of the self quite common to reality television, and especially to the programs of makeover and recovery television I discussed in the first chapter.

But are such techniques uncanny? Several critics of Freud’s essay contend that Freud and Jentsch have more in common with their definitions of the uncanny than otherwise, highlighting a degree of uncanniness itself present in Freud’s readings of Jentsch and Hoffmann. Both Cixous and Weber have found in “The Uncanny” essay an indulgent textuality, rife with calling attention to its own form. The conceptual uncanny,
in both essays, is uncertainly formal insofar as it is somehow more than a shared, subjective feeling but without an easily identifiable objective structure. For Weber, this is on the level of textuality and specifically repetition; the problem of the uncanny is “a problem which, we begin to suspect, involves repetition not merely as a thematic phenomenon but as a factor of interpretation itself.”¹⁹ Such repetition, of course, also defined television textuality and television viewing. We may note, for example, that the kind of bodily modification depicted in the nail salon scene of “Rumble in the Jungle” is part of a staged preparation of a pageant and found in every episode.

Yet this performance involves not just a fixed repetition; as previously elaborated, it oscillates between inanimate doll and animated child, which opens it to the mobility of desire, Thus, I would like to suggest that one side effect of the stereotyped representations of overbearing mothers grooming their daughter-dolls is that, in addition to reinforcing gendered expressions of feminine hysteria – such as mothers coming undone by a desire to win – they legitimate the child-contestant as an object of sexual desire, or at least open up the possibility for her to give her consent. This consent works on a voyeuristic register: a mother gives consent to viewers to ogle her child while simultaneously appearing as childlike, and a child-contestant gives her consent to be viewed as an object of sexual desire through her being disciplined into adulthood. The mother-daughter relationship transforms into its structural opposite, in which the children perform a disciplined adulthood while the mothers perform immature excess, but such an infantilizing role reversal is unstable, leading to significant disruptions in how one can read female agency in the text.
This, too, is present in another of “Rumble in the Jungle’s” scenes. As the episode proceeds, the audience learns that Isabella is an amateur to the world of pageants, and one of her competitors in the “Rumble in the Jungle” pageant is a huge threat: Eden Wood, one of the program’s recurring profiled contestants (she has appeared in twelve episodes of the series). Eden is a pageant superstar; Pageant Director Heather Ryan, who also happens to be Eden’s talent manager (much to the chagrin of the other pageant moms), calls her “our breakout rock star…the best of the best.” Eden is successful at pageants largely due to the tenacious promotion by her mother, Mickie Wood; but in this episode Mickie is not quite on her game. A camera follows Mickie as she runs down the hall, explaining to the audience that Eden’s preparation is in crisis: her wardrobe is arriving late, and Mickie will have to style Eden’s hair herself, something in which she has no expertise. Mickie’s voiceover accompanies footage of her violently pulling Eden’s hair into place, wrangling her daughter as she cries loudly: “I’ve been so traumatized and disorganized because of the drama this morning,” Mickie explains. “We’re all panicking because the hair’s not right and the makeup’s not right…She started crying, she had a meltdown because she didn’t want to let me down. It’s all about her, and for her, and if she’s not happy, I’m not happy, so it’s up to her.”

Both Eden and Mickie inhabit bodies that incite uncertainty as to their narrative position, age, and animation; they are, at alternate moments throughout the scene, representative of the infantilization of women and of post-feminist discourses of empowerment. They are hypercompetitive, yet still display a familial care for each other: Mickie believes that Eden’s meltdown is a performed response to not living up to her mother’s expectations, which in turn elicits similar feelings from her daughter. The scene
ends with Mickie giving Eden a choice, telling her that if she wants (if she consents), they will pack up, withdraw from the competition, and leave immediately. Yet Eden decides to compete – and wins the title of Grand Supreme – thus participating in the episode’s larger ideological work of promoting self-management for young girls through hard work and a refusal to quit. This participation is organized by her active consent, one presented in neoliberal terms of choice and embedded in the system of entrepreneurial reward that serves as the egalitarian promise both of the pageant world and of reality TV. As Kimberly Springer has demonstrated with respect to the processes of editing that ultimately shape the stereotype of the “black bitch” in reality television, “manipulating consent, as well as reality TV participants’ sense of having consented, is integral to the genre’s structure and the manipulation of audiences’ gender, race, class, and sexual orientation prejudices” – prejudices that shape the simultaneous acknowledgment of and independence from the personal identities of its participants. Highlighted here as an affective “sense,” consent functions not unlike a reading practice, aligning the various strategies by which one might be made uncomfortable by a program such as Toddlers. On the one hand, the indetermination of the child-contestant’s consent feeds into the program’s brand as a site of the production of (exploited) child celebrity and therefore as a contested site of media controversy. On the other hand, the moments at which child-contestants do give consent are animated by highly edited pageant crises that scramble age, gesture, and appearance into reiterated gender stereotypes present within the genre at large. Consent, that is, molds both the structural and affective uncanny of reality television.
Broken Families, Real Affects

Both parent and daughter awkwardly consent to their participation in a pageant because for all intents and purposes, production companies and networks view them as a singular family unit. From a legal perspective, parents are allowed to grant consent on the child’s behalf through agreeing to the child’s participation on reality television. Yet a number of law review articles have recently scrutinized the lack of legal protection for children who participate in reality television and for those who participate in child beauty pageants, citing Toddlers as evidence of a problem necessitating federal statutory regulation. Some reality television scholarship has explored questions of child exploitation within the genre, such as in Mark Andrejevic’s insightful reading of consent and labor in Kid Nation (CBS, 2007), in which he contends that “even if surveillance can transform everyday activities into value it nevertheless cannot transform allegedly spontaneous activity (free of the observer’s control) into exploitation” (and thus complicating what counts as “exploitation” within the program’s production and reception). These legal readings of the program are also uncertain readings, insofar as they fail to make the distinction between Toddlers as reality television program and each episode as a “real” pageant, a slippage enacted by TLC itself through the practice of using pageant names as episode titles. This conflation of representation and referent emerges in the policy recommendations this literature offers that would benefit child-contestants, and, in terms of rights, the child pageant contestant and the child actor inhabit the same subject category. Analyzing such legal discourse through the discourse of cultural theory, we might note how this literature constructs child-contestants as embodying the forms of fetal and infantile citizenship thoughtfully identified by Lauren
Berlant as central to the discursive wars over so-called “family values” during the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century. For Berlant, these “sentimental” forms of citizenship paradoxically posit a subject who epitomizes a utopic form of (presumed white and heterosexual) national belonging and a subject without rights that requires them in order to stabilize the family, protecting it from the advances made by people of color, women, and queer people.\textsuperscript{24}

Lindsay Lieberman offers a symptomatic framing of this juridical approach to the subjectivity of the child-contestant through redirecting all avenues of consent through the parent: “A child in the industry has no recognized rights. Thus, if her parents fail to look out for her well being, she has no advocate at all.”\textsuperscript{25} Children, therefore, are only made legible through their participation in a family unit, which itself serves as the basic unit around which the nation is constituted.

But on television – and especially on reality television – the family has never been a “stable” signifier. Derek Kompare notes how “television families are sites of cultural anxieties, where the work of social cohesion is ritually enacted,” proposing that the family may be read as a genre that enacts a space of continuity across history.\textsuperscript{26} The televisual family’s function as a set of normative social ideals, regardless of the actualization of those ideals, governs many of the medium’s expectations, particularly given its domestic context of reception. Reality television is an important contributor enacting these expectations while, in the process, nonetheless dissolving the already shaky ground on which a family may stand. The very first documentary reality series, PBS’s \textit{An American Family}, made celebrities out of its subjects, the Louds of Santa Barbara. But the image of the “American family” presented by Craig Gilbert, Alan Raymond, Susan Raymond, and their crew in 1973 was not one of post-war matrimonial
bliss, since the dissolution of Bill and Pat Loud’s marriage after twenty-one years formed the crux of the documentary’s narrative, epitomized in one famous scene in which Pat tells Bill that she wants a divorce. The headline of a cover of *Newsweek* featuring the first reality TV celebrities from 1973 sums it up: “The Broken Family,” thus yoking together the emergence of the reality genre, however avant-garde and experimental in this case, with the family in crisis.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 9. The covers of *Newsweek* (March 12, 1973) and *People* (September 26, 2011)**

But this is also a connective tissue uncannily present in the aforementioned *People* cover featuring a doll-like Madisyn, insofar as a family comprised of dolls and their handlers is framed as approximating an ideal of a unified family. Amy Villarejo’s astute observation that media reactions to *An American Family*’s broadcast in 1973 express the desire for “the sociopolitical function of the television family as an anchor for representational certainty” cements this perception of reality television as endangering the health of the family and nation.27
Of course, the desire for an anchoring authenticity contributes to – if not primarily establishes – reality television’s polarized cultural value. Cursed with accusations of being very “unreal,” while also celebrated for that unreality, the viewer of reality TV is often left guessing whether or not the events presented as “real” were, in fact, staged by producers, performed by its subjects, or some combination of both. For example, consider Jean Baudrillard’s extensive critique of *An American Family* as “a sort of frisson of the real, or of an aesthetics of the hyperreal, a frisson of vertiginous and phony exactitude, a frisson of simultaneous distancing and magnification, of distortion and scale, of an excessive transparency.” The series constitutes a referent dependent upon the production of its sign, with the presence of the cameras provoking Pat and Bill’s divorce in the name of documenting it. Philip Rosen has critiqued Baudrillard’s reading of the series for conflating the subject (the filmmaker) with the object of knowledge (the Louds), thus ignoring the centrality of sequence to documentary practices. Rosen identifies a fundamental contradiction with Baudrillard’s argument: the panic surrounding *An American Family* as potentially disrupting the family is not a postmodern crisis in which the medium and the real it depicts are indistinguishable from each other, but rather a historiographical question in which the series is a “document of a real that preexists the spectators’ viewing.” Villarejo, too, sees in Baudrillard a egregious misunderstanding of the nature of broadcasting, making “the time of reception equivalent to the time of recording, when in fact it is the ideological valence of ‘live’ television overwhelming its miniaturization to which Baudrillard is responding.” She, in fact, is unconvinced that Baudrillard actually watched the series, drawing his ire instead from an “impatience with cultural theory that rests on breezy associations and fleeting analyses.”
But this is also Baudrillard’s point, to some extent: that one need not actually watch reality television in order to feel empowered to comment on it; moreover, the Information Age and its flexible knowledge economy testifies to this, as I explore in the conclusion to this dissertation.

I recapitulate this reception of *An American Family* in order to demonstrate the operationalization of consent in the debate surrounding the documentary status of reality television and its impact on what would otherwise be considered unmediated real life. *Toddlers* is not unlike *An American Family* to some degree, despite airing on a for-profit cable network and exhibiting a lower cultural value in the eyes of critics; both engage a limited understanding of consent that only empowers its subjects through familial conflict. The performance of excessive control by competitive pageant moms, for example, or the performance of rehearsed poise by disciplined child-contestants may occur under an imperative to amplify the performance of self for broadcast television and the networks of celebrity, including the desire for fame and an extended career on reality television. The glare of documentary cameras, this critique implies, may ultimately produce as many tears as they capture, leading to the never fully “authentic” meltdowns that not only drive ratings but also circulate beyond their original broadcasts through memes and viral video clips. Family drama becomes played out both on-screen and off-screen, as tabloid magazines and gossip websites provoke and reaffirm familial commitments. In this way Kirstin Pike correctly asserts that *Toddlers* resembles “a retrograde, patriarchal sitcom from a bygone era,” but not only, as she claims, through the reinscription of 1950s stereotypical characterizations of wacky spendthrift mothers and sensible breadwinning fathers. Such a comparison is warranted also through the way
that the heterosexual nuclear family threatens to break down, only to emerge intact by the end of each episode, a textual strategy exemplary of the classic sitcom, with elements of disturbance (that produce the comedy) and containment (that revert to the initial situation), as a number of scholars, such as Patricia Mellencamp and Mary Beth Haralovich, have pointed out.32

But Toddlers is not exceptional in its indirect citation of older genres of television that presented complex negotiations of gender and family dynamics. As reality television’s offerings proliferated throughout the 2000s, cable networks such as TLC and Discovery in particular began profiling “ordinary” families with extraordinary hooks, perhaps a strategic rebranding of the genre as reflecting idealized American family values. These families consist of “little people,” bounty hunters, or couples with exceptional procreative powers, and while these programs premiere presenting the image of a cohesive family unit, several of these series had to integrate dissolving family relationships into long-term serial narratives, with network executives taking these compromised relationships into consideration when deciding whether to renew or cancel a program. For some of these series, familial conflict coincides with cancellation, such as in Dog the Bounty Hunter (A&E, 2004-2012), in which “Dog” Chapman’s sons, Leland and Duane Lee, publicly severed ties with their family, leaving the series shortly before its cancellation. Perhaps the most well-known example of this can be seen in Jon & Kate Plus 8 (Discovery Health and TLC, 2007-present), in which Jon and Kate Gosselin went through a very public and very messy divorce, resulting in a cancellation of Jon’s involvement in the series and the eventual removal of Jon’s name from the program. Of course, familial conflict can also be successfully integrated into a series, as in the
example of *Little People, Big World* (TLC, 2006-present), but even this incorporation requires the eventual reassurance of stable partnership. Following the revelation during the series’ twelfth season that family heads Matt and Amy Roloff were engaged in a trial separation, the thirteenth season began by foregrounding the separation, going on to contrast the failed relationship between father and mother with the more successful relationship of their son Jeremy and his fiancée Audrey, whose marriage was featured in that season’s finale. Socioeconomic class is often a determining factor in familial stability; celebrity families with enormous amounts of disposable income prior to filming (such as the Osbournes or the Kardashians) can weather the rocky tides of reality television, whereas many families who are “made famous” through reality television declare bankruptcy or otherwise experience financial difficulty following a cancellation.

The aforementioned series differ from *Toddlers* in that they profile one family across multiple seasons, resulting in a different valence of celebrity status with different forms of affective labor needed to sustain the longevity of the series. But remember that *Toddlers* is not immune to the allures (and risks) of a neoliberal kind of reality TV celebrity that requires brand management and segmented appearances on multiple platforms and programs. Several of its stars – and their families, the mothers of which have been made famous for their notoriety – appear in multiple episodes, with two child stars having parlayed appearances on *Toddlers* into separate series: *Eden’s World* (Logo, 2012) and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (TLC, 2012-2014). It is telling that of these two programs featuring former *Toddlers* fan favorites, the one with the higher ratings success (despite its controversy) was the one that foregrounded the entire Thompson family as a
cohesive unit, supportive of Alana “Honey Boo Boo Child” Thompson’s celebrity, which is asserted through her own personality.\textsuperscript{33}

By contrast, in \textit{Eden’s World}, Eden is “reduced to a supporting role,” as one \textit{New York Post} review of the series claimed.\textsuperscript{34} The premise of \textit{Eden’s World} is twofold: episodically, Eden and Mickie travel around to different small towns, giving guidance and inspiration to other pageant contestants, and across episodes, the series documents Eden’s attempts to move into other types of show business, auditioning for television, Broadway, and a major label recording contract. The majority of the series focuses on Mickie and the other people who manage Eden’s celebrity, her manager Heather Ryan and her publicist Andrew Sullivan. Promotional materials and press about the series frame these individuals as Eden’s “team” and not as her family, making the narrative thrust of the program about a child star’s entrance into established entertainment industries rather than about everyday family life.\textsuperscript{35} Detached from the pageant circuit, Eden’s behavior as a hard working entertainer failed to attract an audience, let alone the attention of production. \textit{Eden’s World} was swiftly cancelled, and its cancellation might be read, I believe, through the disciplinary affects of the pageant industry. Whereas her entourage brought drama, Eden was \textit{too} perfect and thus bland, and \textit{Eden’s World} repressed its supposed star’s air of controversy in favor of her own respectability.\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Eden’s World} exposes through its failure the formula for “winning” reality television, becoming its Grand Supreme: maximize well-rehearsed controversies, promote family togetherness, and consent (via the stabilized family) to the precarious economy of convergent cultural celebrity.
The Child Queered by Beauty and Youth (which is also to say Money)

But who, exactly, is the child beauty pageant contestant, and how did she come to arbitrate consent on TV in recent decades? If reality television, with its uncanny rules of consent, speaks to the transformation of the American family in the last decades of the 20th century, it resonates with the broader changes to the perception of children in the American cultural imaginary throughout the entire century. While *Toddlers* can trace its structural affect well past its neoliberal moment of broadcast, as a media text it mobilizes a number of anxieties particularly shaped by these changes, which include attending to a (queer) figure partially produced by the child: that of the sexual predator. As social historian Viviana Zelizer contended in 1985, the beginning of the 20th century viewed the child as a literal source of wage labor and thus as a subject present in the industrial economy and the public sphere, albeit one with limited rights. Economic changes, such as the transition from an industrial to a consumer goods economy, spurred accompanying juridical and social changes, such as child labor laws, and changed the subjectivity of the child to one whose labor potential was primarily symbolic and affective: a child worthy of protection, secluded from the public sphere within the confines of the homogenous suburban neighborhood.

Kathryn Bond Stockton takes Zelizer’s argument further, or perhaps sideways, noting that the sacralized child asserts its emancipation from wage labor in a rather curious way: by becoming “queered by money, along with [the child’s] obvious appetite for media.” This is a bold characterization despite its deceptive simplicity, and the playfully queer movement from money to media is rich for analyzing a program such as *Toddlers*. On one level, Stockton acknowledges the subsumption of lesbian and gay
identities into consumer capitalism, since, as the playwright Tony Kushner noted in 1994, homophobia is not essential to the successful functioning of the free market, and “the system could certainly accommodate demands for equal rights for homosexuals without danger to itself.” Lisa Henderson advances an ebullient challenge to such a notion without explicitly citing Kushner, calling for a class-based queer politics of love and solidarity. This is not to say that Henderson’s position, however hopeful, cannot merge with Stockton’s, bringing it into an uneasy – uncanny? – coalition with Kushner’s: Henderson draws hope from the vibrant potentiality of queer cultural production, which engenders public affects of care and community as “just a place to start” – that is, from the position of a (queer) child.

On another level, the child queered by money asserts something queer about consumption. The child queered by media is the infantilized fan whose libido becomes sublimated into popular culture. Stockton’s realization thus also inadvertently highlights my earlier argument about addiction, mobilizing the fears of parental advocacy groups and child psychologists that children are vulnerable to the discourses of glib consumption present within media texts. Children gorge on media texts naturally – and uncritically, these fears imply – because media advertising aggressively interpellates children (and especially young girls) into economic life as the ideal consumer-spectator. Reality television brokers this economic subjectivity through its managerial pedagogy of self-improvement, in which audiences are students (a mutated form of childhood) who continue their privately sponsored education well into adulthood; this programming is a practical way of entertaining kids as well as their parents through its moralizing lessons.
And on yet another level, the statement posits a queer relationship to the act of spectatorship itself. This gestures to what Lynne Joyrich canonically called the “epistemology of the console,” or the possibility that a popular entertainment medium such as television manifests the disclosure of information – including one’s sexuality – as a media event with spectacular value.\textsuperscript{41} Fusing together Marx’s theory of the commodity form with Eve Sedgwick’s theory of the closet, and writing in an era of broadcast television climate more reluctant to screen sexual relations between same-sex couples, Joyrich notes how television frequently manages sexual identity through vocabularies of consumption.\textsuperscript{42} It might be appropriate, then, to re-view how Joyrich highlights displacement (the threat of disruptive queerness mitigated through its transformation into commodity fetish) within the context of the queer child, who can consume an embedded queerness surreptitiously while in plain view.

Taken together, the readings I offer here foreground how television acts as a protector of the child, but also how the child’s relationship to television makes her particularly vulnerable. This is a different kind of vulnerability, however, than that proposed by a number of digital media theorists who astutely note the child’s role in framing public debate about the Internet in terms of sexual exposure and harm. Whereas the Internet’s interactivity and its role in negotiating publicity and privacy opened up the child to the unregulated world of cyberporn in its earlier instantiations in the mid-1990s, television constructs the child as primarily economically vulnerable – though also increasingly sexually vulnerable – with, as previously stated, the young girl particularly susceptible to the medium’s capacity to shape consumer habits.\textsuperscript{43} The child queered by money is a variant of what the French collective Tiqqun diagram as the “Young-Girl,” an
extension of bourgeois white femininity who is simultaneously the embodiment of a social relation, the result of a technique of the self, a cog in the war machine, and living currency and commodity. What marks the Young-Girl as both exceptional and universal is her relentless drive to consume through her endless adaptability and exchangeability: “The Young-Girl sets in motion the self-commodification of what is beyond the market; the auto-estimation of the inestimable,” they write. She places her faith in her ability to liquidate everything and is herself “true gold, absolute cash” (YG 96). Tiqqun’s polemical text is rife with aphorisms that construct the Young-Girl as promiscuous living theory, which reflects their own investment in the Young-Girl’s capacity never to be herself. Her beauty, for example, “is never a particular beauty, or one that might belong to her. On the contrary, hers is a beauty without content, an absolute beauty free of any personality. The Young-Girl’s ‘beauty’ is but the form of the void, the spectral form of the Young-Girl” (YG 46). The “spectral form of the Young-Girl” is clearly summoned in televised child beauty pageants, in which child-contestants constantly move from hotel to hotel, entering different pageants with adaptable yet interchangeable outfits and routines. According to Tiqqun’s theoretical sketch, child-contestants are defined by their lack of personality and therefore of any legible humanity: both consumer and to-be-consumed, they are instead voracious tableaux to which artificial processes and excessive accessories can be applied.

It is, however, perhaps too counterintuitive to acknowledge the child beauty pageant contestant as a critical figure of Young-Girlhood (or as having any critical purchase at all). The Young-Girl voluntarily embraces her exploitation and commodification, Tiqqun argue, but the cost of this way of life is fatal: because the Young-Girl is entirely constructed, she can also be destroyed. While they contend that
any gender can be the Young-Girl, the ease at which the Young-Girl can be made extinct by the “different sentimental education” proposed by Tiqqun is uncomfortably misogynistic, despite two claims (again, argued by aphorism): first, the “the Young-Girl is herself the product of misogyny, but the theory of the Young-Girl is not” – a direct quote from the back of the book, and thus a marker of the theory’s own Young-Girlesque necessary commodification – and, second, that the Young-Girl is neither a gender-specific nor age-specific position. But we might contrast Tiqqun’s hostility towards the Young-Girl’s conscious victimhood with Rebecca Stringer’s account of “vulnerability after wounding” or with Mel Chen’s notion of a critical animacy in which one may become more receptive to different objects or affects of care. While Tiqqun reminds us that while the child beauty pageant contestant may consent to her commodification, their emphasis on her aggressive image-colonialism downplays her sentimentalization; the Young-Girl may exemplify a certain anxiety about the child’s capacity to own her economic vulnerability and to transform that vulnerability into a strategy of survival, but she triggers these anxieties rather than simply being the recipient of them.

As is clear by now, the child can be queered by money and by media and be morphed into the militarized image of the Spectacle because the child is, like other identities, socially constructed, and thus dependent upon the network of regulatory apparatuses that simultaneously define and discipline her. But these readings also expose the child as also deeply enmeshed in the semiotic, in the sense articulated by Julia Kristeva in her discussion of the semiotic chora: the affective dimension underpinning signification that gives shape to tone, rhythm, and force. If children must be protected, it is because their immediate proximity conjures a problem to be resolved or a set of
prohibitions. For Kristeva, the semiotic chora lacks structure and meaning, and female children in particular retain connective access to the semiotic even as they enter the symbolic realm of language, structure, and the law.\textsuperscript{47} One way in which \textit{Toddlers} articulates this entrance is through the structure of the pageant itself, which instructs children how to compete with one another from very early ages, in contrast to encouraging children to share with each other freely and collaborate in play. Beauty pageants have long been analogized as the feminine equivalent of sporting events, and the competitive element gives it cultural value, since contestants are considered to be experts at feminine mimicry, even and especially to the point of being boring. Banet-Weiser helpfully observes how the Miss America Pageant has historically drawn attention to the labor of its contestants as a way to distance itself from the perception that it was “something other than a beauty contest.”\textsuperscript{48} But of course the pageants in \textit{Toddlers} are explicitly framed by both producers and contestants as beauty contests, even though these contests privilege and reward hard work. The child-contestant is expected to grow up too fast, becoming, again, the child laborer of centuries ago through her affective labor, but this risks her well-being. Even Grand Supremes are precarious and in need of protection.

The semiotic function of children, then, resonates with that of the American family, and especially so in the decades following the Louds, the broken American family of reality television. As a number of scholars have generatively observed, throughout the 1980s and 1990s the family came to signify a nation coming to terms with the cultural effects of neoliberalism. As a synecdoche for all social relations, certain interest groups within the public sphere presented family values as a solely cultural problem rather than a political or economic one, allowing family drama to be structured
as a bootstraps narrative for the late 20th century. According to Henry Giroux, the myth of childhood innocence functions to disaffirm the material effects of social and economic inequality on children, serving as a wedge issue to dupe white working-class and suburban middle-class voters into voting for conservative economic policies that often threaten their own economic interests. Yet the ultimate effect of conservative family values was not only to enclose the child within ideological parenting techniques or even within the physical boundaries of the home, but rather to circulate the image of the exploited or endangered child incessantly across all media forms and genres in the name of deliberative action that would regulate many groups of individuals (but never the referents themselves, for children are without full rights and thus difficult to legislate).

Thus as the child emerges at the end of the 20th century as in need of protection, she also emerges as exposed by the very forces that claim to protect her or those that demand more protections in her name. This mechanism of protection and exposure expands the visibility of the child as potentially in danger, contributing to her position in the American cultural imaginary as victim. She may even be what sociologist Chris Greer has called the “ideal victim” of the news media, perceived as “vulnerable, defenceless, innocent and worthy of sympathy and compassion.” But vulnerable to whom? Here, finally, the figure this chapter has been writing around, writing sideways in search of, can finally be given his due; if the female child represents the ideal victim, her idealization exists in direct opposition to the ideal predator.
Finding a Child, Catching a Predator

The sexual predator has enjoyed a renaissance in cultural studies scholarship, perhaps an unsurprising development given the impact of Michel Foucault’s first volume of *The History of Sexuality* in interrogating – and, to some extent, reclaiming – social deviancy. The sexual predator was often found within some feminist circles as exemplary of harm and sexual violence, even and especially through critiques of Foucault, who was accused by many feminists for providing a revisionist account of intergenerational sex acts. A 1978 radio interview conducted on the topic of pedophilia with a panel consisting of Foucault, Guy Hocquenghem (whose aside opens this chapter), and the French actor and gay activist Jean Danet, lays out, along more or less expected grounds, the case against the criminalization of sex between adults and children below the age of fifteen: Foucault finds fault with how the law has regulated homosexual behavior by using the pedophile as a straw man, which, he points out, was historically constructed as a catch-all population of “dangerous individuals.” He also criticizes the law, as well as the psychiatric establishment that props up the law, for presuming to “know” the child’s sexuality. In a thorough reading of the interview, Linda Martín Alcoff reads a certain “almost laughable insignificance” – an affective reading – afforded to sex acts between adults and children by the panel, which minimizes the potential for harm present within these acts, which are presented as always already consensual. In other words, Alcoff writes, “despite the problems they have with applying the notion of consent to sexual practices, the panelists rely on just such a notion in their argument that not all sexual relations between adults and children are violent or exploitative.”52 Her attention to a certain ambivalence regarding pleasure in *The History of Sexuality* – according to Alcoff,
although he sees pleasure as a product of discourse, Foucault views it as intrinsically good and thus exempt from political evaluation – reveals how sexual practices “comprise forms of subjectiviation” precisely because of their self-constituting intersubjectivity, not unlike a moral code.53 Such a reading typifies how the predator came to index harm itself, with the universalization of harm in Alcoff’s essay, I believe, betraying an overinvestment in the myth of childhood innocence.

While I do not use Alcoff’s essay to stand in for all feminist figurations of the sexual predator, it serves as a useful historical marker for understanding the construction of the sexual predator along registers of harm and consent. Indeed, much of the literature on the sexual predator that followed Alcoff’s essay (which was published in 1996, although it was written much earlier) is critically (and queerly) sympathetic to the predator, positing his cultural production through oppositional readings of the myth of childhood innocence. “As pedophiles have multiplied (and hidden themselves),” James Kincaid writes in his masterful study on the culture of child molestation, “we have reconstituted and extended the range of their activity,” yet this Foucaultian proliferation of the predator leads not to his marginalization from society but to his outright excommunication and erasure from social life.54 Stephen Angelides notes how the figure of the sexual predator, either as “stranger danger” or as from within the family, secernates child sexuality from adult sexuality as something else altogether, while Judith Levine contends that the predator represents a target for anxieties surrounding the possibility of a sexually emancipated child.55 In a similar vein, Richard Mohr has persuasively documented “the pedophilia of everyday life,” or the cyclical process marked by the
propagation of pedophilic images: “ones in which youthfulness sexualizes the image and in turn the image enhances the sexiness of youth.”

One critical difference between these two literatures is the role that media play in the sexual predator’s cultural production. Both the child and the sexual predator may require the mass-mediated spaces ubiquitous throughout what Berlant calls the “intimate public sphere,” with the circulation of media images predominantly accounting for the sexual predator’s cultural power in Kincaid’s and Mohr’s accounts. That so much of this recuperative scholarship discernably refers to the sexual predator in a figural register is telling; as Joseph Fischel compellingly asserts, the fiction of the sex offender “helps functionalize consent as the metric that matters for late modern sexual ethics.” In other words, the same culture industries that regularly publicize the threat of the pedophile in fact help produce his very subjectivity. As stabilizing fiction, the sexual predator obliges constant publicity, insofar as he must be surveilled by both the state and the popular media, just like his prey, the child.

Some of the effects of this phenomenon on television can be gleaned from the millennial police procedural; for example, Law & Order: Special Victims Unit (NBC, 1999-present) stands out most notably for the degree to which crimes against children are represented. Yet one need not look to narrative television to find the most egregious examples of sensationalized coverage of exploited children: these instead can be found in one of television’s oldest genres – the news – and in one of its newest – the reality docusoap. This paradox at the heart of the predatory relationship further explains the amplification of the sexual predator within a 24 hour news cycle, as images of children near identical to each other circulate in the tabloid ether, either on spinoffs of cable news
channels or in the print media that grace supermarket checkout lanes. This reinforces the paradox of innocence and exposure central to the trope of the sexualized child: the more one insists on the child's innocence, the more exposed her sexualization is to the world, via an affective cycle of publicity and desire rhythmically staged in modern celebrity culture. But it also exempts the body itself from the paradox, to some degree, insofar as innocence, rather than the autonomous young subject, also becomes the victim of sexual violence.

Of course, Toddlers & Tiaras did not introduce the identity of the child beauty pageant queen into American popular culture. The first child beauty pageant queen to become a media celebrity was made famous by her disappearance and not by her pageant successes: JonBenét Ramsey, who was found strangled in the basement of her family's home in Boulder, Colorado, in 1996 on the day after Christmas. Ramsey's case captivated national attention during the typically slow-news winter holidays, spurring endless speculation as to the guilt of her parents, John and Patsy, who were not only the prime suspects in her murder but also routinely pilloried by media outlets for being bad parents. Patsy once allegedly physically punished JonBenét for wetting the bed, for example; but, more so than for any form of parental discipline, the Ramseys were condemned for the “discipline” of encouraging JonBenét’s participation in pageants. As Kincaid so succinctly puts it,

the murder of JonBenét Ramsey allowed us (by way of our obliging media villains) to wax indignant about beauty pageants – what kind of people would do that to a six-year-old child? – as we were watching endless videos of a little girl made up to look like a cross between Dolly Parton and Joan Rivers. She pranced once again for us on the screen and sang and did a mock striptease, and we blamed it all on vulgar parents, greed, or ‘the South.’ Of course, no one has been able even to invent a connection
between the pageants and the grisly murder that gave rise to the publicity, but so what?\textsuperscript{58}

Although Kincaid claims that such a connection does not exist, this is not for a lack of effort on the part of the news media, most famously in Katie Couric’s March 2000 interview with John and Patsy Ramsey, which was divided into five segments that aired successively during that week’s broadcast of the \textit{Today} show. In it, home video footage of JonBenét singing “I Want to be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart” – a short, ten second sequence that was heavily replayed on both network and cable news segments about JonBenét’s murder and the subsequent investigation – leads Couric to ask JonBenét’s parents, still suspects in the public eye, about their daughter’s participation in pageants:

I'm sure you both know by now that this whole beauty pageant aspect of your lives has struck many people who aren't in this world as kind of weird. Some would say creepy, in fact, to take a little six-year-old girl, and poof up her hair and put makeup on her and dress her up like a showgirl…It has influenced public opinion that you had your daughter compete in beauty pageants.

Patsy’s response: “But does that translate, because you went with your daughter on the weekends to a talent show, does that translate to make us murderers? I mean come on. It was something we enjoyed together, and I don't care what people say about it. It is a precious memory to me. And if she were alive we'd probably still be doing it.”\textsuperscript{59}

The exchange, one of many between journalists and the Ramseys in the year 2000, fails to make any evidentiary associations between JonBenét’s participation in pageants and her murder. But it accomplishes a semiotic association – we all know that the parents are suspect of something, even if it is not
JonBenét’s murder – through the trace of the sexual predator. “Some would say creepy,” Couric presses, and though the Ramseys were never formally accused of sexually abusing their daughter, such conspiracy theories were reproduced endlessly throughout online discussion boards and tabloid magazines. In a particularly rich interview on CNN’s *Larry King Live* on January 13, 1997, just a few weeks following the discovery of JonBenét’s body, CBS anchor Dan Rather criticized the news industry for repeatedly airing footage of JonBenét dressed up in her pageant outfits – footage not unlike “I Want to be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart” – and comparing it to child pornography. The comparison was echoed throughout much mainstream media coverage of the murder and investigation, which inevitably circled back to the media ethics of the coverage itself. But if footage of JonBenét participating in pageants constitutes child pornography, who occupies the position of the pornographer, the mediatized predator? On one level, the parents are the obvious suspects – not just John and Patsy but also Cristy and Mickie and Abby Lee and all the other pageant and dance moms featured on reality TV – for they are the ones to stage the scene of sexualization through initiating and, in some cases, driving pageant participation and through filming amateur performance footage. On another level, producers and network executives could be considered culpable, as they control all technical aspects of the pageant broadcast and news footage, from the cameras that zoom in onto the child-contestant’s doll-like appearance to the editing that frames the gender and generational dynamics. But neither of these are the real culprit: the pornographic (and thus predatory) enabler of the predatory spectator is none other than the audience, ourselves. Tuning in, we
consent to enter the hotel conference room, to “Rumble in the Jungle.” Tuning in, we consent to meeting Olympia and the other miniaturized Dolly Partons and Julia Robertses. Tuning in, we consent to the predatory spectator, and the uncanny realization, for a fleeting moment, that he is standing right next to Eden onstage, on full display.

**Bad Touches and Predatory Pricks: Dread and Absent Presence**

Or was that him? It is unclear, uncertain.

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes lays out the *noeme*, or essence, of photography as its essential differentiation. But Barthes is not a photographer, and so although he provides a new lexicon of photographic agents, including the Operator (photographer), Spectrum (photographic subject), and Spectator (viewer of the photograph), he is most interested, as am I, in the role of the spectator. He identifies two well-known components that together form the affective relationship between photograph and spectator: the *studium* and the *punctum*. The studium carries an intuitive familiarity as the presence of a spectator’s knowledge within the photograph, such as what is obvious about its mise-en-scène, staging, and frame composition. As both self-contained and ordered, the studium is an extant field that establishes spectatorial relations around established orders and its cultural contexts. The studium is, to Barthes, a rather boring hermeneutic category from which to pinpoint affect; by contrast, the punctum is vibrantly private, disturbing the studium’s false sense of ideological security. Where the studium provides order, the punctum is a “temporal hallucination” (though it is also “modest and
shared”); where one approaches the studium on the level of like, the punctum is a wound that injures simplistic criticism. The punctum (in Latin, the perfect passive participle) “will…punctuate” the studium, both breaking it up and giving it a formal grammar (CL 26). The punctum is hardcore; it is aggressively uncanny: Barthes writes that it “is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (CL 27).

Barthes did not watch a lot of television (the word does not appear in Camera Lucida) and, indeed, he makes clear throughout Camera Lucida that the moving image is severed from photography, although it can create a “blind field” that “constantly doubles our partial vision” (CL 57). Yet he concedes that the punctum in a photograph can create such blind fields too, such that, as Adam Lowenstein has observed, “the punctum animates the photograph with a cinematic power.” Pricking shocks the photograph out of a purely static reception; might it then follow that perhaps Barthes could be pricked by the moving image as well? I do not want to oversimplify Barthes’ distinction between cinema and photography here; Barthes goes out of his way to stress that “the continuous series of images” within film (and, one would also think, television, although television’s continuity – indeed, its seriality – comes from temporarily suspending disbelief in the indexical relationship to its referent) unfreezes its eidos such that it cannot be death. Nevertheless, a number of film scholars have taken up this small concession, arguing that it points to the tactility of photography, a poignancy that can bruise a moving target. My questions are these: where is consent in the punctum’s prick?
Can consent be legibly distributed across the “blind field” of the moving image that may also carry with it unexpected stings? Can one consent to seeing in the blind field?

Consent and touch are never very far apart from each other. In Erin Manning’s exposition of an affective politics of touch, “to touch is to engage in a consen-sentment that is confronted by the specter of incommensurability, of disagreement.”66 This logic implies that the act of touching invites consent but is not necessarily granted it, or that the act of touching runs the risk of violating consent to some degree. Framed intersubjectively as affective encounter, touch relies upon multiple affectivities converging at a point, nominally on the skin. Recent scholarship in film theory has proposed a theory of haptic spectatorship in which not simply visuality but touch structures the cinematic encounter. For Laura U. Marks, this merging of sight and touch comes across through some texts’ aesthetic qualities – such as the deployment of the low resolution of video and “change in focus, graininess (achieved differently in each medium), and effects of under- and overexposure.” These create a haptic visuality, which allows the spectator’s gaze “to rest on the surface of its object rather than to plunge into depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture.”67 In a sense, spectators can thus feel caresses as well as pricks, with these touches “mak[ing] difficult the notion of a separate, mutually distinct self and other,” in the words of Jennifer Barker.68 The spectatorial body, this camp within film theory maintains, negotiates constant contact with the screen, which itself comes to function as a sort
of skin (for Marks, the “skin of the film” that serves as her monograph’s title).

Giuliana Bruno expands upon the range and reach of haptic cinema:

The haptic, as its etymological root suggests, allows us to come into contact with people and the surface of things. Thus, while the basis of touch is a reaching out – for an object, a place, or a person (including oneself) – it also implies the reverse: that is, being touched in return. This reciprocal condition can be extended to a representational object as well; indeed, it invests the very process of film reception, for we are moved by the moving image. Furthermore, we should consider that, as a receptive function of skin, touch is not solely a prerogative of the hand. It covers the entire body, including the eye itself, and the feet, which establish our contact with the ground.59

These interventions into theories of the moving image offer a richer understanding of affective investment, but they do not adequately problematize consent in their understanding of touch. Barker acknowledges that her theory of haptic erotics contains both pleasurable and horrible touches, with touch as both source of pain as well as the “source of salvation and redemption from pain,” with haptic cinema (in her example, Alain Renais’ Hiroshima mon amour) steering us towards accepting and incorporating both styles of touch onto and into our bodies.70 The act of spectatorship, it would seem, entails an uncertain yet implied consent to both good and bad touches.

I have taken this detour through Barthes and theories of haptic cinema because I wish to consider the predatory spectator as an uncertain or uncanny agent of touch that is central to understanding the child beauty pageant contest in nonnarrative television. This reanimates the controversies surrounding Toddlers & Tiaras as exploitative or as a form of child pornography that undergirds its financial viability and its ability to find its audience. But I do not believe that Toddlers, in fact, “borders on kiddie porn,” as Dan Rather once said about footage of JonBenét. Instead, I read in Toddlers a text so self-aware of its ability to represent the fantasy of pornography that it, in effect, functions in a
similar manner to what feminist legal scholar Amy Adler has called, with respect to *To Catch a Predator*, “a realm of regulatory fantasy that serve[s] to restrict, produce, and fracture desire.” As aspiring Grand Supremes reenact their idealized image of femininity – even when exaggerated to literal reenactments of celebrities such as Dolly Parton and Julia Roberts (in *Pretty Woman*) – audiences cannot help but notice the blatant sexualization of the contestants onscreen, a kind of sexualization omnipresent within the spectacle of the program’s structure yet only explicitly identified as such by paratextual criticism, as in the controversy covered on *The View*. This, I would hazard, formalizes the studium of the series.

Put differently, one might say that *Toddlers* continually stages the spectacle of the sexual child that it disavows, using the imagery of a family united in competition to sidestep the reproduction of prohibited desire enacted by the mise-en-scène of the pageant. Witnessing this rather Foucaultian proliferation of unannounced prohibited desire, audiences must negotiate the viewing position of the sexual predator vis-à-vis their own pleasure taken from the program’s spectacle, a negotiation that pricks its audience in both uncomfortable and pleasurable ways. *Toddlers* is television fueled by uncertain affects, in which viewers sense the position of the predatory spectator – his bad touches – and then redirect those affects through a touching back of the program that exposes the program’s ideological work: its gendered and classed divisions of labor and its parochial spectacle, for example. Yet this process of touching back is forever uncertain, even though we know, on one level, that these Young-Girls are living humans come to inanimacy. The uncanniness of *Toddlers* extends to the anxiety, fear, and dread that accompanies the realization of the predatory spectator, his own soft yet violent touch.
This returns us to the critical question at the core of Shepherd’s rant: is the audience of *Toddlers* protecting the child or molesting her? The predatory spectator is an absent presence, a necessary chaperone to the child beauty pageant contestant’s appearances on television, but this absent presence is itself internally distant from itself, a consensual convergence of dread with perverse pleasure.

But perhaps the knowledge of the predatory spectator, the mental gymnastics viewers undergo in order to acknowledge, and then dismiss, his presence, is enough to fulfill the programs’ disciplinary objective as an instrumentalization of state power. Following Samuel Weber’s assertion that “what constitutes the theatricality of a scene is not simply its visibility, not simply the fact that it is seen, but rather that it is seen by another,” I close by asking how the business of the child beauty pageant might be characterologically interrupted by the predatory spectator, refracting the voyeuristic gaze central to documentary reality onto the exploited child as a totem for national sentimentality. We are never quite alone when we watch a program such as *Toddlers & Tiaras*, but rather we find ways to live with the predatory spectator’s absent presence, such that we can let children be children, however mischievously excessive, this entails.
Saturday morning, 1985. The cereal is packed with extra sugar: Cinnamon Toast Crunch or Powdered Donutz, or perhaps some of the varieties that were based off of popular media, such as Rainbow Brite Cereal or E.T. Cereal. These bowls are lightly splashed with milk as American children wake up early and gather in front of the television for hours of cartoons. Some of the more successful cartoons of the period are produced for network television, requiring an address to a more heterogeneous audience with respect to gender. But many are syndicated for target markets, produced through collaboration between animation studios and toy companies. The most successful of these is a venture between the toy corporation Hasbro and the animation studios Marvel Productions and Sunbrow Productions, responsible for four hit syndicated series: *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* (1983-1986), *The Transformers* (1984-1987), *My Little Pony* (1984-1987), and *Jem and the Holograms* (1985-1988). Largely targeted at different genders, the marketing opportunities appear to be endless. *Jem and the Holograms* is a case in point. Little girls are equally as transfixed by the adventures of Jem, the colorful glam rock alter ego of music producer Jerrica Benton, as with the ways one can access Jem’s identity: through the cartoon itself, through the collectible doll series, or through the accompanying playsets (the Rock Backstager, the Rockin’ Roadster, or the Star Stage). *Jem*’s ideological message of independent girls achieving success in the music industry through the largely male-dominated genre of rock and roll hugely resonated with young audiences (provided that their families had the means to empower these viewers
with the Hasbro line of *Jem* toys): the series was the third most-watched children’s program in syndication in 1987.²

Nighttime (any day of the week), 2009. A wholesome Saturday morning this is not: a video appears on YouTube with a familiar face, but with a completely different voice, pacing, and soundtrack. Here, in this remix video, Jem is renamed Jiz, a profane drug addicted ambiguous drag queen who encourages young girls to get an abortion. The lyrics of the original animated series’ theme song “Truly Outrageous” have also shifted, such as in the verse “Glamour and glitter and fashion and fame!” which has been changed to “My jiz is contagious” and “Glamour and glitter, drag queens insane!” In the two and a half minutes that follow – and then in nineteen subsequent remixes that follow, ranging from short public service announcements to ten-minute long self-contained episodes – the animated adventures of Jem and the Holograms (her bandmates Kimber, Aja, and Shana) are remixed to graphic effect, replaced as Jiz and the Mammograms and containing irreverent storylines and jokes about sexual violence, cunnilingus, abortion, and “shitty panties.” The episodes carry titles such as “A Very Special Drug Episode” and “Kimber is a Dirty Lezzie,” playfully nodding to the form of children’s animation television (singular “very special” episodes and episodes that focus exclusively on a supporting character) while functioning as an assault on nostalgia in all of its sentimentalized registers. Music is still important in Jiz’s diegetic world, but the musical remixes are to contemporary Top 40 hits: in one episode, Rihanna’s 2012 summer hit “Diamonds,” with the chorus instructing its listeners to “Shine bright like a diamond,” is remixed so that under Jiz’s biting humor that borders on bullying, her friends will “break like a hymen.”
Created by a video artist from Los Angeles who assumes the pseudonym Sienna D’Enema, *Jiz* represents a radical departure from its 1980s antecedent *Jem*, both in terms of its technological mode of address and in terms of its content. These departures, however, gesture towards oppositional affective structures. The remix form of *Jiz* situates the series as a fan-produced transformative artwork disseminated online, a cultural object that has benefitted from (and, in turn, benefits) older circuits of production and consumption. In this way, transformation functions positively for the television industry and its neoliberal logics, reinforcing codes of cultural value premised upon expanded spectatorial agency and new networks of fan communities who both consume and produce for TV. Yet in another way, the crude content of *Jiz* renders transformation alienating, with the ideological messages of a popular children’s animated series (popular, at least, among those of a certain generation) corrupted, its empowering import defiled by Jiz’s toilet humor.

It is impossible to think about television in our post-network, broadband, or convergent age without acknowledging the impact of digital culture, such that “television as digital media,” as James Bennett and Niki Strange’s book of the same name argues, refocuses the medium’s mass appeal onto a number of interconnected specific audiences, including fan communities that frequently take “old” media texts and remix them as “new” transformative works. The nomenclatural convergence between “digital” and “new” here is intentional: according to Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, while “new media” was originally envisioned as distinct from “digital media” (indicating interactive or independent dissemination rather than the digitization of other media forms), “the singular plurality of the phrase…stemmed from its negative definition: it was not mass
media, specifically television." Yet the ambivalence with which transformation operates within *Jiz* and in other remixed television series raises a number of questions about the structural logics of televisual remix, which straddles positions both of “television” and “digital media” as well as of “old” and “new.” The movement between these forms – and indeed, the apparent impossibility of making categorical cleavages within remix culture – resonates on an affective dimension; to remix an old text into something new is to risk mutuation on the level of audience, representation, and mode of address in unexpected ways, such that a remixed text not only may arrive to viewers on a different platform but may offend, alienate, and disgust viewers as well.

This chapter argues that there is something *queer* about televisual remix, but this queerness operates on multiple planes. It describes not simply the transformation of an identity (the drag queen replacing the female rocker, for example), but the act of transformation itself: indeed, to queer a text, following some minor OED definitions of the word, is “to put out of order; to spoil” or “to disconcert, perturb, unsettle.” Both “queer” and “remix” thus share a certain theoretical resonance, with each of these terms attempting to scramble existing categories of sexuality and textuality, respectively, in order to subvert, pervert, and revolt against normative codes. Each of these terms is also anthimeric, sliding between object and action or between nouns and verbs. This chapter uncovers the side effects that occur as a result of the processes of “remixing” and “queering” as they play out in convergent television. *Jiz* affords its audiences a look into the affective landscape of remix culture through its insistence on an aesthetics of vulgarity and taboo subject matter. Importantly, I claim that this affective landscape is overdetermined by the technological changes to television spectatorship that have
occurred in the convergent era, such that television series from the past now routinely inset themselves beyond their cancellation dates into a future punctuated by participatory culture.

Specifically, I track how nostalgia is transformed and reshaped through this new experience of televisual remix, using Henry Jenkins’s work on “affective economics” and Sara Ahmed’s work on “affective economies” to theorize an affective economy of perversion and its subsequent impact on the standard idealized confidence in participatory culture’s ability to eliminate the barrier between media consumers and producers. Drawing primarily from Jiz, I propose examining televisual remix from the perspective of abortion, both because it is explicitly referenced in Jiz’s vulgarization of its source text and because it is a reference that fully undermines a sentimental attitude toward both childhood and reproductive processes, including the reproductive processes of media forms themselves. As Barbara Johnson has reflected, the debate surrounding abortion “should refuse to settle into a single voice.” The gravelly, queer voices of Jiz dictate strange and uncomfortable ways of (re)animating and aborting the familiar scenes of Saturday morning to the multiple screens of convergent television, risking the wistful innocence of one’s childhood in the name of participatory culture.

Convergent Sensibilities

Understandings of televisual remix occur in part through the rhetorics of viewer agency and consumer choice that are ubiquitous within convergent television. Part of the spectatorial conditions that distinguish Jem from Jiz – 1985 from 2009 – is that the idealized audience member is no longer part of a family group sitting together in front of
a television, but instead an isolated consumer navigating a matrix of programming offerings on multiple screens and platforms. As a medium advertised to American families during the nation’s rapid suburbanization, television quickly determined many of the temporal rhythms of postwar life, reorganizing how families spent their time through different viewing rituals. Much of this has already been extensively documented within television studies, from examinations of how women integrated soap opera viewing into their housework routines to investigations of how differences in the identity positions of individual family members (particularly age and gender) impacted the politics of viewing and therefore delineated the leisure time of the postwar American middle and working class.  

Technological changes to the medium shifted the boundaries of the domestic spaces for TV viewing from a singular space anchored around the family to multiple rooms with TV networks utilizing narrowcasting strategies and algorithmic formulae to attract and maintain viewership.

Anne Friedberg provides a helpful metaphor in her deployment of the window for describing this changed experience, noting that the “virtual windows” of today are fragmented yet personalized, multiple and simultaneous. “Watching television” is no longer something necessarily done in a domestic space, or even in a public space that facilitates group viewing (as in a doctor’s office, a bar, or an airport terminal), but instead occurs in dispersed environments that move in and out of each other and that are mediated by industrial structures of individuation. Lisa Parks notes that “industry leaders have identified the age of postbroadcasting as the era of ‘personal television,’” and she documents the strategies deployed by networks, cable companies, and other providers to “produce the effect of enhanced viewer choice in the form of a stream of programming
carefully tailored to the viewer’s preferences, tastes, and desires.”10 While this kind of direct marketing may yield a more narrow definition of content, this content is flexible across multiple devices (which, not coincidentally, share data with each other in order to create a robust profile of a user’s viewing habits). An individual viewer could start an episode of a series aired in syndication, complete with commercials, then pause it, continuing to watch the episode via a streaming subscription service on a different device, such as a laptop, a tablet, or a mobile smartphone. Here, the direct migration of a text from one apparatus to another does not necessarily correlate to a shift in cultural value, as in the third chapter’s discussion of intermedial television: the text is not claimed as that of another medium but simply of another means of transmission.

These migrations have been called “convergence culture” by Henry Jenkins, described as collisions between “old” and “new” media both in terms of production and consumption.11 Convergence culture, according to Jenkins, has transformed television’s viewing communities such that active audiences have more control over what content comes onto their various devices, and they can follow aspects of a media text as it traverses different forms, industries, and platforms. As a text migrates from one platform to another, the configuration of the audience similarly changes: Jenkins gives the example of a family watching a broadcast of the popular reality series such as American Idol (Fox, 2002-present) together, but individually voting for a contestant on a smartphone or tablet or participating with other individuals in a social media fan community. The casual substitution of “fan” (of a text) or “user” (of a platform) for “viewer” within industrial and critical publications that describe convergence culture has ramifications on both producers and consumers; as John Caldwell notes, “convergent
mechandizing augmentations” – for example, creating and selling a line of merchandise based from a program’s diegesis – “work to narrativize the world of the user rather than vice versa.” This kind of interactivity has been present within broadcast television’s industrial and programming structures since the 1940s. For my argument, then, the key shift with convergent television is not its interactivity (again, viewers have interacted with television since its inception) but instead the discursive consolidation around a single user or fan; fans may communicate with each other frequently through digital platforms, but this does not necessarily translate into shared viewing experiences.

It would be an understatement to assert that fan cultures (and the recognition of the individual fan as an ideal audience member or consumer) are central to the practices and rhythms of convergent television. According to Jenkins, the existence of a fan culture cements participation – as opposed to interactivity – as the governing concept of corporate media, with the tension between how the industry and its consumers variously define participation serving as the force behind many of the changes to contemporary television. The general difference between interactivity and participation, as I see it, is one of stress: interactivity lies on the side of the technological or media system such that the design of a system (a video game, a website, a competitive reality series) demands an interaction on the part of a user, viewer, or consumer, whereas participation is incited by the user. While Jenkins is clear that participatory culture, rather than spectatorial culture, is a defining characteristic of fandom, it is important to note that part of fandom entails the transformation of “personal reaction into social interaction,” approximating a structure of feeling; individual affective reactions to a text are only considered part of a participatory culture if they are mobilized through communicative pathways of a fan
network or community.\textsuperscript{15} Individual fans may therefore view a media text individually, but this viewing carries with it a participatory reminder to engage with the text in a social setting.

Most famously, such an engagement entails the production of transformative works for distribution among members of a fan community. According to the Organization for Transformative Works, a transformative work “takes something extant and turns it into something with a new purpose, sensibility, or mode of expression,” with the category including “fanfiction, real person fiction, fan vids, and fan art.”\textsuperscript{16} This is a similar definition to that offered by the Supreme Court in the copyright law case \textit{Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music, Inc}, in which the transformative work was construed as one that “adds something new, with a further purpose or different character, altering the first [work] with new expression, meaning, or message.”\textsuperscript{17} While a transformative work’s “purpose” and “message” could, in theory, be determined by a court of law, some of the other terms within both the OTW’s definition and within juridical literature are subject to broad interpretation: especially “sensibility” and “expression,” two terms that evoke a text’s affective characteristics. In early texts on fan cultures, “sensibility” was used to describe the relationship between cultural forms and their audiences, highlighting the residual effects of context as well as of text; sensibility thus inscribes certain cultural codes that shape viewer experiences with texts. In Camille Bacon-Smith’s work on \textit{Star Trek} fan communities, to name one example, she locates a feminine or women’s sensibility in the reconstructed characters of fan fiction that realigned the heroism of the all-male science fiction series’ protagonists into the array of cultural values important to female fans, while at the same time often dooming such transformative works to
dismissal by cultural gatekeepers. The multiple and coexisting sensibilities unique to a particular text and its reception in a specific place and time, then, produce a set of relations between the audience and the cultural world; sensibility, in a sense, crystallizes how audience members digest texts in order to make sense of the world around them.

In this capacity Lawrence Grossberg has distinguished between a “consumerist sensibility” structured around individual pleasure and a “fan sensibility” structured around socially constructed affect. Grossberg’s constructivist attempt to wield affect many years before its contemporary revival (he is writing in 1992, at the inaugural moment of what can be now called “fan studies”) is a sharp reminder that for many scholars of popular culture, affect has always been a category of prime importance to cultural analysis, read within the labor of the audience and regularly along lines of difference. Importantly, Grossberg maintains a distinction between affect and emotion, prefiguring later ontological work in the field. He views affect as “perhaps the most difficult plane of our lives to define” precisely because how it is “what we often describe as the feeling of life.”

Elsewhere, Grossberg has noted that “Our emotional states are always elicited from within the affective states in which we already find ourselves. Unlike emotions, affective states are neither structured narratively nor organized in response to our interpretations of situations.” Yet such distinctions and viewpoints should not be read as total agreement with a vitalist or virtualized affect, as read by, say, Brian Massumi. Grossberg identifies two aspects of affect, the first of which quantitatively describes an amount of energy or volition invested into an event and the second of which reroutes that energy through pathways of inflection prior to meaning or signification. This second aspect, qualitative in nature, emphasizes “the way in which the
specific event is made to matter to us.” A habitual sensibility that establishes the conditions under which we make meaning from affects, this second imperfective facilitates the organization of investment, the set of mechanisms he calls “mattering maps.” The affective is, for Grossberg, but one dimension that can determine the ideological, as it is the terrain of inflected investment through which difference (always figured intersectionally) is structured: “The importance of affect derives, not from its content, but from its power over difference, its power to invest difference.”

Put differently, the affective sensibilities of fan culture establish the conditions for spectatorial identification around the binary opposition of fans and non-fans or “Us and Them.” Fans “get it,” non fans do not. Transformative works require these sensibilities because of the importance of context in the creative process of transformation; remixes of a series by people who have no prior affective relationship to the source text tend to be taken less seriously (and receive less circulation) than those with the affective sensibility (or, at the very least, those with prior knowledge of the affective sensibility) shared by fans of the source text. This is especially true of works that transform texts with already complex diegetic universes, such as in the science fiction and fantasy series that comprise a substantial plurality of contemporary TV fan cultures. The sedimentation of convergence culture around the figure of the fan who both affectively invests in a series and participates in communities yielding transformative works in the current and expansive age of digital television owes a debt, to be sure, to the work of cultural studies. As Grossberg states, “for cultural studies context is everything and everything is contextual.” Attempting to understand the affective economies of perversion that undergird a remix series like Jiz authorizes the consideration of the affective sensibilities
of both *Jem* and *Jiz*, which in turn involves investigating the texts themselves, the political and cultural contexts of the mid-1980s as well as the late 2000s, and the industrial and technological structures that allow each text to attract fans. Yet perhaps this age of convergence demands a remixing of context itself, one in vein with what Rita Felski, herself remixing Bruno Latour, expansively outlines as the non-human assemblage that “includes not only individual novels or films, but also characters, plot devices, cinematography, literary styles, and other formal devices that travel beyond the boundaries of their home texts to attract allies, generate attachments, trigger translations, and inspire copies, spin-offs, and clones.”24 Thinking the affective sensibility of *Jiz*, then, must begin with the formal qualities of televisual remix as a unique subculture of the participatory culture endemic to convergent television.

**Remix Culture and Cultural Value**

My interest in sketching out the affective dimensions of televisual remix stems from the figuration of participatory culture as creatively liberated from traditional circuits of production and consumption, such that those who participate in these digital art practices – remixers, DJs, vidders, hackers, slash writers, meme authors, and the like – are now frequently valorized by both cultural critics and scholars as the driving force behind pop culture trends in today’s buzzworthy mediaverse. (This figuration stands in clear opposition, I would note, to the “Trekkies” that William Shatner infamously told to “Get a Life” in a 1986 episode of *Saturday Night Live.*) As such, remix culture itself has been historiographically reinscribed by scholars and artists to encompass multiple media forms as well as inhabiting multiple historical moments. Remix speaks with a teleological
force, however coded or implicit this may be; scholars of digital cultural studies are fond of noting, for example, that remix is not a strictly “new” phenomenon, precisely because culture always already appropriates texts and rituals from the past and transforms them into objects of the present (though such a position can often end up perpetuating unequal power relations). In the introduction to a special issue of the online journal *Transformative Works and Culture* on Fan/Remix Video, Julie Levin Russo and Francesca Coppa mischievously note that “the buzzword has gathered such momentum in cultural discourse that it begins to seem retrospectively that everything is a remix…remix as a trope converges with our idea of creative production itself. At least, this is a common refrain among advocates of copyright reform, who have argued that culture always builds on the past.”

Eduardo Navas, one of the most prolific scholars on the phenomenon, defines remix culture a “global activity consisting of the creative and efficient exchange of information made possible by digital technologies” that comprises a meta-level genre. He makes a distinction between remix culture, a movement anchored around the free exchange of ideas and their association products, and Remix, a discursive cultural variable espousing principles of rip, sample, cut, copy, and paste (among others). Whereas Remix is a practice, a way of reading and writing texts that is largely parasitical and, in theory, without form (although form is a wily element throughout Navas’ theory of Remix), remix culture is the loose institutionalization of said praxis and is often overdetermined by questions of legality. Remix thus appears in dimensions not traditionally bracketed into remix culture; some examples of this he offers include RSS-feeds (in which different stories are curated based on a timestamp), smartphone operating
systems that allow for simultaneous activities (such as screening streaming video while text messaging), and the complex special effects present in Hollywood blockbusters that use CGI to insert an actor into a fantastical scene.

While any discussion of television as medium is absent from Navas’ extensive writings on remix – an omission, I suspect, related to its perceived low cultural status – television seems a natural fit for theorizing both remix culture and Remix. Remixes such as *Jiz* correspond to the organizational systems of remix culture, as they involve sampling, cutting, and pasting ripped broadcast material owned by the entertainment industry. Examples of this, such as the practice of vidding (a specific type of remixing in which cut footage from television series or films are remixed and set to music), should elude charges of copyright infringement and thus fall under the legal definition of a transformative work because of their own creative reconstruction of fair-use material. Yet this is not always the case. For example, *Friendship is Witchcraft*, a remix of the cult animated series *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (The Hub/Hasbro, 2010-present) that, similar to *Jiz*, sets recut visual footage to darkly humored dialogue and music, appeared on YouTube and Dailymotion in 2011. In 2013, Hasbro, the owner of the *My Little Pony* entertainment franchise, successfully removed some episodes of the remix from these platforms, claiming that, although such remixes are typically protected under the Fair Use copyright clause afforded to transformative works, images from the remixes were trademarked and thus not legal for reuse.28 Despite the corporation’s legal claims, Hasbro’s interest was not simply in some specific trademarked images but also, and probably primarily, in the overall “perversion” of their product, giving it a radically
different affective tone. Remix culture thus occupies a liminal legal status that is partially
determined (or at least influenced) by its dominant affect.

More broadly, television as a medium shares several formal characteristics as
Remix and remix culture, making televisu

al remix a particularly evocative media object. In his taxonomy of remix culture, Navas identifies four different “forms” remix often
takes, three of which – selective, reflective, and extended – are static, thus serving as independent art objects that have a set temporality, are shared and circulated amongst audiences, and are rewatched as closed texts. The overlay of new dialogue to mashed-up

series footage falls into this broad category of static remix, which Navas calls “regressive” with respect to its functionality. The fourth category is regenerative, and it is dependent on the updating of information across a given amount of time. The example of an RSS-newsfeed is regressive, for example, because it is a mashup of headlines and hyperlinks from different news organizations that changes over time, typically chronologically, with new news stories displacing older ones. In fact, Navas claims that most new media are dependent on the practice of sampling, even on the level of structure: common online activities require copying and deleting information (in the shape of data packets) from one point to another, making the identification and handling of fragments important to Remix. “[C]ulture is redefined,” he writes, “by the constant flow of information in fragments dependent on the single activity of sampling. The ability to manipulate fragments effectively, then, extends principles of Remix even in practical terms.”

Interestingly, thinking remix in terms of “the ability to manipulate fragments effectively” ties it to television, given a definitive feature of broadcast television: the
transmission of live events unfolding in real time. The formal organization of broadcast
television is, of course, often thought of through Raymond Williams’s notion of flow as
well as through Jane Feuer’s notion of “segmentation without closure.” More so,
television routinely remixes its own content for narrative and paratextual means:
regressively through flashbacks to earlier episodes within a diegetic narrative, for
instance, or through promotional trailers for DVD or streaming releases of a single
season; and regeneratively through the automatic updates to the ticker tape at the bottom
of the screen common to most news and sports programming or through routine weather
and traffic updates for commuters on the morning and evening news. Whereas Navas and
other historians of remix make a convincing case that remix culture was created and
defined by American DJs in the 1960s and 1970s, it would appear to some extent that
television has always exhibited some key characteristics of remix into the concept and
design of the apparatus, though for most of television history the viewer exerted no
control over the order and length of segments.

Both television and Remix are, on a popular theoretical level, postmodern. Navas,
for example, asserts a historical synchrony between postmodern challenges to history
(Hayden White, de Certeau) and the rise of remixing in music. In the current digital age,
not only is every new cultural text remixing the past through some sort of digital
engagement, but it also habituates new users through these remixes into the signs
common to digital culture. Lawrence Lessig has notably claimed in his 2008 vociferous
indictment of current copyright law, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the
Hybrid Economy*, that remix culture assists in the creation and promotion of cultural
literacy, as it introduces a younger generation of millennials and post-millennials to
logics of reading and writing, cut and paste, and collage that are ubiquitous to digital culture.³¹ Remix begins polemically, arguing that current copyright restrictions automatically criminalize a whole generation of youth who have been raised “in a world in which technology begs all of us to create and spread creative work differently from how it was created and spread before” (R xviii). He considers the social ramifications of labeling an entire generation criminals, even if for minor crimes such as copyright infringement, bringing together remixers with file sharers under the same legal category. Repeatedly linking together “kids” with “criminals,” he explicitly appeals to the presumptive parents of remixers to join him in calling for copyright reform in order to ensure that free culture is prioritized as a liberal democratic value.

But if kids will be kids, this is also because technology will be technology. Popular media have begun to tie together generation and technology, such that one efficient way to delineate a generation is by the technology that its members use.³² These remixed categories lead Lessig to invoke the specter of an endangered media literacy overdetermined by the cultural norms surrounding the adoption of emerging technologies. Copyright law, in his words, “will stanch the development of the institution of literacy that are required if this literacy is to spread” (R 108). Remaking, Lessig argues, is a variation both on citation practices and on creative expression, and it should be thought of as a more expansive and elastic form of “writing.” The argumentative style of Remix, with its repeated affect of fear (one legal scholar has critiqued Lessig’s “vision of America” as consisting of “millions of kids in orange jumpsuits”) and its blatant refusal to interrogate the discourse of criminality it sets forth perpetuate an equivalence between remix culture and cultural literacy in the digital age.³³ While I support horizontal methods
of citation as a form of writing (as the curatorial gloss of this chapter should make clear by now), Lessig all too readily subsumes institutions of literacy within the social good. “We should encourage the spread of literacy here,” he writes, “at least so long as it doesn’t stifle other forms of creativity” (R 114).

I want to stress that these accents of “cultural literacy” (in Lessig) and “creative,” “efficient,” and “meta” (in Navas) are not neutral terms. Lessig has been critiqued for establishing a logic in which practices of copying and pirating become circumscribed in racialized dichotomies of empire.34 On the one hand, forms of copying and sharing perpetrated by predominantly white, tech-savvy middle- and upper-class youth are deemed socially acceptable (albeit illegal), and, as Lessig argues, also necessary for the institutional development of cultural literacy. On the other hand, those forms perpetuated by predominantly racialized, classed, and national Others, such as the duplication and sale of commercially produced material, are classified as “piracy.” Lucas Hilderbrand writes in his study of bootleg video that “pirates steal for profit, not for the egalitarian or productive redistribution of culture and information,” yet some shared content (streaming video hosted on overseas servers, for example) carries the potential for profit through advertising revenue from user clicks.35 Therefore, while the recoding of criminality remains considerably uninterrogated among proponents of copyright reform, remix culture, like most work discussed within fan studies, participatory culture, and convergence culture, tends to be lauded as democratic and thus insulated from colonialist critique.

My point in underscoring this non-neutral contour of remix is neither to discount the immense labor of remixers nor to sleight the discourse of fan studies that has brought
these transformative works to the attention of the often-stuffy academy. Rather, I want to pressure the logic of accumulation that accompanies remix rhetorics, in which “transformation” indicates the addition of an affect that inscribes the remixed object into discourses of creativity, efficiency, and metagenre. Navas’s category of “extended” regressive remix, for example, which stretches out a song through the repetition of instrumental sections that renders it more manipulable for DJs, fits this bill. Even in work done on non-digital remix, such as discussions of found footage, terms such as “recycled images” invigorate the footage with the rhetorical weight of ecologically friendly practices, evocative of a “green” economy distinct from the corporate conglomerates that populate Hollywood. As in my discussion of how discourses surrounding The Wire construct the series as something in excess of television in Chapter 3, the discourses surrounding Remix as a practice construct the transformative work as in excess of its source material. To those who argue that remix is a recognizable form of writing unique to participatory culture that must be legally protected in order to preserve cultural literacy, remix adds “something” to its previous iterations. I contend that this excessive remainder, like its HBO cognate, is overdetermined by its cultural and affective value, necessitating an affective reading of the changes between original and remix.

The Tactics of Queer Remix

While Lessig’s documentation of generational media literacy focuses on the need for copyright reform, Lev Manovich’s assertion that “it is a truism today that we live in a ‘remix culture’” and McKenzie Wark’s observation that the “cut and mix practice is now the daily life of a generation” both highlight remix as ingrained in the mediated rhythms
of society. In particular, Wark’s use of the term “practice” invokes Michel de Certeau’s foundational work on the routine ways of being in the world; as fragmented parts reassembled and rewritten, Remix carries the potential to disrupt the temporal flows of routinization established by corporate, state, and educational institutions that structure work and leisure time. De Certeau provides a rich framework with which to reconsider remix, as he opens The Practice of Everyday Life by declaring his project’s goal to be the pursuit of “the ways in which users – commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules – operate.”

For de Certeau, users – as opposed to consumers, subjects, or even persons – are epistemologically foregrounded as actors, and his introduction to his study on these operations sounds familiar to remix users:

> The purpose of this work is to make explicit the systems of operational combination (les combinatoires d’opérations) which also compose a ‘culture,’ and to bring to light the models of action characteristic of users whose status as the dominated element of society (a status that does not mean that they are either active or docile) is concealed by the euphemistic term ‘consumers.’ Everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others.

Of note here are two things. First, de Certeau again highlights the user as an active agent. Second, that users poach resonates strongly with the language of fan cultures (as in Jenkins’s book Textual Poachers, which itself heavily cites de Certeau) and their logics of appropriation: in everyday life, users do not blindly consume the entertainment offerings of those in power (Hollywood corporations), but instead appropriate them to their own ends in a constant cycle of reinvention. Remix builds on this activity of poaching through its use of the actual “property of others” as the capital from which new works of art are invented, making a direct substitution of “remix culture” for “everyday life” in the aforementioned passage not be so farfetched.
Paul Booth has written how remixing, and especially remixing that changes the genre of a text, is a “practical application of the de Certeauan notion of tactical reading, where alternate readings become externalized.” Although his comparison stops without further explanation, the association of remix with de Certeau’s notion of tactics is helpful, for it reorients the framework of media culture towards a circuit of media interactivity, a more dynamic and unstable variation of the model of production/consumption historically present within cultural studies. Tactics are, for de Certeau, the tools of the non-powerful, as they represent the adaptation of the surrounding environment; he distinguishes them from strategies, which presumes control and order. Tactics require constant adaptation to unfolding circumstances, thus instantiating it as an important component of practice. Televisual remix can be powerful in pointing out how broadcast television routinely tells stories from the perspectives of those in power, and, in opposition to that, in envisioning a world in which women, people of color, and queer subjects subvert existing televisual narrative conventions.

In the *Queer Carrie Project (Sex and the Remix)* (2009-2010), Eliza Kreisinger creates a queer-positive renarration of HBO’s *Sex and the City*, critiquing the presumed heteronormativity of post-feminism (although, according to Kreisinger, the “issue of white, owning-class women remains”). Seamlessly keeping sound and visuals intact, *Queer Carrie* uses existing characters from the original series to perform the premise of the series – how the modern successful woman can find (queer) love in New York City – differently. The final installment of the project, for example, describes a failed queer romance between Carrie and Natasha, a character who, in the “canonical” text, is Carrie’s competitor. In HBO’s text, the two characters were rivals for the ring of Mr. Big, and,
during the third season, Carrie played the role of homewrecker to Big and Natasha’s marriage while herself cheating on her current boyfriend. By contrast, *Queer Carrie* reverses the gender and sexuality norms that govern televisual representation: Natasha and Carrie meet awkwardly in a boutique dressing room as queer exes (in footage originally culled from Season 3, Episode 4 of *SATC*), and flashback is used in some scenes to depict a tumultuous and sexually charged relationship between two women (in footage from episodes in which Carrie is having sex with Big during the affair [Season 3, Episode 11 and Season 3, Episode 12], meets with Natasha post-breakup [Season 3, Episode 17], and gets dumped by fifth and sixth season romantic interest Berger [Season 6, Episode 7]). Bringing a refreshing reading of the industrial practices that often create such remixes to the table, Aymar Jean Christian has documented how similar variations of *Sex and the City* (such as the independent webseries *The Real Girl’s Guide to Everything Else*) advance more radical perspectives on identity and representation and pitch them “not only to a community of like-minded fans but also to the industry of Hollywood, (potential) advertisers, and the media as a product created by a group of marginalized workers leveraging convergence culture for their purposes.”

Television remix thus can produce disidentificatory politics of representation that both play with stereotype (explosively dramatic lesbian relationships) and TV form and genre (serial melodrama) and metatextually comment on relationships between the entertainment industry and fan communities.

*Jiz*, too, flips the sexual script of *Jem and the Holograms*, queering all of the children’s animated series’ characters, even if only one openly claims such an identity (which again demonstrates the slippages between queer as noun and queer as verb). Most
notably, *Jiz* queers keyboardist Kimber, who clashes with Jiz and the other members of the Mammograms in several episodes about her newfound sexual identity. But it also flips the narrative of homonormative queerness, critiquing structures of queer community invested in liberal democratic values and identity politics. In the sixth episode of *Jiz*, Jiz has a special message for queer youth who are being bullied by their peers for their sexual identity. Jiz’s special message, as inferred by the episode title, “It Gets Worse,” reverses that of the “It Gets Better” social media campaign, launched by gay sexual advice columnist Dan Savage and his partner Terry Hecker, which features testimonials from ordinary individuals as well as celebrities who offer uplifting words of advice for victims of bullying. In a medium-shot frame that focuses on Jiz’s head and neck, and using looped footage with a dissonant voiceover, Jiz passes on her wisdom to the next generation before breaking out into a sexually explicit rendition of Whitney Houston’s “The Greatest Love of All”:

> You’re gonna grow up and get a job, and it’s gonna suck. And you’re gonna get a relationship, and it’s gonna suck. And you’re gonna get old and fat and wrinkled, and it’s gonna suck. But you know what doesn’t suck? Gay sex. Gay sex is fucking awesome. I mean, you’re gonna grow old, and life’s gonna be pitiful and stupid, but at least you can look back and remember the gay orgy that you had, there are still gonna be those memories to beat off to. So I mean, if you’re gonna kill yourself, do it because life is fucking retarded. Not because you’re a fucking queer.

In many ways, Jiz’s message to the victims of bullying comments on the temporal universality fostered by processes of socialization and aging; despite having what Kathryn Bond Stockton calls a stretched out, horizontal relationship to time, here both straight and queer youth must endure the suffering of entering the workforce and systems of formalized kinship. But “gay sex” is valued not for its radical ability to thwart the repressive heteropatriarchy, or even, really, for its ability to stage a publicity that leads
“to the production of nonheteronormative bodily contexts” in the words of Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner. Rather, gay sex becomes a masturbatory memory of pleasures past, an approximation of the larger, more liberating projects of queer world-making envisioned by Berlant and Warner – it is, indeed, “fucking awesome” – that can be used to combat the minutiae of adulthood.

The episode of *Jem and the Holograms* from which “It Gets Worse” sources is, too, a curious choice for *Jiz’s* critique of the discourse of liberal rights. The *Jem* episode “Adventures in China” sees the Holograms as they perform a concert in China. The narrative action of this episode revolves around the pair of magical star earrings that Jerrica uses to transform into Jem. When the earrings are stolen by rival girl group the Misfits, Jerrica enlists the help of a young Chinese girl, Lin, in order to retrieve them. Here, the global fan is used as the narrative device to resolve the episode’s crisis, though the rescue involves a certain degree of Orientalism when Lin must defend herself using martial arts against a boy trying to steal her earrings. The song at the end, “Love Unites Us,” sees Jem and the Holograms wearing East Asian-inspired fashions (and matching flowers in her blown out pink mane), with one shot consisting of the floating heads of Jem and Lin transparent against a background of neon stars (see figure 8). “It Gets Worse” evades the racialization of sexuality, despite remixing an episode that visually features many animated Chinese extras. The remix form – the recycling of the visuals of “Adventure in China” – produces the unintentional alignment of the racial Other with the bullied queer and the overexuberant fan, with all three identities linked to the memory of past sexual excesses that serve as an emotional crutch for the victims of global capitalism, many of whom must grow up and get work while still in adolescence.
Jiz remixes the language of bullying in her public service announcement while erasing the (presumed queer) youth of color from the neoliberal discourse of coming out and upward mobility found in “It Gets Better”: at the end of her parodic song, with the floating heads and neon stars, Jiz asks, “Whoa, wait, hold up…Why is my head like this? And what’s that Asian girl doing there; I don’t get this part.” Remix traffics in the recycling of images, but the shifting affects and identities it produces often leave, in effect, an unsalvageable head floating on the screen, confusing Jiz with an ethnicity that muddles her message to the (presumed white) bullied queer youth.

In one provocative passage from his description of the operations present in everyday life, de Certeau identifies a necessary fugitivity in a “way of using.” In such patterns, he writes,

> We see the tactical and joyful dexterity of the mastery of a technique. Scapin and Figaro are only literary echoes of this art. Like the skill of a driver in the streets of Rome or Naples, there is a skill that has its connoisseurs and its esthetics exercised in any labyrinth of powers, a skill ceaselessly recreating opacities and ambiguities – space of darkness and trickery – in the universe of technocratic transparency, a skill that disappears into them and reappears again, taking no responsibility for the
administration of a totality. Even the field of misfortune is refashioned by this combination of manipulation and enjoyment.47

If televisual remix can demonstrate the mastery of technical editing, as Queer Carrie does, or the mastery of trolling, as in Jiz’s “It Gets Worse,” it exercises a dexterity that is as potentially irresponsible as it is tactical. Remixing feminist television to queer ends, it would seem, risks an engagement with a slippery and tricky darkness (and, occasionally, literal darkness) to manipulate both heterosexual and queer suffering.

The Circulation of Perversion, The Perversion of Circulation

In contrast to the logic of accumulation championed by nascent remix theory, I propose an affective economy of perversion as a useful lens to view queer remix. I sample the term “affective economics” partly from Henry Jenkins, who introduces it in Convergence Culture as the system produced by digital culture that can “understand the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making as a driving force behind viewing and purchasing decisions.”48 Whereas the affective dynamics of fan communities has been an object of study for cultural studies scholars since the days of Jenkins’s textual poachers and Grossberg’s affective sensibilities (and present even further back to the days of feminist vidding on Star Trek and other media fandoms of the 1970s), affective economics transposes the desires, dislikes, and frustrations placed onto a text into a system that facilitates purchasing decisions. As personalized television rewards what the industry calls “loyal viewers” or “fans” (with the distinction often an act of self-identification), affective economics rewards the affective investment that loyals/fans have in a series through acknowledging the presence of fan communities (through, for
example, “Easter eggs” (messages or jokes hidden within a media text), nods to online shipping cultures, and corporate-authored platforms for interactive discussion) while attempting to commodify the cultural visibility of fan communities. The emotional investment loyal fans have in a series (and here it is important to note that advertising executives, unlike scholars in the humanities, do not by and large differentiate between affect and emotion) can be harnessed to extreme ends, as such investment is an unlimited resource, as opposed to a viewer’s annual income or technological sophistication. This investment diverges somewhat from Jean Burgess and Joshua Green’s “affective economy” of vlogging that describes the emotional attachments present in the participatory culture of YouTube, underscoring the affective labor that goes into the self-presentation of authenticity on the video sharing platform.49

In a different register, however, I also sample from Sara Ahmed’s work on “affective economies.” Working from a psychoanalytic viewpoint – important for Ahmed, as it allows her to theorize subjectivity as outside the present – she posits an account of emotion as economy.50 Indeed, she highlights the sociality of emotions “as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or the commodity, but is produced as an effect of its circulation.” She thus invests in the metaphor of circulation as an index of the perceived affective value of a sign. Importantly, in her theorizations, the circulation of affect is not spatially limited to a movement to and from the subject but rather moves across a number of “nodal points” – perhaps a tacit reference to actor-network theory. For instance, in Ahmed’s example of language drawn from the website of The Aryan Nations, the circulation of a publicly shared emotion works to substantiate
the embodiment of racialized individuals within the nation-state, as it mobilizes social, material, and psychic affective economies of hate.

But if, as I argued earlier, figurations of remix culture are effuse with positive valences of accumulation, is it possible to theorize an affective economy independent from these values? I would answer yes. For Ahmed, accumulation functions as a given over time, rather than as a singularly psychic drive: thus the more objects and signs engage with and across one another the more affective they become. Yet the accumulation of affect present in all affective economies is separate from the desire to accumulate affect specifically in order to maximize its value (even if it may have that effect). In fact, I would wager that the discursive fashioning of remix in Western digital culture relies upon a categorical drive to accumulate affect as a marker of cultural value that disavows its position within the capitalist market economy. As Rachel O’Dwyer has convincingly argued:

Like much of the ideology of free culture, however, the emancipatory potential of remix is arguably contested and at best, overstated. Following on a series of transformations to the relations of production, the technical composition of labor and the property regimes under which labor produces, we can no longer think of remix as operating in fundamental opposition to the market or indeed as fundamentally anti-capitalist.51

As a practice, remix is first and foremost a process that adds meaning, often to extreme measures. Take, for instance, the way in which digital sampling culture in electronic music regularly combines a large number of songs in order to create new mashups, such as in musician Girl Talk’s (Gregg Gillis) 2006 album Night Ripper, which sampled 164 artists, or DJ Earworm’s (Jordan Roseman) annual “United States of Pop” mashup, which combines the top 25 songs of the year as determined by Billboard’s Hot 100 singles chart. If the addition of new meanings resulting in a “new purpose, sensibility, or mode of
expression” is a key criterion for determining the scope of a transformative work, then remixes, by definition, require the accumulation of both meaning and affect.

Affective economies, to parrot Ahmed, suggest “that emotions do not positively inhabit anybody or anything.” The logic of accumulation present within remix culture is foregrounded around additional meanings that migrate between networked communication technologies as well as around affects that, according to Ahmed, are themselves produced from entangled migrations between users, objects, and commodities. Jodi Dean’s elegant formulation of “communicative capitalism” as the dominant way in which networked communication operates under economic neoliberalism is an instructive reminder that the exchange value of a message – “its contribution to a larger pool, flow, or circulation of content,” in her words – trumps its use value. Such contributions need not be decoded or mobilized for political action, but are instead repeated and reproduced ad infinitum. It is thus possible, and I would aver necessary, to formulate an affective economy that complicates the pure accumulation of commodifiable affect, one that risks destroying as many meanings and affects as it produces throughout the course of its transformation. Even if the migration of affect implies a degree of accumulation in meaning (and in affect itself), this accumulation does not have to be situated as positive or as “adding” anything to the text.

My own appropriations fixate on the rhetorical valence of queer as a force of corruption and of degradation. That is to say, when we talk about “queering” art objects – such as turning Carrie into Queer Carrie, or Jem into Jiz – we cannot escape the connotations of perversion that are enabled in such a performative gesture. Ahmed notes, for example, how “‘queer’ acquires new meanings not by being cut off from its previous
contexts of utterance, but by preserving them.”

Like the body that archives emotional responses and that processes its surrounding material conditions as part of reading sensation within its affective pathways (to reinsert Grossberg), to queer something is already to shift its paradigm of sexual identity but also to imbue that thing with historical affect (such as abuse or insult). A (queer) theory of (queer) Remix, then, requires attending not only to what is accumulated but also to what affects are lost, vulgarized, and elided through derivative transformation.

An affective economy of perversion emphasizes how, in a sense, such loss, vulgarity, and elision is naturally concomitant with transformation. Psychoanalytically speaking, perversion is synonymous with the sexual development of children, illustrative of the fundamentally transgressive nature of the sexual drive. As Elisabeth Roudinesco has claimed, Freud

...rehabilitated the idea that perversion is an essential part of civilization to the extent that it is society’s accursed share and our own dark side. But rather than grounding evil in the natural world order or seeing man’s animal nature as the sign of an inferiority that can never be overcome, he preferred to argue that access to culture is the only thing that can save humanity from its own self-destructive drives.

I see in statements like this a partial explanation for why so many remixed videos deal with perversity in their rewritings of culture: for example, the perversity found in the forbidden sexual tension between characters unearthed by shippers, for example, or in Francesca Coppa’s assertion that vidders are fetishists who “cut, slicing visual texts into pieces before putting them together again, fetishizing not only body parts and visual tropes, but the frame, the filmic moment, that they pull out of otherwise coherent wholes.” Indeed, there is something queer about this figure of the geeky vidder who meticulously, though not always precisely, sees a different narrative underneath the
conventional one, a private narrative that correlates to the open-secret structure central to Eve Sedgwick’s axiomatic claims about same-sex desire. “In dealing with an open-secret structure,” Sedgwick writes, “it’s only by being shameless about risking the obvious that we happen into the vicinity of the transformative.”

We might ask if the same logic applies to transformative works, like those that set up derivative jokes that all too often write themselves or those that involve the incessant repetition of a meme that itself plays off of a play on words.

But if remix culture is derivatively queer, its queerness operates through suspending the temporal structures that govern its open secret. This is especially true in televisual remix, in which “old” television series are given “new” texture through voiceovers and editing, often with satirical intent. Recent interventions into queer temporality demonstrate how the nostalgia for a television series connected to one’s own past can function as a queer affect that can be temporally extended into the present or into a future of the present (to sample José Esteban Muñoz briefly). The collection of work on queer temporality, while heterogenous, is replete with emblems of resistance to teleological experiences of time: such as in Heather Love’s backwards queer who embraces a politics of refusal and in Stockton’s adolescent who grows not up but sideways via processes of self-ghosting.

In Elizabeth Freeman’s remixing of Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity – which Freeman mashes up with Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of the habitus – she notes how “delay and surprise” lay bare the conditions for gendered performance; her location of “temporal drag” allows for a robust sense of performance that encompasses reception as well as address, and “might capture the gestural, sensory call-and-response by which gender is built or dismantled within a
Temporal drag also appears to describe, fittingly, an affective change to our engagement with television under convergence culture, in which television can be dismantled from the apparatus itself and rebuilt, under conditions of delay and binge, surprise and spoiler, across multiple platforms and devices and retransformed by new communities of disparate individuals.

As “new” media consolidates and reshuffles the specific technologies that spectators use to watch television, television “flow” must be rethought of in a different register – one that not only emphasizes the flow of content across multiple media platforms, industries, and audiences but also highlights the affective economies in which these series are rebranded, revalued, and remixed. I locate in televisual remix something uniquely perverse given how it both stretches the temporal surface of programs and drags segments along to new dialogue and music. Because of such temporal play, remixing thus feels as if it is a call-and-response, an engagement between vidder and spectator. This is a counterfeit feeling, however, at least for televisual remixes (and especially vids), the vast majority of which are not regenerative and whose interactivity is limited to user comments on YouTube or the direct creation of another transformative work. This call-and-response, I believe, is thus structured less by technological interactivity than by the affect incited by our perception of historical cultural objects as they emerge in the present day – in other words, by the nostalgic weight these objects conjure as they enter the digital age. Yet the centrality of nostalgia to televisual remix culture should not be interpreted as it has been by scholars of the postmodern, such as in Fredric Jameson’s or Jean Baudrillard’s accounts, in which it represents a blockage to historicity resonant with cultural amnesia. Curiously, these renditions of nostalgia as ubiquitously referential in an
simulated world, or as images of pastiche spread across society in order to invoke a collective past, function as affective economies – ironic, to be sure, as Jameson connects the “insensible colonization” of the postmodern by nostalgia with the waning of affect. Linda Hutcheon has addressed this contradiction by noting how many accounts of nostalgia modeled after Jameson overlook it as an affective response, and it is in response to her call for “transideological” approaches to the study of nostalgia that my reading of Jiz and televisual remix offers. What is striking about nostalgia in televisual remix is how the programs important to one’s childhood past become animated into the present, albeit becoming perverted in the process. A consideration of this, however, involves returning to Jem and the living rooms of the 1980s, to a time before remix culture and the use of the internet in everyday life – a time before Jiz.

**Consuming the Contradictory Feminine**

*Jem* premiered in October 1985, targeting an audience that seemed to defy generational categorization, comprised of equal parts younger members of the Generation X and older members of Generation Y (better known as Millennials). It also aired during a unique historical juncture: the shift from a general strategy of broadcasting to one of narrowcasting. During *Jem’s* run in syndication, several now successful cable networks (VH1, A&E, and Movietime/E!) and a new broadcast network (Fox) launched; the Big Three networks switched to satellite feed activation, losing the chime intonations that formerly began telecast; and new technological devices (particularly the remote control and the VCR) became widespread that changed how viewers watched television. Jane Feuer has importantly connected these changes to television – what “could be said to
have been the end of the era of American network television as we had known it from the
1950s” – to the neoconservatism of the Reagan administration, claiming that, in this era,
“television and Reaganism formed mutually reinforcing and interpenetrating imaginary
worlds” as well as mutually reinforcing forms.63

In detailing the contradictory positions afforded to American broadcast television
during the 1980s – its fluctuation between populism and elitism – Feuer limits her
analysis to programs that are not obviously ideological (such as news and opinion
programming), focusing instead on primetime drama, made-for-TV movies, and serial
melodrama. And while she does not discuss it, her emphasis on politically ambivalent
modes of spectatorship seems also to apply to children’s animated programming of the
same time and especially to Jem. For example, several fans and critics of the series have
noted how Jem lends itself to a feminist reading, given how, in its narrative world,
women run the music business and are thus powerful within the media. Although she
inherits Starlight Music from her deceased father, lead character Jerrica is a music
producer, and, as Lizzie Ehrenhalt has observed, “the Holograms are not treated as an
oddity because they are women, and the episode focusing on African American drummer
Shana and Chinese American guitarist Aja promote a more complex vision of sisterhood
than, say, Strawberry Shortcake” (who starred in six television specials in the early and
mid-1980s).64 And yet, such a feminist reading becomes invariably complicated by the
range of female roles presented in the series; all girls may be rock stars, Jem preaches,
but the possibility for musical prowess is highly dependent upon the type of band that
young girls wish to emulate: the Holograms or their rivals the Misfits and the Stingers.
“Jem really has a social conscience,” Stephen A. Schwartz, then-senior Vice President for
Marketing for Hasbro in New York, said in a 1986 interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, “Her world is not about shopping and dating. She is a working girl, a woman of the '80s. She's an executive. She makes decisions. She has lots of pressure.”65 In contrast to this executive humanitarianism, the Holograms’ antagonists throughout the series are the Misfits, consisting of spoiled rich girl Pizzazz, high school dropout Roxy, pickpocket Jetta, and creative Keytarist Stormer; whereas the Holograms sing about romance, friendship, and other appropriate themes for young girls in songs such as “People Who Care,” “We Can Make a Difference,” and “I Believe in Happy Endings,” the Misfits sing about rebelling against conventional norms of femininity, displaying a rather masculinist lyrical posture in songs such as “Winning Is Everything,” “Takin’ It All,” and “Gimme Gimme Gimme.”66 Viewers are thus faced with a binary opposition between the Holograms, who run an orphanage on the side, and the Misfits, who once kidnapped a young girl and locked her in a trunk. With this limited number of options for female roles and this narrow vision of appropriate feminine behavior came a clear directive. Series creator Christy Marx broke down the framing of the Holograms in commentary on the DVD release of *Jem’s* first and second seasons, granting that “This show was essentially about being good role models for the girls.”

Although *Jem* made good on Marx’s prescription, steadfastly incorporating messages about multiethnic friendship, cooperation, and generosity into its plots, it is imperative to recall that the series, like so many other of its peers, is toyetic, produced in part for the purpose of marketing tie-in merchandise. Hasbro created *Jem* with the explicit purpose of rivaling Mattel’s iconic Barbie line of dolls, broadcasting the series four months before the first wave of merchandise was released at the New York Toy Fair
in February 1986. Standing roughly a foot tall, each Jem doll came with an audiocassette featuring the series theme song (“Truly Outrageous”) as well as two or three other songs from the series. While the music is, arguably, what distinguished Jem from other animated programs of the time (each episode typically contained two or three “music videos”), Hasbro maintained exclusive focus on the development and sales of the toys, rather than pursuing partnerships with record labels. According to Al Corosi, Hasbro’s then-Vice President of Marketing, “We're in the toy business…We don't want the doll's success to be hurt by an album that doesn't sell well. After all, the record business is even more volatile than the toy business.”

These toyetic motives lend themselves to the model of affective economies of perversion I outlined earlier. As an example, consider a commercial for Jem dolls that aired during broadcasts of Hasbro-sponsored cartoons (in this case, a title card for the Transformers appears at the beginning of clip as it appears on YouTube). Advertising the inclusion of an audiocassette with each doll purchase, the commercial adopts the form of popular music album commercials present in television up until that industry’s own shift to digital markets, with the names of popular Holograms songs (“Jealousy,” “Universal Appeal,” and “Who Is He Kissing”) scrolling up the screen as excerpts from those songs play in the background. The commercial alternates between black and white stock footage of crazed Jem fans in a stadium arena, neon close-ups of the dolls and their accessorized instruments, and human interaction with the toys: a hand places a cassette vertically into a player, and the words “Free With Purchase” pop right back up, explicitly stressing the commercial appeal of rock ‘n roll. Girls decked out in headbands and denim rush to grab packaged dolls off the shelf, as a female announcer tells audiences “you get a
free *Jem* poster too!” Following this, the happy girls proudly hold up their audiocassettes in their bedrooms (the free *Jem* poster displayed on their walls), cheerily exclaiming, “I got mine!”

![Free with Purchase](image)

**Figure 11. Commercial for *Jem* doll advertising free audiocassette.**

The phrase “I got mine” eerily echoes the consumerist mantra of 1980s protoneoliberalism, in which hardworking individual entrepreneurs claim their well deserved consumer goods. Middle- and upper-class girls growing up in the 1980s had far fewer opportunities to use entertainment technology on a daily basis than they do today; the audiocassette – along with television, of course – thus represented one of the major outlets for girls to demonstrate control over technology. The *Jem* dolls commercial frames the ownership of the cassette as essential for musical celebrity, and as the girls in the segment practice good citizenship via consumption, we see the kind of overidentification with the image that Walter Benjamin noted as symptomatic of mass culture. These girls may not yet be successful glam rock stars like Jem, or even successful music executives like Jerrica, but through eager and diligent consumption, they can, in the future, lay claim to the entertainment industry. That the commercial is not just a commercial but one intimately linked to the programs during which they aired is also of critical importance; the convergence of cartoon, commercial, and music video
within the *Jem* universe all belie the industrial effort to train girls as prodigious consumers, though the Children’s Television Act of 1990 would end the practice of advertising tie-in toy lines and food products for the programs within commercials. Lynne Joyrich’s thoughtful analysis of 1980s television through the lens of gender and consumer culture rings especially true here: “In both their consumer appeal and their address to an audience of youths, a viewer who is not yet considered a man, music videos are in many ways exemplary... [demonstrating] the gender contradictions that may arise in a medium that is considered ‘feminine’ by many critics but is itself committed to appealing to the public at large.”70 While Joyrich is referring to the presumed male spectator of the music video as it aired on networks such as MTV in the 1980s, we might flip the script of her remark to expose the totality of gendered consumption as it occurs within *Jem*. Here, gender contradictions do not emerge through a gendered audience (though *Jem*'s audience did not entirely consist of girls), but rather through the contradictions it engenders in defining appropriate feminine behavior: Jem and her friends may have a social conscience and preach cooperation, but her fans must gleefully embrace private property in order to access *Jem*'s model of female success.

Whereas the “I got mine!” commercial reveals the perversion of feminist aspirations for girls through its contradictory address and possibilities for identification – in which the only tenable position is that of consumer – it is not the only example I wish to discuss. Jiz, too, has merchandise that she wants you to buy. “The *Jiz Commercial*” opens with the profane humor one can come to expect from *Jiz* (“and now a motherfucking word from our motherfucking sponsors”) as Jiz invites the “ugly girl from the 80s” to shop at the “Jiz Emporium.”71 The commercial mashes up a number of *Jem*
merchandise commercials, replacing the glamour of the music industry with scenes of sexual violence through its alteration of sound and image. First, “this is where you’re going to have an abortion,” Jiz tells a girl in front of a marquee; and then “I’m going to rape you…and I have friends to help!” voiced over footage of the plastic faces and neon hair of the Holograms and Misfits dolls. Furthermore, the cassette grants access not to the sphere of feminine consumption but instead to the most morbid cultural signifier of the 1980s: AIDS. The footage of the girls rushing to grab dolls off of store shelves is now remixed to Jiz’s voice stating that “the first thirty victims who come get an AIDS test where I read you the results,” as we see Jiz’s verdicts emerge out of the pink cassette player:

![Figure 12. The audiocassette from the commercial becomes remixed as a HIV test result.](image)

[Voiceover]: “Hey Hannah, it’s Jiz…so I have something to tell you: you got it. I’m sorry. No easy way to say it. You are as positive as the nubby clit side of a battery. You have more AIDS than an 80s gay bathhouse. So…sucks for you.”
Figure 13. Another test result.

[Voiceover]: “Hey Lindsey, it’s Jiz…looks like you’re negative, but don’t make that [sic] think that you’re not a slut, because you know what, even whores can get lucky, all right, because we all know it’s only a matter a time…it’s only a matter of time, Lindsey. You disgust me.”

In the “Jiz Emporium,” the girls proudly display their cassettes, which now serve as their test results: “I got mine!” is remixed to “I got AIDS!” shifting the rhetoric of consumer empowerment to that of diseased pariah. If, as Monica Swindle argues, “girl power is often a slogan and a marketing technique, [and] ‘girl’ an image sold to girls and women as coming from the consumption of products and other intangible commodities in new global affective economies,” then what sort of image is being “sold” through this discursively immunocompromised remix? What affective economies are present within this transposition of AIDS? Nostalgia functions powerfully in the “Jiz Emporium,” insofar as the ideological attitudes espoused by test counselor Jiz mirror and exaggerate the condensed temporalities and reorganization of subjectivity of People With AIDS (PWAs) during the height of the epidemic, a temporal overlap with the syndicated broadcast of *Jem*. Prior to the development of antiretroviral medications, AIDS was represented in the popular press and other media as a death sentence with little recourse;
a diagnosis in 1985 would have, in fact, engendered feelings of helplessness and pity, whereas a negative test result would have been framed as a dodging of the bullet, a delay in what might have been perceived as the inevitable threat of seroconversion. And although children were used in media representations of AIDS to signify innocence and the utter capriciousness of the disease throughout the 1980s and early 1990s (as Paula Treichler argues, in a strategy to “normalize their ‘otherness’” as victim and to shift attention away from gay men) – girls were very rarely the victim of AIDS.  

Apparently, the Misfits are not the baddest girls in town; in the “Jiz Emporium,” the body of the girl extends beyond the boundaries of legitimated consumption and into the dangerous territory of reckless abuse and misogyny, as girls are presented with a third option for identification: that of happy victim or of masochist.

Remix is crucial to the reorganization of consumer identification under this affective economy of perversion. Both Jiz and the original commercial footage (which was also made available as part of the extras for Jem’s DVD release) are “consumed” on YouTube. Richard Grusin notes how “YouTube not only functions as a 24/7, global archive of mainly user-created video content, but it also serves as an archive of affective moments or formations, much as television has done for decades,” and nostalgia circulates in both the online Jem-verse and the online Jiz-verse. Among the comments on one YouTube page containing the original “I got mine!” commercial are those from predominantly female commenters who proudly say they still have their cassettes or who long for their old dolls. While the commercial, to some extent, suffers from the decay common to recorded video footage that has been digitized and compressed for YouTube – recalling Lucas Hilderbrand’s point (and quip) that “streaming clips on YouTube reflect
the aesthetics of access. In a word, YouTube clips look (and sound) terrible” – viewers still approach the access to their pasts through the merchandise they consumed in their youths.76 The commodity circulates as object, text, and nostalgic affect, although it is anchored in its original material form. In contrast, the comments on “The Jiz Commercial” make little reference to material objects, but rather repeat some of the more graphic (and choice) lines from the parody, effacing the nostalgic weight of the commercial – though some users express a desire for Jiz to read out loud their future test results. The textual repetition of the voiceover in the comments reaffirms the circuits of transformation to consumer culture; what ultimately is to be consumed, the episode of Jiz suggests, is more Jiz, a masterful demonstration of the intertextuality present in televisual remix.

“Don’t Give it a Name / Flush it Down the Drain”: Remix’s Reproductive Politics

While it may be hard to isolate the most conventionally offensive element in the Jiz remix series (between its incessant profanity, quotidian jokes about rape and sexual assault, and misogynist toilet humor about female anatomy), abortion functions as a notable trope in the Jiz-verse. As a character, Jiz is “pro-choice. Really pro-choice,” as the caption to “The Abortion Episode” that I analyze here reads; and many remixed episodes are spent documenting her attempts to coax abortions out of all young girls that appear in the diegetic narrative.77 Yet I would like to propose that on-demand abortion is not only a controversially definitive trope within the remixes – even more than the imagined seroconversion of young Jem fans – but also, in a sense, a structural condition
of televisual remix itself.

As a family-friendly medium for much of its history, television has always figured the family in its direct address, yoking together, as Joyrich has keenly pointed out, the reproductive capacities of television as a medium premised on weekly repetition and the reproductive capacities of the family that give television its audience. As a number of feminist television scholars (and scholars of feminism more broadly) have pointed out, the 1980s saw television dealing in more explicit and experimental fashion issues taken up by the socially conservative campaigns in the name of “family values,” specifically surrounding reproductive rights and debates around when life begins.

Portions of The Silent Scream (dir. Jack Duane Dabner, 1984) aired on network television, and the documentary “The Miracle of Life” played on Nova (PBS, 1983). Abortion on primetime narrative television, however, remained taboo throughout the 1980s, even as the aftermath from Roe calcified within the American cultural imaginary: following Maude’s Maude Findlay’s decision to undergo the procedure in the infamous episode “Maude’s Dilemma” (CBS, 1972), only a few series tackled the issue, and the majority of these representations were of the debate itself, rather than of a female character making the decision to abort her pregnancy voluntarily. Three decades later (and four decades after Roe v. Wade), these debates continue to be unresolved, yet abortion is now a more common practice, although it often remains as equally sensationalized. When a teenage character from the family drama Friday Night Lights (NBC, 2006-2012) decided to have an abortion, for example, one television critic noted how surprised he was by the fact that the episode was “devoid of political posturing or grandstanding. It didn’t insult its viewers. It was classic ‘show-not-tell’ at its best.”
lauding of realism hinted at in his review may be read as part of a larger strategy by NBC Universal to frame the episode as amorphously apolitical and appealing to a homogenous audience for whom the boundaries between pro-life and pro-choice are not recognized as demographically pertinent, despite the character’s ultimate decision to abort.

But Jiz does not belong to primetime drama, and she is most certainly not beholden to network censorship or corporate control. “The Abortion Episode” of *Jiz* is one of the series most watched, attracting nearly half a million views on YouTube. In the episode, Deirdre, one of the girls from Starlight House – in *Jem*, the orphanage run by the Holograms – faces a familiar dilemma, and opts to keep her baby rather than have the expected abortion induced by Jiz. Abortion (or a “self-induced miscarriage,” as Jiz prefers) is figured in unequivocally positive terms. For instance, a conversation between Jiz and her boyfriend Rio at the beginning of the episode reveals that Jiz refuses to have babies of her own because she loves abortions too much; this conversation exists in opposition to one that acknowledges the diegetic world of *Jem*, in which the orphanage function of Starlight House serves as an outlet for the maternal. “Only live things go in my pussy, and only dead things come out,” Jiz reminds Rio, establishing her own body as the space of a promiscuous sexual politics in addition to the very zone in which life and death can be established. Jiz projects the site of reproduction – and thus of her own reproductive politics – not as the womb but as her pussy, an exceptionally insistent sexualization of abortion. Indeed, perhaps unwittingly, Jiz stumbles upon the fraught relationship between the act of sexual copulation (and its attending affective labors, from negotiating sexual autonomy through the overcompensation for material power differences to the literal manufacture of gesture during the act itself) and the (failed) act
of childbirth (as well as its attending affective labors, from the performance of the
celebration of an always racialized femininity to the regimented coordination of
preparing both to give birth and to socialize a newborn into the present world). It is not
simply that Jiz employs the binary of penetration and expulsion as the framing device for
life or death (though it is this too), but that she orders it as well, first the (orgasm
inducing, one assumes) act of life, then the (violent, one also assumes) eviction of that
life that contaminates the categories of recreative and procreative sex, but does so
methodically. The mechanization that Jiz thus uses to describe “self-induced
miscarriages” (in a rather “businesslike” manner, perhaps a nod to Jem’s “executive”
sensibility) presents the structure of remixed abortion as necessarily pleasurable, violent,
arranged, and vulgar all at the same time.

Abortion represents one of the most meaningfully commanding “choices” in the
lives of women, yet the fact that reproductive politics has borrowed consistently,
although tenuously, from the language of neoliberalism should also come as no surprise.
The way in which reproductive debates have been cast within the news media and within
political discourse as an issue of “choice” or of “reproductive freedom” is a strategy by
pro-choice groups to maximize associations with individual liberty and self-autonomy.
According to this discourse, women should have control over their own bodies to the
extent that they can advocate for health decisions, which may or may not include
abortion. Yet this neoliberal logic could also be used against women’s reproductive
autonomy. As Lauren Berlant and others have cogently documented, the fetus emerged
within pro-life or anti-abortion social movements, and was thus introduced into the
national political discourse, as a living organism-citizen that is entitled to rights – a rather
sneaky appropriation of the liberal discourse of freedom. Identifying television, and in particular 1980s television, as complicit in this appropriation, Berlant stitches together vitalism with natalism and with nationalism:

The purpose here is to exhaust the banality of violence to the originary (read white, “American”) body, to make violation once again a scandalous violence, and to reprivatize that body (within the patriarchally identified family); to recontain scandalous corporeality within mass culture and the minority populations of the nation; and to revitalize the national fantasy of abstract intimacy, but this time in a body that, visually available in its pure origin, receives protection from the juridical and immoral betrayals of national capitalism let loose by feminism and *Roe v. Wade.*

Berlant underscores the way in which neoliberalism thrives on the tactic of appropriation, such that what is ultimately produced within the abortion debate is a strange discomfort within neoliberal ideology that, to quote Eve Sedgwick, could be best summarized as “kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic.” Just as neoliberalism has coopted choice within feminist theories of reproduction, so too has it recalibrated its economic spheres of influence to reinscribe gender stereotypes so as not to disrupt the heteropatriarchal order. If access to contraception and abortion encourages American women to work, choose to marry, and have children later on in adulthood, the effects on the distribution of population lead to what Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild have called the “care deficit,” in which low-wage and often unorganized workers from developing nations become caregivers for developed nations. Yet however circumscribed by globalization, the rhetorical framing (and again, the media is ministerial in this construction) of choice and rights, on the one hand, and life, on the other hand, constructs a well known logic of false equivalence: the opposite of “pro-life” or “anti-abortion” is not, in fact, “pro-death” or “pro-abortion,” respectively.

And yet for Jiz, these are precisely the ideological positions that must be
scurrilously espoused; the rhetoric of choice is entirely absent from all of Jiz’s conceptions of abortion. By perverting the object of the debate, Jiz succeeds in resisting the neutralization of liberal rights discourse, although this resistance should not be uncritically valorized. Indeed, Jiz is simply against choice writ large: she demands abortions on cue, and in fact views the act of copulation as integral for fulfilling the second act of her script. The compulsion to abort with fascist precision does not compute with the rationales of the free market. But just as choice is always limited, so too does Deirdre become trapped by her pregnancy in “The Abortion Episode.” Having decided to keep her baby and thereby defying Jiz’s orders, she finds that this option (preferred by most of television’s female characters) carries risks of its own. After attempting to gain support from her brother, a gay prostitute, and then seeing what acts may be required of her in order to have the income necessary to raise a child (it involves defecation), Deirdre eventually decides that she wants an abortion after all, and she returns to Starlight House for the procedure. Jiz, in the meantime, has been busted by the authorities for administering abortions without a medical license and for performing them – license of not – “after the eighth month” (a charge to which Jiz replies, “but that’s when you pull ‘em out, when they’re ripe”). As Jiz and Deirdre reunite, the younger protégé confesses, “I finally realized that having babies is for retards. I realized that I don’t want to fucking have a goddamn baby on my goddamn back.” Her rock star mentor could not be more proud, and Kimber delivers the tagline from which this chapter draws its name with a spritely jump: “Let’s get a motherfucking abortion.” The Mammograms then take the stage in front of a global audience to sing their new hit, “Abortion.” Kimber’s line, and its ensuing repetition in later episodes, positions abortion not as an individual act at all,
but one experienced collectively, a socialist/consumerist, feminist/misogynist, heterosexual/queer celebration of abortion that represents a right of passage for young girls. “The Abortion Episode” reanimates, quite literally, the potential for the rhetoric of abortion (or anti-abortion) to be dramatized and pushed to its logical extreme, and Jem has been remixed into a different kind of female pioneer – the crusader who demands that every girl get an abortion to hilarious, if reprobate, effect.

It may be tempting to read these puerile abortion jokes as simply there for shock value, a way of capitalizing on the legacy of television program such as *South Park* while transposing the valence of obscene animated adolescents to a different aesthetic and gender. But I wonder if perhaps abortion is doing other work as well, representing more than just an effort to shock or scandalize its viewers. In Barbara Johnson’s consummate excursus on abortion and poetry, “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion,” she articulates an inquiry into the rhetorical shape of abortion with a simple yet deep question: “can the very essence of a political issue – and issue like, say, abortion – hinge on the structure of a figure?” (*AAA* 29). As she takes a keen eye to poems by Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton, Lucille Clifton, and Gwendolyn Brooks that give voice to women, fetuses, and readers who both act and do not act as witnesses to the event (the essay is a rather tour de force of close reading) she advances the figure of apostrophe (the address of an inanimate being) as the structure around which the arguments for and against abortion coalesce. Abortion is only activated as a polarizing debate, she argues, because it is *animated*, given life through a situation that cannot not be violent: “The choice is not between violence and nonviolence, but between simple violence to a fetus and complex, less determinate violence to an involuntary mother and/or an unwanted child” (*AAA* 33). The speakers of
the poems she analyzes have written themselves into poems they “cannot get out of without violence,” due to the formal structures of poetry, the device that was originally assigned to give life in the first place (*AAA* 34). Because it must be animated, the “choice” is never without violence.

What kind of violence is present within *Jiz’s* own animation of abortion, and what, specifically, is being animated? I have advanced the notion in this chapter that the offensive rendering of what are undoubtedly sensitive and resonant issues for women across the globe is a kind of violence that is conjoined to the development and cultural value of remix culture. *Jiz* is full of profane language that often borders on hate speech, and while certain queer voices have, of late, stood out against the policing of speech as respectability politics, I am not convinced that *Jiz* and her creator Sienna D’Enema may be acquitted (if they ever cared about such things) by a line of defense that states that “the right to offend people is a cornerstone of the LGBT movement…and every movement and community needs jesters,” to quote trans* activist Andrea James. To write off *Jiz* as an “equal opportunity offender,” as pure parody, would do injustice to the effects of that very violence, after all. I see in *Jiz* the very abortion of nostalgia for its “parent” series, but this perversion of nostalgia has political effects. Nostalgia is not wielded in the *Jiz* episodes to gloss over the political battles over family values successfully used by Reaganites to electoral effect. Rather, when a remixed *Jiz* encourages abortion among her girl groupies, I see nostalgia being vulgarized, but in such a way that functions to revive said nostalgic feelings in the first place. In other words, what makes the *Jiz* videos so dangerously offensive is less the provocative slurs and more the violence they enact on nostalgia, how they reanimate the sacred objects of one’s childhood in order to defile
them with acerbic humor. I read in Jiz an act of vidding apostrophe, in which remix culture gives life to old series but, in doing so, become trapped into a position of violence. Such a reading must resist the temptation to call remix culture pure creation or an unimpeachable form of writing pace Lessig. Rather, we must take Johnson’s import to heart: “it is as though male writing were by nature procreative, while female writing is somehow by nature infanticidal” (AAA 38). While D’Enema identifies as male, he prefers to lurk in online pseudonymity with a female name, and the queer sensibility present within his work cites Elizabeth Freeman’s identification of queerness “as the site of all the change element that capital inadvertently produces, as well as the site of capital’s potential capture and incorporation of chance.” This linguistic drag, in which the male writer is both procreative and infanticidal, produces a queer infanticide of the nostalgic object.87

As an anecdotal aside, when I met with D’Enema, he told me that one of the most frequent responses to his work is the comment “You killed my childhood!” To take such a flippant comment seriously, we might stipulate that while the remix might kill a childhood, it can only do so because it first reanimates the feelings of nostalgia connected to one’s childhood. Indeed, this repetitive cycle of apostrophic aborting nostalgia lays bare the terrain of an affective economy of perversion, as Jiz both is a pervert but also perverts the memories of Jem fans. Her presence online functions as a rejoinder that Remix as action and remix culture by industry infuses creative potentiality into the wistful objects of a viewer’s past, but only through taking as its premise the risking of innocence conjured by those objects. If remix is, in today’s digital cultural studies, indeed a repertoire of techniques used to promote cultural literacy, it often has such instructive
power because of its capacity to pervert. As past becomes remixed into the present, queer remixers must insist on tracing what is risked when they scramble, even to innocuous or humorous effects, for the reanimation and subsequent murder of childhood innocence might, as Jiz demonstrates, embody perhaps one of the most extreme metageneric principles at stake in today’s remix culture.

Postscript: Jem is alive, Jiz is Dead (Long Live Jiz)

On March 20, 2014, Hasbro announced a live-action cinematic adaptation of Jem and the Holograms, to be released in October 2015. A YouTube video uploaded by a “Jerrica Benton” accompanied the announcement, showing director Jon M. Chu and producers Jason Blum and Scooter Braun walking around a Hollywood office and inviting fans of the original animated series to submit, via a host of social media sites, “their passions for the original Jem.” Mixing direct address with short clips from Jem, the three men asked fans not for money but instead for their “creativity” (and talent, as the trio also solicited help for casting) in a variation on an online crowdfunding campaign: through the avenues of participatory culture, fans could audition with a two minute long video or simply post pictures of Jem-related fan art. Many Jem fans eagerly responded with glee following the announcement, noting that, unlike Hasbro’s other transmedia franchises, G.I. Joe or The Transformers (both targeted at a male audience), Jem never had an official update following the series’ cancellation in 1988. Others, primarily female critics, were less convinced: series creator Christy Marx was not asked to be a part of production, though in a video response to a Twitter hashtag campaign (#WeWantChristy), producer Jessica Hall announced the addition of female production
staff to the formerly all-male development team, reassuring fans “Don’t worry girls! I won’t let [director Chu] screw it up!”

The *Jem* adaptation departs from the series in a number of telling ways: it is live-action as opposed to animated, and it integrates social media not just into its production but into both its narrative (in the film, Jem reaches stardom through a viral video) and its audience (the film will speak, producers have said, “for a whole new generation with themes of being true to who you are in a multitasking, hyperlinked social media age”). Following the announcement, many critics and fans expressed nostalgia through pointing out the influence of the original series on notions of girlhood, retrospectively attempting to discern a politics from the series that was often absent from their childhood viewing. Writing in *Collectors Weekly*, Lisa Hix lamented “Welcome to the real future: Social-media fame trumps fighting for social causes, powerful women are reduced to sad girls, and a mammoth toy company allies with Hollywood to make money ruining everyone’s favorite childhood memories.” And writing in Gawker Media’s io9 blog, Lauren Davis narrated her feelings by saying “We were hoping that a *Jem* movie would be filled with '80s camp, but instead it's looking like a rushed nostalgia grab… we're worried that *Jem and the Holograms* will be flat dolls rather than day-glo rockers.”

If the cinematic adaptation of *Jem* will result in “flat dolls,” the force of the inanimate would seem to be asserted in this circuit of transmedia storytelling – based on these reports, it is easy to speculate glibly that *Jem and the Holograms* will, in different ways, perform similar work to the function of abortion in *Jiz*, though of course, the profits of the film will go to a major corporation instead of circulating as part of independent queer cultural production. But Jiz will not be around to witness this next
remix in the franchise. In June 2014, the last episode of Jiz, “Jiz is Dead,” appeared on YouTube with the ambiguous caption “what may be the last Jiz video.”92 The episode comments, as do many televisual series, on its fan culture, its style (here, the offensive jokes and juvenile toilet humor), and its metatextual universe. Jiz receives a letter from a superfan, Spooge (in the Jem-verse, Spooge is the visual character of Riot, the lead singer of the Stingers, a German rock band that replaces the Misfits in Jem’s third season), saying that Jiz’s performances have inspired him to perform as well. Jiz and Kimber go to see Spooge’s act at a gay bar, and repeatedly through the scene Kimber calls Jiz out on her insolently bawdy language, forcing Jiz to rephrase her calling of Spooge a “hot tranny mess,” a “hot trans mess.”93 In a moment of direct address to the camera, Kimber explains that from that after witnessing an explosive performance of Spooge’s new single “Only Anally” (a parody of Katy Perry’s 2013 pop hit “Unconditionally”), Jiz fell in love, and the two became “the most motherfucking offensive couple on the planet, and there is no room in this motherfucking society for any type of hate speech, whether it be racist or misogynistic, or homophobic, or transphobic. None of it,” right before telling an extra who speaks in a voice that suggest that he is disabled, “shut up, you motherfucking retard. I’m trying to talk to the motherfucking cameras.” The story ends with Jiz and Spooge being so obscene together that, as with many relationships, their competitive ribaldry becomes annoying, and they become marooned on a desert island following a boat crash caused by an interpersonal fight. The dialogue references a number of media memes and controversies: the debate over the use of the term “tranny” on RuPaul’s Drag Race; the media focus on various “supercouples”; discussions about hate speech
(including the use of ‘retard’); familiar television narratives of being marooned on an island (going all the way back to *Gilligan’s Island*).

Upon viewing “Jiz is Dead,” I was struck not only by the supposed finality of the episode (made clear by its title, though as we know by now with *Jiz*, what is killed is often reanimated, only to be “killed” again) but also by Kimber’s moments of self-reflexivity in critiquing *Jiz* for its filth – that is, for her direct acknowledgment of the remix’s affective economy of perversion. Affective economies of perversion, I maintain, operate in subtle ways, despite the level of explicitness present within their address. Hearing *Jiz*’s voiceover is fundamentally different than reading the transcribed language on the page – as you have done here – so much so that, during the course of writing this chapter, it caused me no small degree of consternation. It is why I insist on the vulgarity (however unprofessional and risky in a neoliberal university now rife with “trigger warnings”) as essential to animating the many uncomfortable affects present within *Jiz*’s televisual remix of abortion. Assuredly, my task in demystifying perversely queer televisual remix has been to expose the violence present in remix culture, no matter how much such critique would seem to run counter to the object under investigation. If, for Johnson, the uneasy terrain over which rhetorical, psychoanalytic, and political structures crawl in and out of each other emerges “in the attempt to achieve a full elaboration of any discursive position other than that of child,” than I believe that *Jiz* affords us access into understanding how the formal grammar of remix culture discharges a correspondingly muddled elaboration of non-child discursive positions (*AAA* 39). The problem with remix culture’s teleological bent, one I have attempted to slow down and carefully limn, is that perhaps even the child has been sophomorically corrupted, and once we accept that as the
case today, we risk indulging in the viewing position of the child without the knowledge of the fraught reproductive politics that enabled this juvenile remix to transpire online.
A Statement Three Ways

*Televisual affectivity depends on the fiction of meaningful representation.* This statement has been a primarily theoretical intervention of this dissertation into the affective turn and its comport on American television. But what “meaning” can be extracted from the phrase ‘the fiction of meaningful representation,’ or even from the various valences of a word like “meaningful”? Here, I identify three possibilities.

Meaningful representation could refer first to the process by which a viewer makes meaning from a narrative text, a process of reading. The contours of such a process – how one approaches a text, what one “looks” for within its complexity – occupy a central concern of the field of literary studies, with textual strategies having been frequently analyzed as systemic (if not scientific) processes: Russian formalism’s techniques of defamiliarization; Franco Moretti’s distinction between close reading and distant reading; Louis Althusser’s symptomatic reading of Marx; and more recently, Eve Sedgwick’s characterization of paranoid reading and reparative reading; Michael Warner’s attention to uncritical reading; Rita Felski’s articulation of post-critical reading; and Sharon Marcus’ and Stephen Best’s gloss on surface reading (we could add many more to this list!). Although these theories vary widely in the degree to which they privilege authorial intent and historical context, they all associate the act of making meaning with the adoption of the role of a critical consumer of narrative. Yet affect, we
may recall, is supposed to resist an equivalency to meaning in its purest form; it is something immediately, viscerally felt throughout the body. Some affect theorists, drawing from Spinoza, claim that affect is “nonrepresentational” insofar as they define representation as referring to signification itself, choosing instead to view affects virtually or relationally. Thus, the statement that televisual affectivity depends on the fiction of meaningful representation gestures towards the slippages inherent in how we perceive affect – what this camp would call “emotion” – and affect itself. Ruth Leys has instructively pointed out how the oppositional binary of meaning and affect runs counter to the anti-dualism present within this non-representational approach to affect, questioning whether one can escape signification altogether, and locating the role that technological materialism plays in such an escape. As I claimed in my overview of “viscerally uncomfortable television,” to read the affectivity of television as immediate, present, and vital is to engage in a necessarily ideological reading, as the temporality of the medium is marked by its liveness, a liveness that, as Jane Feuer has canonically argued, is both TV’s ontology and its ideology (and one troubled by changes in televisual convergence, as I remarked in the first chapter). We thus require the fiction of meaningful representation in order to inhabit TV’s temporal flows, built as they are on segmentation and repetition. The affectivity of television, this reading implies, has been there all along in how we watch as an organizational grammar of time.

Second, the fiction of meaningful representation could gesture towards a claim oft-repeated in this dissertation: that to privilege a television series or genre as inherently more “meaningful” than others plays into one of the television industry’s cultural logics. This has been insidiously propagated throughout contemporary television criticism, an
industry itself that has grown exponentially with the medium’s so-called legitimation, as well as by technological changes such as the explosion of the Internet that allowed fans to publish their transformative works of art, their critiques, and their ideas about a series, challenging the traditional (and, we should note, predominantly white male) profile of a “television critic.” This is not to say that all critics, bloggers, fans, recappers, industry correspondents, or academics do buy into these hierarchies of cultural value. Rather, televisual affectivity means reorienting claims that some television programs and genres (for example, serialized television drama such as *Breaking Bad*, *The Sopranos*, and *Mad Men*) carry more meaning than others (for example, reality television series such as *The Swan*, *For the Love of Ray J*, or *The Anna Nicole Show*) towards assessments of affective charge. After all, one can have as equally intense affective reactions to reality series as serialized drama. The statement thus can be inferred to mean something like this: whether detached from processes of signification or not, affects do not discriminate between high art and low culture. Because of participatory culture and the plethora of ways in which we watch, audiences now express their affects in more supposedly populist (insofar as participatory culture is figured, as the last chapter maintained, as democratic) and networked – though this does not necessarily mean less commoditized – ways.

To conclude this dissertation, however, this afterward focuses its energies, its affects, on a third reading of this statement. This reading pressures the term “representation,” attending to its definition as an action on behalf of someone else, as in the example of a political representative. As the world’s predominant electronic media form for most of its history, television has always foregrounded and interrogated the category of meaningful representation through its deceptively complex portrayals of
different gender, race, socioeconomic class, national, religious, and sexual identities. And as a medium that primarily entered the national imaginary through the domestic space of the suburban American home, television has always emphasized in particular intersectional questions of gender and sexuality; television studies has thus uniquely contributed to the study of representation as a discipline closely tied to feminist theory and analysis. Nevertheless, as beholden to industrial conventions, multiple audiences, and creative talent, television has instigated a cautious embrace of as well as a critical distance from stereotypes of marginalized identity groups. Taking care not to universalize all members of a particular group, meaningful representation might have to be thought of narrowly as a structural impossibility, as no series will be able to satisfy the representational expectations of everyone within or outside of a particular identity or audience demographic. Someone will feel alienated from a program’s politics of representation; someone will disidentify with a protagonist who phenotypically and demographically resembles herself. Television may traffic in this notion of representation as re-presentation, referentially, of delimited identities, but attending to affectivity expands our understanding of what “meaningful representation” itself might mean.

Having charted a path of discomfort across different genres (reality TV, serialized drama, children’s TV) and figures of neoliberal citizenship (the addict, the sexual predator, the abortionist), I end this dissertation on a slightly different register of the viscerally uncomfortable, one perhaps turned inwards toward the discipline of television studies and the practice of television criticism: irritation. Irritation is not supposed to be appealing, but I argue that irritation can be wielded as a productive, affective reading practice through which to approach the study of representation. In considering what
affective energies television scholars deploy while gaining pleasure from programs, characters, and storylines containing muddled (at best) or problematic (at worst) representational content, irritation emerges as a minor but no less important form of discomfort well suited to late capitalism’s appropriation of identity politics to further its own means. Through a reading of the HBO series *Girls* (2012-present) and the polarizing reaction to the series that emerged in print and digital journalism, I briefly examine here the convergence of irritation and the politics of representation. As an affect of inadequacy and as itself an inadequate affect, irritation serves as a useful affective barometer for millennial television, marked by a profound state of change in the medium’s current moment. That is to say, we must embrace irritation as representation in order to articulate and challenge the political stakes and viewing positions of televisual neoliberalism.

**Thinking Toxicly yet Affectionately**

Television is a medium dependent upon repetition, yet Michelle Dean is not looking to repeat herself, even though she already has. Dean was a blogger about popular culture for *The Nation* from October 2012 until June 2013, and she was blogging about the comedy series *Girls* (HBO, 2012-present) in a post titled “The Internet’s Toxic Relationship with HBO’s *Girls*.” The post is organized around Dean’s affective reactions to news at the time that the series had been renewed for a third season:

I’ve written about Lena Dunham in this space before, and I’m not looking to repeat myself, but the gist of my take on *Girls* is: it’s fine. Just that. Not the Second Coming of twentysomethings (which one shudders to contemplate anyway), nor some brave new art form. *Girls* has some good jokes embedded in unremarkable-to-sloppy plotlines and acting, but otherwise I generally prefer control and artfulness to Apatowian craft-of-no-craft. That said, I watch it faithfully for the occasional flashes of talent it
contains. So there was no reason for the queasy feeling I got when I heard that the show had been renewed for a third season. I mean to say that I actually felt a pit of dread begin to open in my stomach. I interrogated this overreaction, and concluded: my objection is not so much to the show as it is to the endless amounts of think pieces – as I once saw someone put it, Very Important Essays – *Girls* inspires. There are think pieces about think pieces and now I suppose you could call this a think piece about the general phenomenon of Internet think pieces about television shows, so yes, on some level, I’m a hypocrite to point that all that out.⁶

Dean describes feelings of exhaustion, resignation, loyalty, pleasure, dread, and guilt before moderating this “overreaction” of spectatorial affectivity with critical thinking (as if critical thinking is itself somehow free of affect!). Yet the tone of her think piece is chiefly one of frustration: at *Girls* for not being quite good enough; at her peers for a continuous desire to think about and comment on *Girls*; with the Internet for creating and popularizing the think piece as a commodified form of writing; and, eventually, even with herself for participating in an economy that bargains the act of thinking itself. In her words, *Girls* is a mediocre text, and there is something irritating about having to read too much – that is, to fashion meaning – into something that is the “craft-of-no-craft.”⁷

Dean and Dunham may be a few years apart, but they share much in common: they write across media forms, often attracting controversy for their polemics about millennial culture and everyday life. Additionally, they both participate in the “craft-of-no-craft.” Dunham does this through her mumblecore series, a celebrity memoir, and countless opinions voiced through interviews and appearances as well as through social media; Dean does this through freelancing at a number of online publications, writing blogs and endlessly promoting herself through social media. The indictment of a craft as having no craft at all is also the formal style of a think piece, a form of writing defined by the *OED* as “presenting personal opinions, analysis, or discussion, rather than bare
facts.” But this strange text, perhaps formerly called an essay or a review, has become a way to ruminate about the steady stream of popular culture – what is currently trending or has recently gone viral – through the expansion of digital publishing. They are robustly citational, horizontally deploying hyperlinks to provide evidence to their claims and to promote the think pieces written by their peers (in the process legitimating that as a form of criticism). David Haglund, in what might be a think piece, gives a history of think pieces in American news publishing, noting that since the 1930s, the term was used derisively by journalists to incite panic about the quality of their craft; think pieces, according to The Nation’s Paul W. Ward in 1936, were “dispatches that in major part are the product of the reporters’ communion with their own imaginative souls,” prefiguring the accusations of craftless craft that would come nearly three quarters of a century later. To commune with one’s own imaginative soul evokes the kind of meditative writing found in American transcendentalism, which has occupied a prestigious place in the canon of American literature, and this is both the aim of and criticism leveled at the think piece, which epistemologically epitomizes the paradoxically unique, mass individuality of digital media. Creative yet calculated, reflective yet narcissistic, the think piece has a cultural value and reach higher than the self-published personal blog but lower than seemingly objective, fact-based journalism. Opinionated yet often inaccurate (requiring “updates” that correct facts and tone, often thanks to equally as opinionated commentators), it inhabits a temporality that continuously undermines itself, for it can never be definitive enough or have the last word. In short, the think piece claims to be rich in content, even though it is manufactured quickly and cheaply.
The think pieces on *Girls* should not be confused with a form of writing unique to television that has also emerged thanks to the expansion of digital publishing, the recap. The recap has become a way to summarize the events of an episode while also situating the characters and plot in the episode within and against the series as a whole (for example, in claiming that a particular episode of a series is the best one of a season, or in comparing one character’s arc to that of another). A number of established online publications have devoted more resources to recapping, making it the trademark currency of convergence television. The recap is also, as Mark Andrejevic has written, a way for the industry to take the pulse of fan communities, a way in which “creative activity and exploitation coexist and interpenetrate one another within the context of the emerging online economy.”11 As a textual practice, recapping expands the boundaries of both authorship and criticism, giving viewers a playful way to make sense of a narrative program. As an art form, recapping is often an elevated form of criticism, often wielding sarcastic humor as hermeneutic weapon; it stretches the surface of criticism through an intertextual language translatable to both producers and fans. As a genre that tends to be written in a particular style, recapping demands intersubjectivity, the desire for fans to be a part of a larger industrial and creative apparatus as well as the desire for producers to construct expansive fan communities. The think piece about TV differs from the TV recap insofar as it makes a claim independent of the structure of television. One can create a think piece about an entire season, series, or paratextual material, whereas a recap must hew to a concretized form of broadcast. Recaps require outside content, whereas the think piece circulates independent from such a referent.
Anna McCarthy notes the transience of the word “content” in the digital economy, calling attention to the word’s flexibility but also its mechanization, technologization, and commodification: “it seems that the word content now refers to text and image materials that are intended for human consumption but which must be read by a machine before they can be read by a human.”\(^{12}\) But the way in which think pieces become read both by algorithmic code and by human eyes generates a “toxic relationship” according to Dean, who claims that the audience of such think pieces “spend way too much time reading and thinking about on the Internet.” In many respects, Dean aligns think piece criticisms with what is now commonly called the act of trolling, insofar as its audience (“journalists, bloggers, and, yes, comments sections”) consists of people immersed in digital culture, not dissimilar to how Gabriella Coleman characterizes the “troll’s” function as “commenting on the massification of the Internet – a position that is quite contemptuous of newcomers.”\(^{13}\) Dean, too, sees the Internet’s discussion of Girls as exemplifying what Maura Johnston coined as “trollgazing,” which works on the troll’s logic of “annoyance”: “doing what you know will annoy people, even if your cause is a just one.”\(^{14}\) The compulsion to write about HBO’s Girls, Dean concludes, is inevitably tethered to the irritating nature of both the series and the medium and form used to comment on the series.

But what to make of this “toxic” relationship between a millennial form of knowledge (“the Internet”) and a millennial TV text (Girls)? Part of this toxicity may be theorized from the perspective of cognitive science, which has called the gap between how individuals behave online and how they behave offline the “online disinhibition effect,” a subcategory of which, “toxic disinhibition,” describes the “rude language, harsh
criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats” commonly expressed in Internet discourse.\textsuperscript{15} Or it may be established through the work of digital media scholars such as Coleman and Lisa Nakamura, who have asserted how trolls and their hate speech constitute the distinguishing expression of community in digital culture.\textsuperscript{16} But it must also be asserted through toxicity’s own relationship to the category of representation. In Mel Chen’s powerful work on queerness, toxicity, and affect, toxicity has a rhetorical valence when applied to minoritarian identities: “If the definition of toxin has always been the outcome of political negotiation and a threshold value on a set of selected tests, its conditionality is no more true in medical discourse than in social discourse, in which one’s definition of a toxic irritant coincides with habitual scapegoats of ableist, sexist, and racist systems.”\textsuperscript{17}

The Internet, with a never-quite-fulfilled promise of anonymity and the erasure of identity, becomes susceptible to toxic affects through debates surrounding the question of representation; such a porous structure of exposure and publicity undergirds the point of entry by which toxicity, in the form of hate speech, infects the proclamation (and contestation) of identity.

**Representing Imperfections through Imperfect Representations**

Apart from its televisual and think piece medi(t)ations, *Girls* is irritatingly toxic through its relationship to its identity of its main character Hannah Horvath (played by Dunham) and to that of its creator: a white, millennial self-proclaimed feminist. Just as the think piece metonymically stands in for the Internet and the forms of knowledge production and networked audiences it typifies, so too does Lena Dunham (culturally synonymous with HBO’s *Girls*) come to represent the artistic aspirations of a generation,
and this rhetorical linkage is perhaps what is most polarizing about Dunham, her series, and millennial culture as a whole. As the first television auteur to come from the millennial generation – defined by Neil Howe and Williams Strauss as children born between 1982 and 2004 – most profiles of Dunham, including those written by her detractors, assert this linkage; it is so ubiquitous that an exhaustive list of its appearances in recaps, think pieces, and other reportage on the series would be impossible.18 To name just one example: a profile in The New York Times Magazine in anticipation of Dunham’s 2014 book Not That Kind of Girl characterizes her “as a proxy for the collective aspirations and insecurities of her generation, or at least a certain educated, mostly white, mostly urban-dwelling microdemographic therein.”19 The linkage is perhaps not so surprising for viewers of Girls, on which Dunham’s character Hannah tells her parents while high on opium in the series’ pilot, “I don’t want to freak you out, but I think that I may be the voice of my generation – or at least a voice of a generation.”20 This generation (or at least her demographic subset of it) is, as Daum’s corrective indicates, one of privilege: most profiles of Dunham will also comment on her whiteness, her Tribeca upbringing, and her wealthy artist parents, and the series has publicly struggled with its treatment – or avoidance – of issues of race, as its four main leads are all white, and people of color make scant appearances on the series (and when they do, many critics have noted, they are either tokenized or stereotyped). While Dunham publicly stated in interviews that rectifying the lack of diversity that a number of critics had noted throughout the first season would occur in the second season, her solution – a two episode arc in which she dates a black law student named Sandy (Donald Glover), who also happens to be a Republican – was roundly criticized for its inauthenticity.21
The episode in which Hannah and Sandy break up (“I Get Ideas”) is telling for how it inscribes irritation as the series’ fundamental affective relationship to race. The majority of scenes dealing with their short relationship are set in private moments, away from the main spaces of diegetic action: for example, in independent bookstores or at his apartment. The one exception to this is a brief scene in the bathroom of the apartment that Hannah shares with her gay friend Elijah (Andrew Rannells), in which Elijah confronts Sandy about his political beliefs, insinuating that he is homophobic through a number of thinly veiled comments, the object of which is simultaneously Sandy’s ideological otherness as well as his racial otherness. Sandy, tired of being characterized in Elijah’s flat stereotypes, tells Elijah: “I’m not doing this with you.” He eventually leaves, after pointing at Elijah and Hannah (shown in the screen in the bathroom mirror), saying, “I get this. I don’t approve, but I get it.” This is the only scene from two episodes in which Sandy is shown with one of Hannah’s friends, and his entrance into her world (and thus the world of the series) is marked by conflict; judging by the size of the bathroom, it is a small world indeed. Sandy’s two remarks are punctuated by different uses of the word this: in the former, ‘this’ signifies the tedious explanation of one’s political identity, but in the latter, it flips the script of social conservatives and becomes a sarcastic acknowledgment of the normative logics of the series, as Sandy acknowledges, but does not approve of, the whiteness of Hannah’s world.

The slippage between the narrative insularity of the series and the discourses about this insularity becomes fully apparent during Hannah and Sandy’s breakup at Sandy’s apartment. Hannah is upset that Sandy has not read her writing. But he has, he admits: “It just wasn’t for me,” he tells her, to which she replies, “It’s for everyone,” in
an allusion to the dogged critiques of representation within *Girls*’ first season. Yet if the series is engaging in a sort of trolling of its critics, it does so through establishing Hannah’s character as stubbornly defensive about the supposed universality of her creative efforts. She insists that Sandy call out the flaws of the essay, but then frequently interrupts him with her sloppy rebuttals: he felt as if nothing happens in the essay; she feels as if “a girl’s whole perspective on who she was and her sexuality changed”; he proceeds to explain himself further while she complains that she has something in her ear (a subtle association of feminist critique and her own physical embodiment as challenges to his point of view). Lamely, Hannah offers one final justification for her obvious discomfort at hearing criticism of her writing: that getting such criticism is, in fact, a good thing, insofar as it constitutes a dialogue about her work that mirrors the dialogue of his political beliefs. But this, too, is a smokescreen for Hannah to voice her opinions about such matters as gay marriage, gun control, and ultimately, that “two out of three people on death row are black.” Hannah’s rant tenuously yokes together Sandy’s politics with his race, an explicitly verbal mirroring of Elijah’s earlier discomfort. Sandy counters by noting the racial fetish of white girls new to Brooklyn, commenting how the “black boyfriend,” like the “fixed gear bike,” appears to be a staple of hipster femininity. As the recipient of what are well-trod criticisms of white millennial females characterized as “basic” (which is also a part of Tiqqun’s *Theory of the Young-Girl*, for instance), Hannah claims to be unaware of the ways in which race is organized within her social world. She confuses, this critique goes, the consumption of racial difference with the active support of communities of color; she will fantasize about her “jungle fever lover” (as NBA legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar characterized Sandy) without fully integrating him into her
life. In language that uncannily reflects Dunham’s own excuses for the lack of cultural diversity within the series – in an interview on NPR, Dunham claims it was by “accident” that the four leads are white – Hannah deflects with an obliviousness that is notable for its whiteness as well as for its aggravation. “The joke’s on you because you know what? I never thought about the fact that you were black once,” she tells him. “I don’t live in a world where there are divisions like this.” She requires an excess of words to communicate her cultural sensitivity and adherence to post-racial ideologies – ideologies that persist especially in today’s media spaces, in which online interaction obscures an individual’s phenotype – but Sandy needs only two to call out Hannah (and Dunham)’s whiteness: “You do.”

The controversy surrounding the lack of cultural diversity in Girls exemplifies the irritating(ly white) logic of the series itself, the think piece echo chamber that calls our attention to its logic, and of televisual logics more broadly. Before the series even premiered and well throughout the first three weeks of its reception, a number of reviews praised its originality while bemoaning its racial and class homogeneity. In a critique of the series’ premiere that was widely shared around social media, Jenna Wortham (a technology columnist for The New York Times but here writing for the women’s website The Hairpin) ethnographically turns to Twitter to distill reactions, which inevitably augur around expectations of referential representation, and she writes, “They are us but they are not us. They are me but they are not me.” The allure of Girls’ verisimilitude is a profound moment of potential identification for Wortham, as she speaks of how the series “gets So. Many. Things. Right” about being in one’s twenties, but in particular praising the series for being “painfully self-aware of its characters’ entitlement,” a trademark
characteristic of many members (i.e., the white, middle-class members) of the millennial generation. Indeed, it is because, in her view, *Girls* is “actually good” that the lack of racial representation within the first three episodes that Wortham saw stings all the more.

Yet while this argument points to problems in *Girls*’s representational politics, it also could be critiqued for its own notion of representation and identity. Wortham (who identifies as black) can be read as voicing a critique of the series that both reinforces an understanding of race as supremely visual, as defined by skin color and a notion of TV as a site for visual reflection: she closes her think piece by stating that “I just wish I saw a little more of myself on screen, right alongside” the four friends of *Girls*. In this statement, the visual field defines Wortham’s notion of representation, and her desire to suture herself into the scene appears through direct mirroring or projection, as she both looks at herself as part of *Girls* and alongside its anchoring signifiers. As many black cultural critics have argued, however, the visual field often amounts as a scene of punishment in which white people (and especially white spectators) assert a normative definition of subjectivity defined against the racial Other, most often through the reproduction of racial stereotypes.\(^{27}\) The impossibility of being sutured into the TV diegesis anchors representation as rooted in lack, and given the way in which the series reifies femininity as appearance (propped up by, among other things, Dunham’s frequent nudity), it would seem as if Wortham’s final comment contains a telling recognition of Kara Keeling’s “black femme,” a figure of difference who in making herself visible “offers us time in which we can work to perceive something different, or differently.”\(^{28}\)

But what is object of this labor – what can be perceived differently – in these reflections? If the object of this labor is representation, Wortham’s think piece, like much
online writing about *Girls*, positions this representation as imperfect, insofar as it will not fulfill any spectator’s fantasies about what legitimately constitutes the imagined “girl.” For the representative icon of millennial feminism is simultaneously very much and certainly not Hannah, in many respects a flawed inheritor to Carrie Bradshaw of *Sex and the City*. *Girls* cannot quite get post-feminism right, for its subjects are not the comparatively mature women of Generation X claiming their place in the workforce, but rather those whose access to the workforce (that is, to that which represents capitalism) has been restricted by the Great Recession. Yet the series also complicates its own performance of its economic precarity, with many online commentaries focusing on the socioeconomic disparity between Dunham’s wealth and her character’s perceived destitution: Hannah is an imperfect representation of a “real” poor person. As several scholars have noted, popular media narratives framed men as the hardest hit by the Great Recession – in which the “mancession” preceded an economic “hecovery” – in ways that erased the material effects on women’s employment and income. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker have astutely noted, for example, how these narratives fit into a larger rhetoric of austerity that was invoked through masculinist language as the solution to the Recession. *Girls* responds, and in turn generates responses, to this privileging of male subjectivity, becoming an imperfect gendered representation of millennial economic precarity. As Lauren DeCarvalho has argued about *Girls* and its reception, “When televisual feminism collides with recession anxiety, not only are both trivialized, but male authority is reinforced for good measure.”

Discourses about *Girls*, and of Hannah in particular, emphasize flaws: Dunham’s self-promotion of her imperfect naked body (itself a critique of “flawed” ideologies
surrounding femininity and appropriate body size); the perceived entitlement of its characters; their general lack of sexual self-confidence (suggesting a millennial sexual immaturity full of anxiety); and, of course, its tone-deaf whiteness. These flaws are what give Girls its complexity, and thus the kind of realism associated with its HBO brand. But as Taylor Nygaard has prudently observed, the controversy surrounding Girls is also a product of HBO’s “inconsistent and conflicting branding strategies, which worked to subsume Dunham’s female auteur identity within the masculine tradition of the HBO quality brand.”32 As industrial strategies of containment – Dunham is a much more polarizing, outspoken, and political showrunner than Alan Ball or David Chase, Nygaard observes – meet an excessive gendered recessionary politics, Girls becomes overdetermined by its own discourse, a strange brew of imperfect pleasure manifested on a visual plane of representation.

This imperfection is, I would argue, the backbone of and for an affectation of irritation that serves at both Girls’ ontology and epistemology, as its textuality and its reception. As part of a televisual revival of the “girl” post-Recession – also seen in network sitcoms such as New Girl (Fox, 2011-present) and 2 Broke Girls (CBS, 2011-present) – Girls casts millennial feminism as incessantly irritating, as both a feminist troll and the object of the troll’s ire. Trapped within the discourse it cannot help but produce, the series exposes the rawness of a visual representation premised on imperfect approximations. In Sianne Ngai’s apperceptive theorization of irritation, she remarks that “whether ‘irritation’ is defined as an emotional or physical experience, synonyms for it tend to apply equally to psychic life and life at the level of the body – and particularly to its surfaces or skin.”33 Her reminder of irritation’s dual role as mild anger and as soreness
prompts a reassessment of the epidermal in *Girls*. One might examine one critic’s – Emily Nussbaum’s – own prolific writings on the series to see the deployment of such epidermal terms of irritation. In 2012, writing for *New York Magazine*, Nussbaum claims that *Girls* reveals “an aesthetic that’s raw and bruised,” as opposed to the “aspirational” aesthetic of *Sex and the City*. In 2013, writing for *The New Yorker*, she likewise claims that the series “teaches you to thicken your skin” through its privileged wit. Indeed, skin is precisely what *Girls* is accused of revealing too much of, with much media attention focused on Dunham’s nude scenes, often figuring them as a feminist aspect of the series (or at least an aspect representative of Dunham’s particular millennial feminism). This may be most clear in the awkward scenes of sexual exploration in the third episode of the series (“All Adventurous Women Do”), in which Hannah is diagnosed with HPV, the sexually transmitted virus that causes skin and mucous membrane infections (transmitted, according to public health campaigns, “skin-to-skin”). But Dunham insists on such contact and transmission. Refusing to be silenced, Dunham tenaciously promotes the series and her other projects despite making inflammatory comments (most notably about an encounter with her sister Grace of questionable sexual contact, which is detailed in her book and attracted significant controversy across the political spectrum).

The sensations that such examples elicit are racialized as well as sexualized. As a mood that uses external sensations to elaborate internal states, irritation, Ngai points out, is always already racialized, since society’s primary way of reading race is through the visual signifier of skin color. Furthermore, since this irritation can operate “only in conspicuous surplus or deficit in proportion to its occasion,” *Girls* irritates both through an excess of its representative capacity (it is too privileged, too white, too narcissistic)
and through a deficiency of the same capacity (it will never be realistic because it lacks authentic diversity). The flattened schema of representation within Girls thus entraps it within a metric of appropriateness that it subsequently refuses, and the constant restaging of this affective gap is what gets under the skin of the spectator and of the porous, networked surfaces of online criticism.

**Throwing Stones at Beach Houses, and Other Forms of Irritatingly Neoliberal Resistance**

Irritation is an imperfect affect, insofar as it lacks an explicit object: it simply is. In fact, Ngai initially ascribes a limited political valence to it: “irritation and its close relations…might be described as negative affect in its weakest, mildest, and most politically effete form. One is tempted to vote it the dysphoric affect least likely to play a significant role in any oppositional praxis or ideological struggle.” But if this were to be the case, this dissertation would end on a rather depressing note – though perhaps it is an appropriate note, given this work’s weighty documentation of viscerally uncomfortable television. In fact, the political stakes of this project seem particularly cornered and stymied by the forms of neoliberal citizenship that the viscerally uncomfortable supports on television; what good is politics if the viewer is too busy (maybe even too addicted to) binging or live tweeting to process political issues or even to recognize them within the programs they watch? This is not to ask about the political possibilities imagined by Girls, which in this particular recounting (a recounting of its already existing many recountings online) amount to a politics of representation defined by the profound disappointment that such a well-written show could be so supremely irritating. Without a
proper object, irritation as a political critique appears to be a bite with no teeth; *Girls* is irritating enough for many critics to make pointedly misogynistic proclamations about the future of feminism, but not irritating enough to project a positive feminist utopia free from the commodification of post-feminism.

Put differently, if irritation can be thought of as an undergirding affect for a politics of representation in millennial feminism and television, is such a form elastic, like the skin metaphors common to *Girls* and its critiques? How might spectators take that form and stretch and contort it toward alternate political ends? How might a productive irritation with and of *Girls* open up a different reading of the series, one imbued with an underwhelming force? *Girls* is, as the critics claim, exceptionally well-written – this is even how Sandy preferences his criticisms of Hannah’s essay – but, as I argued about other “quality” programs in an earlier chapter, I do not wish to imply that its hipster aesthetics or its cultural brand as HBO original programming somehow denies the program of any political comport. Rather, I turn to *Girls* – in particular now, to a scene from the third season episode “Beach House” – to uncover what joys might be located in the act of exposing irritation for what it is, in all of its imperfection.

“Beach House” appears at a moment during the third season in which all of the characters within *Girls* are irritated with each other, to the point where Marnie (Allison Williams) sees the need to plan a way to bring them closer again. She scores a house for the girls for the weekend on the North Fork of Long Island (a location separate from the Hamptons, a choice that Marnie justifies by claiming that North Fork is “for people who think the Hamptons are tacky and don't want to be on a beach that's near J. Crew”). Marnie is optimistic that healing will occur during their time together, and she has gone
to great lengths to ensure that this will happen, from placing vases with hand-cut flowers next to each girl’s temporary bed to planning activities such as making dinner together, using face masks, and writing down their wishes on slips of paper that are then burned in a bonfire to ensure their fulfillment. “Beach House” is thus about feelings and how the processing of feelings can help a group of friends regain their footing with each other (and perhaps that of the series, too, as the episode received the highest number of viewers since the season premiere). Marnie’s efforts, however, are wholly unsuccessful: Hannah runs into Elijah and a group of his friends in town, and she invites them back to the house, and now the eight people at the house (not just the four girls) commence on a boozy pool party, complete with a choreographed dance number. While the partying is fun, Marnie is unhappy that it has prevented more intimate moments of friendship among the women from occurring, and after a rather dense dinner of duck originally intended for four and now stretched eight ways, what was originally intended as a time for healing quickly becomes a disaster.

The highlight of the episode (written by Dunham, Apatow, and Girls’ Executive Producer Jenni Konner) comes when Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet) hears Marnie’s call for honesty among the girls and lets loose with a stinging indictment of each character, calling Hannah a narcissist (“I wanted to fall asleep in my own vomit all day listening to you talk about how you bruise more easily than other people”), Marnie a bad cook and a neurotic (“You are tortured by self-doubt and fear, and it is not pleasant to be around”), and Jessa a robot who recites the trite spiritual language of recovery (“Seriously, Jessa goes to rehab for five fucking seconds, and we have to listen to everything she comes up with?”). Shoshanna goes from sitting on the sofa in the corner, nearly a cameo in the
episode’s action so far, to standing up, with the camera panning around her as she delivers her indictment: Hannah and her friends are “mentally ill and miserable,” a millennial generation coddled by neoliberal entitlement and post-Recession ennui.

To troll, to call out, to indict, to irritate: these are the weapons that Girls uses (and that girls must use) to survive as millennials. These are forms of acknowledgement and recognition that are not tactful, polite, or diplomatic. Sara Ahmed describes in wonderful detail the position of the “feminist killjoy” who destroys the possibility of happiness in social situations through her embodied actions (such as rolling her eyes) as well as through her words. She instructively notes that the term feminism “is thus saturated with unhappiness” insofar as its very construction identifies a refusal to locate happiness in heteropatriarchal society. Indeed, her very presence may incite antagonistic feelings, altering the affective atmosphere of a room: “The feminist killjoy ‘spoils’ the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness.” Ahmed notes how the position of the feminist killjoy is closely tethered to figurations of the “angry black woman,” and this is suggestive of how racial difference helps amplify affective intensities: anger is coded as racially Other, in contrast to more minor and more white forms of negative affect, such as irritation. Shoshanna’s rant at the end of “Beach House” articulates a politics of acknowledgement and recognition anchored around identifying the unhappiness between her group of friends; she is a killjoy in this particular scene through her desire to expose the tensions present within their friendship. But if her rant indeed kills joy, it also opens up the possibility for that joy to emerge again, as such acknowledgement causes visceral pleasure within the viewer aghast at her lack of tact.
“Beach House” presents Girls as a lacerated narrative, barely intact after the affective wounds of a failed weekend of (non) healing. Its characters askew from the images of perfect, upper-class post-feminism presented by previous HBO series, Girls shows a lot of skin in its version of millennial culture – but this skin, while preserved on the outside, exists to communicate a raw feeling interiorized within. The image that Girls presents of its characters as irritated and as irritating enables the series to reconfigure the politics of representation, trolling itself to the point of literal exhaustion: little action happens after Shoshanna’s rant, and the episode closes with the four friends sitting on a curb in town, waiting for the bus that will take them back to New York City and vaguely reenacting the dance they learned the night before. In what might be read as telling both of both their affective familiarity with one another as well as of their exhausted state, they only do bits of the dance while sitting down, communicating comfort through friendship but also a lack of energy. Troubling the viewer’s ability to forge empathetic attachments to its characters, Shoshanna’s rant foregrounds Girls’ larger effort to address its critiques of white narcissism while still maintaining a complex negotiation between audience identification and disidentification. Indeed, this rupture helps to resist the demand of representation itself, as it calls into question the belief that it can have value in a pre-determined, privatized entertainment industry. To reiterate the claim with which I opened this afterword, televisual affectivity depends on the fiction of meaningful representation, but Shoshanna teaches us that the fiction of meaningful representation, its complicit turning in on itself, does not have to produce only irritation but can also create solidarity in its exposure. Acknowledging and recognizing irritation for what it is undermines the conventional wisdom that televisual neoliberalism is indulgent in only the uncomfortable,
or only figures of abjection and disidentification. In addition to giving voice to its trolls – a neoliberal yet effective way to call attention to the racialized and gendered logics at work in producing millennial television – Girls suggests that it may be through the probing sensations of discomfort that we may better understand the way neoliberal culture shapes future generations, such that we may be ever vigilant to lash out and expose it for the irritating mechanism by which we in turn smile, laugh, and explode with exhilaration and joy.
Acknowledgments

To acknowledge, as this dissertation argues at its end, is also to call out, and this does not necessarily take the form of thanks. Indeed, to write a dissertation in the contemporary moment is to come up against the many obstacles set in place by the neoliberal university: the delay in finishing due to the commitments of adjunct teaching, for example, balanced against the pressure to finish due to cuts to graduate student support. Brown’s own Graduate School has a murky record on this front: while I am grateful for their support in conference travel, their definitive inaction surrounding sixth-year graduate student funding significantly affected this dissertation, almost preventing it from being completed. Recognizing this, rather than glossing over it and letting the administrators responsible for creating an opaque, unfair, and dysfunctional process for supporting graduate students off the hook, may be an irritating way to begin my acknowledgments, but it nevertheless must be called out.

With that said, I do wish to acknowledge positively the contributions of those that shaped this dissertation through many iterations: casual conversations, conference presentations, and the writing process. Lynne Joyrich is the reason I moved to Rhode Island to pursue this particular line of graduate training; her incisive comments are omnipresent in this dissertation and her unflagging support and optimism are the primary reason it exists in its current form today. She is a genuinely kind and supportive mentor, going out of her way to make graduate students feel like her intellectual peers while simultaneously challenging us – a rarity given the situation of graduate education today. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun always pushed the scholarship into unknown and unexplored territory, reminding me to think about affect in nuanced and intersectional ways. Rebecca
Schneider taught me the value of thinking polemically in solidarity with others while introducing me to new paradigms of embodiment and performance. Finally, Laurie Ouellette has shaped much of this dissertation’s approach towards neoliberalism, helping me to understand better television’s participation in the affective atmospheres of the present moment in addition to being a friend and mentor. Together, this committee has stood behind me every step of the way, and I am enormously indebted to them for their support.

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My family authored the origin story of my own forays into teaching, and research. My parents, Sandy and Marilyn, deserve much credit for encouraging me to read at such a young age, and their embrace of who I am – a television viewer in addition to a reader of literature and of theory – has richly enabled this work to emerge. My sisters, Morgan and Hailey, have also imprinted their care onto this work: Hailey often rescues me from
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Finally, I thank Hans Vermy, who taught me the necessary work of slowing down. His love is a grateful exercise in the deliberate ways one learns, and is made better from, being made to feel uncomfortable.
Notes to Preface

1 Amy Villarejo, “Ethereal Queer: Notes on Method,” in Queer TV: Theories, Histories, Politics, eds. Glyn Davis and Gary Needham (New York: Routledge, 2009), 48-62. Villarejo notes how the Birmingham school of cultural studies insists “on the relation between those hypothetical positions and actual people (even if they, in turn, are valorized too mythically as ‘the working class,’ ‘women,’ or ‘queers’),” a parenthetical charge I would agree with (50). She demands that scholars attend to both textual and industrial/institutional analyses in their work in order to speak to both scholars in the humanities and social sciences, though she doesn’t quite make clear to how “cultural studies” (which she admittedly understands to be “a loose and mottled set of critical practices”) fails in this regard (50).

2 Linda Williams’ foundational work on “body genres” is instrumental to thinking through this point. See Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” Film Quarterly 44.4 (Summer 1991): 2-13.

Notes to Chapter 1


2 Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, “Sex, Swearing, and Respectability: Courting Controversy, HBO’s Original Programming and Producing Quality TV,” in Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond, eds. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 63. McCabe and Akass do not speculate, however, whether or not such a pushing of limits can be found on non-premium outlets, probably because at the time of their analysis (2007), network television confined most representations of violence and profanity to the police procedural and non-premium cable television was only beginning to produce original dramatic content to critical acclaim.

3 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 8. For Sedgwick, critical work on identity and performance (she cites Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble in this regard) often undertheorizes space in a prioritization of the temporal, though for her, no clear hierarchy exists within the two terms. We might extrapolate from her reading of the beside a logic of mutual constitution, in which the spatial is already temporal and vice versa.


6 John Mowitt, Percussion: Drumming, Beating, Striking (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002). Mowitt notes how film theory embraced the Althusserian account of interpellation, but reinscribed within it a privileging of the visible – a move he traces from Althusser’s own characterization of the role of interpellation within the discourse of Christianity. In introducing the metaphor of the mirror as the structure of ideology, Althusser perhaps unwittingly authorized the very reading of the category of interpellation that not only led [apparatus film theorist Jean-Louis] Baudry to subsume the soundtrack beneath the image track, but that also led film studies into an overdetermined investment in the significance of seeing the screen as a window to seeing it as a mirror (46).

Curiously, Mowitt does recognize how television speaks to his interest in how the subject forms through the limits of sonic embodiment.


8 Sedgwick, Touching Feeling, 12.


10 Spigel, “Introduction,” Television After TV, 1-5. Spigel characterizes television “after TV” as a “reinvention” of the medium in the period 1994-2004, noting the following changes:
The demise of the three-network system in the United States, the increasing commercialization of public service/state-run systems, the rise of multichannel cable and global satellite delivery, multinational conglomerates, internet convergence, changes in regulation policies and ownership rules, the advent of HDTV, technological changes in screen design, the innovation of digital television systems like TiVo, and new forms of media competition all contribute to transformations in the practice we call watching TV (2).


20 One important exception to this is the subfield of reality television studies, which has thought through the genre’s neoliberal shape. While the literature on the confluence of neoliberal governmentality and reality television is extensive, two key examples are Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, *Better Living Through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008); and Brenda Weber, *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

21 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Harvey’s book is probably the definitive “history” of neoliberal policy, though by no means is it the only history.


23 Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 17. As the subtitle of her monograph suggests, she prefers the term “late liberalism” to highlight the role that tense plays in defining these social struggles, using the phrase to denote “the shape that liberal governmentality has taken as it responds to a series of legitimacy crises in the wake of anticolonial, new social movements, and new Islamic movements” (25). My own use of the term neoliberalism, while registering these crises, is not dependent upon them, and my own geographic focus on the United States limits me from addressing, for example, how these new social movements might complicate the transmission of affect in popular culture.


25 The 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War also signaled the death of Marxism to many on the left, as Brown persuasively notes: “in the second half of the twentieth century, liberalism and capitalism have been quietly consolidating their gains less because they were intrinsically successful than because their alternatives collapsed.” See Wendy Brown, *Politics Out Of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 19.
28 A social scientific analysis of the term “neoliberalism,” for example, came to three conclusions: “First, neoliberalism is used asymmetrically across ideological divides, rarely appearing in scholarship that makes positive assessments of the free market. Second, those who employ the term in empirical research often do not define it. And third, scholars tend to associate neoliberalism with multiple underlying concepts, including a set of policies, a development model, an ideology, and an academic paradigm.” See Taylor C. Boas and Jordan Gans-Morse, “Neoliberalism: From New Liberal Philosophy to Anti-Liberal Slogan,” Journal for Studies in International Comparative Development 44 (2009): 140.
34 Massumi, Parables for the Virtual, 27-28.
36 She writes, “the affective turn is extremely interesting in regard to the fact that it seems to resist the binary still so virile in the linguistic ties of the performative turn – that is, the binary between writing or textuality on the one hand and embodied gestic repertoires of behavior on a seeming other.” See Rebecca Schneider, Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment (New York: Routledge, 2011), 35.
40 Writes Williams, “it is evident that what is now called ‘an evening’s viewing’ is in some ways planned, by providers and then by viewers, as a whole; that it is in any event planned in discernible sequences which in this sense override particular programme units.” See Raymond Williams, Television: Technology as Cultural Form (London: Fontana, 1974).
42 Dienst, Still Life in Real Time, 33.
55 Spigel notes how “at the present moment the genre [of reality television] has morphed into highly contrived, serialized spectacles where real people acting as themselves play out increasingly ‘perverse’ scenarios.” See Spigel, “Introduction,” 3.
56 A personal anecdote might aptly describe this situation: I had the pleasure of talking to a friend’s younger sister, an aspiring actress living in New York City who had an SVU episode on her resume. (In the episode, she played an expensive sex worker whose best friend, another sex worker, was found murdered in the city’s subway tunnels.) I asked her if she was a fan of the program; her response was to say that she could not watch more than five minutes of an episode because (and I paraphrase) “every episode shows girls who look like me getting raped and murdered in New York City.”
59 Ibid, 83.
66 Patricia Mellencamp, High Anxiety: Catastrophe, Scandal, Age, and Comedy (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1992), 86-89.
67 Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” Film Quaterly 44.4 (Summer 1991): 2-13.
69 Ibid, 25.
70 Caldwell writes that “The new television does not depend upon the reality effect or the fiction effect, but upon the picture effect,” in Caldwell, Televisuality, 152. Emphasis in original.
71 Such a genealogy of feminist television criticism is impossible to replicate here, but for key examples, see Julie D’Acci, Defining Women: Television and the Case of “Cagney and Lacey” (Chapel Hill, NC:
Notes to Chapter 2
6 And indeed, most journalistic accounts of the practice attribute its popularity to Netflix, noting that with the release of Netflix original series such as House of Cards, Orange is the New Black, and the fourth season reboot of Arrested Development, in which entire seasons are released on the same day, spectators have the option to ingest hours of programming without interruption, without the burden of a weekly programming schedule.
10 Boskind-Lodahl, “Cinderella’s Stepsisters,” 351.
13 As Newman charges, “Quality TV” these days demands a completionist mandate: start at the beginning.” In Newman, “TV Binge.”
Epidemics of the Will," cultural and geographic associations from the exotically foreign to the domestically banal. See Sedgwick, University Press, 2007), 5.

our collective common sense" (235).

scholars of media petitions the discipline of television studies to rally around this political position, claiming that "as critical
Richard Campbell (with respect to 1980s televisual representations of crack/cocaine), Mittell particularly
foundational work of Janice Radway (with respect to metaphors of consumption) and Ji


Rebecca Greenfield, “Netflix is Making Both Cable and Internet Television Better,” The Atlantic Wire, 8 July 2013; available online at http://www.theatlanticwire.com/technology/2013/07/netflix-making-both-cable-and-internet-television-better/66929/ (accessed 5 May 2015). Indeed, Greenfield’s use of the word “better” in the article’s title should already make clear the anxieties that programs have over their signification as “quality” texts.

See many of the essays in Beyond the Pleasure Dome: Writing and Addiction from the Romantics, eds. Sue Vice, Matthew Campbell, and Tim Armstrong (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), specifically those by Mary Condé, Tim Armstrong, Ros Ballaster, Erica Sheen, Sue Vice, Renate Günther, and Nicholas O. Warner.


Mittell, “The Cultural Power of an Anti-Television Metaphor,” 218. Adopting his position from the foundational work of Janice Radway (with respect to metaphors of consumption) and Jimmie Reeves and Richard Campbell (with respect to 1980s televisual representations of crack/cocaine), Mittell particularly petitions the discipline of television studies to rally around this political position, claiming that “as critical scholars of media and culture, we must engage with this metaphor and refuse to yield it any more ground of our collective common sense” (235).


Eve Sedgwick has also pointed to the elasticity of the concept “drug,” noting how substances can straddle cultural and geographic associations from the exotically foreign to the domestically banal. See Sedgwick, “Epidemics of the Will,” Tendencies (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 130-142 (hereafter cited as

31 Boothroyd, *Culture on Drugs*, 24.

32 Avital Ronell, *Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, Mania* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 51-52.

33 Milton Friedman, “Prohibition and Drugs,” *Newsweek* 79.18 (1 May 1972), 104.

34 The trope of sickness is evident in psychological profiles of addiction, as in the title of one recent study that constructs addiction as a “disorder of choice.” See Gene M. Heyman, *Addiction: A Disorder of Choice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

35 Rose reads psychiatric discourses as mapping out neuronal and neurochemical bases of life; drawing from psychiatric research from the early- and mid-1990s, he pinpoints how psychiatric disorders became assigned to neurotransmitter anomalies, such that the molecular specificity of disorder becomes the visual representation of disease pathology. The solution to these disorders can be found, he argues, within the market rationales of the pharmaceutical industry:

> For those becoming neurochemical selves, these drugs promise to help the individual him or herself, in alliance with the doctor and the molecule, to discover the intervention that will address precisely a specific molecular anomaly at the root of something that personally troubles the individual concerned and disrupts his or her life, in order to restore the self to its life, and itself, again.

Rose’s concept of neurochemical selves helps to explain two cultural shifts in the 1990s relevant to my own model of addictive spectatorship: first, the proliferation of legal pharmaceuticals to correct neurotransmitter anomalies; and second, the diagnosis of these anomalies through discourses of popular psychology, as evidenced in the proliferation of texts offering “self-help.” See Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 211.

36 It should be noted that this thesis of addiction — in which addiction is neither completely caused by a toxic substance nor by an imperiled body, but rather beside each of these (or “between them”) — architecturally expresses the “third way” emblematic of Clintonian economic policy, corroborating the affinities between addiction’s textual and economic guarantees.


40 White, *Tele-advise*, 11. She extends this argument further, noting how “therapeutic and confessional modes of discourse have frequently been affiliated with female audiences, especially in forms of melodrama and women’s fiction” (171).

41 For example, the genre continues to dominate in the eyes of the Nielsen ratings. The success of Fox’s *American Idol*, the most watched American television series from 2004-2011 according to these ratings, is a testament to this point.


43 Conlin, “America’s Reality-TV Addiction.”

44 Ronell, *Crack Wars*, 19.


Ibid, 22.


Ronell, *Crack Wars*, 74.

Tavia Nyong’o defines the hot mess as even exceeding the boundaries of the market, stating that “unlike the clean trade of capitalist commerce…being a hot mess is a state of excitation, confusion, and disarray.” See Nyong’o, “Brown Punk: Kalup Linzy’s Musical Anticipations,” *TDR: The Drama Review*, 54.3 (2010), 82.


Heyman, *Addiction*, 44.


I return to *An American Family* and claims as to its authenticity in the fourth chapter.

Susan Murray, “‘I Think We Need a New Name for It’: The Meeting of Documentary and Reality TV,” in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, 78. See also John Corner, “Afterword: Framing the New,” in *Understanding Reality Television*, eds. Su Holmes and Deborah Jermy (New York: Routledge, 2004), 290-299.


Dave Boothroyd, in his narcoanalytic investigation into “heroin cinema,” asserts that drugs function “as a ‘screen’ upon which all the ambivalences of modern life -- individual, social and geo-political aspirations and anxieties -- can be projected and find expression.” One of the most prominent examples of heroin cinema is the film *Requiem for a Dream* (dir. Darren Aronofsky, 2000), and Boothroyd points to the multiply connected and disseminated images of heroin in the film to compare the two schemas of signification: the “language of heroin use” and “the language of film production.” In Boothroyd, *Culture on Drugs*, 188, 197.


Reality television can get “too real,” however, in instances that make space for (literal) sober reflection. These are moments of death, when the subject of reality television who occupies a less desirable moral and cultural position (the hot mess, the redneck, the addict) strays too far from the boundaries of acceptability. When reality television stars die in horrific ways, either through reckless accidents (as in the case of Shain Gandee from MTV’s Buckwild) or through chilling atrocities (as in the case of Ryan Jenkins, the murderer from VH1’s Megan Wants a Millionaire), or through suicide (as in the case of Russell Armstrong, the estranged husband of one of the cast members of Bravo’s The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills). Here, feelings of discomfort are mobilized in different arrangements, as the documentarian features of reality television now serve a social purpose; we are no longer watching the ordinary person thrown into the cyclonic economy of celebrity culture, but instead left to pick up the pieces after he is violently expelled from its thrust. This also comes across in the moments in which producers and crew must negotiate their own degree of involvement; the New York Times, for example, wrote an article about Intervention that questioned the role of producers in merely filming (rather than intervening) on potentially dangerous situations (such as when an alcoholic gets behind the wheel of a car). See Benjamin Wallace, “Diamond in the Mud: The Death of Buckwild Star Shain Gandee and the Search for Authenticity in Reality TV,” New York Magazine, 23 September 2013; and Jeremy W. Peters, “When Reality TV Gets Too Real,” New York Times, 8 October 2007, C1.


Misha Kavka, Reality Television, Affect, and Intimacy: Reality Matters (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 100. Kavka also draws our attention to how affect theory has approached the topic of believability and performance, reminding us how Brian Massumi mines Ronald Reagan’s presidency to show how his lack of concern with the difference between acting and not acting carried severe ideological effects (96-97).


I should clarify, though, that Wegenstein and Ruck’s terminology – and their use of the term “gaze” specifically – only somewhat applies to recovery television. This is because of the rich tradition within television studies (stemming from the work of John Ellis) that privileges scopic logics of the “glance” rather than those of the “gaze,” which has been traditionally associated with cinematic spectatorship. While the gaze sets the boundaries for uninterrupted spectating (and could thus be applied to the phenomenon of binge watching), I want to hold onto the glance for how the distracted nature of TV spectatorship both speaks to the medium’s gendered history as well as its emphasis on bodily movement and speed.

Wegenstein and Ruck, “Physiognomy, Reality Television, and the Cosmetic Gaze,” 46.


McCarthy, “Reality TV,” 33.

Ibid, 33 (emphasis mine).


Armisen is also well-known for creating and acting in (along with Carrie Brownstein) the sketch comedy series, Portlandia (IFC, 2011-present); in one of the more famous episodes, “One Moore Episode,” Fred and Carrie binge-watch the entirety of Syfy’s Battlestar Galactica, although their satirical sketch intentionally confuses the pleasurable act of binging with the oscillating rhythms of addictive spectatorship. Between this episode and the Funny or Die segment, one cannot help but wonder how Fred Armisen actually watches television off-screen.


Notes to Chapter 3
8 By ‘critical assumptions’ I signal the primary objects that this chapter will interrogate: the writings of critics themselves, as well as the structural and institutional features inherent to the industry of television criticism, both in non-academic (best-of lists, recaps, and journalistic meditations on the medium) and academic (syllabi) registers.
9 Martin, Difficult Men, 21. See also 21-33.
11 While the institutionalization of fan communities online have increased the degree to which these lists can be “crowdsourced” – in which fans or users collectively author the best-of list through online voting – the single-critic format is still widely used across all platforms of journalistic criticism. I would argue, moreover, that the language differs in these different contexts of reception: fan-authored lists utilize more subjective terms such as “favorite” while critic-authored lists utilize more objective terms such as “best.”
13 Raferty is a regular contributor to Vulture; like most online media periodicals, he is a freelancer and thus his position of critic becomes instantiated by the fact that he writes for several different publications.
On The Wire


Jason Mittell (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 244.

Ibid, 122.


In one interview, Chase is quoted as saying: “Look, I do not care about television. I don’t care about where television is going or anything else about it. I’m a man who wanted to make movies. Period.” Brett Martin, in a generously hagiographic move, frames Chase’s antipathy as “one of the small tragedies: that the Reluctant Moses of the Third Golden Age, the man who, by example, opened the door for so many writers, directors, actors, and producers to work in television gloriously free of shame, was unable himself to enter the Promised Land.” Martin, *Difficult Men*, 34-35. For more on Chase’s obsession with cinema, see Newman and Levine, *Legitimating Television*, 46-47.

See Miranda Banks, “I Love Lucy: Showrunner,” in *How to Watch Television*, eds. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 244-252. Simon has mentioned in interviews that he found the process of writing for television as “very communal,” going out of his way to single out the other writers on staff for their contributions to the program. While this may be read as a temperamental difference in ego between Chase and Simon, I would argue that the perception of authorship (and thus of cultural value) stems less from the showrunner’s own words and more from those of TV critics, who nearly universally attribute *The Wire’s* greatness to Simon’s vision. See Pearson, “David Simon.”


Quoted in Martin, *Difficult Men*, 258. Martin does not offer any evidence for this in his book, and as a work of general non-fiction, he is under little obligation to provide citations for his sources. In the three-page “Notes on Sources” section at the end of the book (before the index, and under a heading that misidentifies the chapter number), he writes that “Matthew Weiner declined, politely, to sit for interviews specific to this book. I was, however, able to draw on our multiple conversations in other contexts and on the truly heroic amount of talking he’s done on behalf of *Mad Men* elsewhere” (294).

Foucault, “What is an Author,” 213.


I mean such death literally, too; a cursory search of “soap opera” in the *New York Times*’ Television section from the past year reveals primarily obituaries of actors who had, at one point, soap opera credits. The last substantial bit of newsprint to cover the daytime soap from that newspaper came in 2011, notably also on the genre’s death. See Rebecca Traister, “The Soap Opera is Dead! Long Live the Soap Opera!” *The New York Times*, 25 September 2011, MM9.


Linda Williams makes a compelling counterreading to this effect, claiming that race is produced as a serial problem through the serial form. I explore her claims in greater detail shortly. See Linda Williams, *On The Wire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). Hereafter OW.

Irina O. Rajewsky, “Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on
65 Quoted in Lorrie Moore, “In the Life of The Wire.”
66 Žižek reads the order of the seasons as a larger narrative system, with “each successive season taking a further step in the exploration,” though his own summary of the seasons does not follow such a linear trajectory. Indeed, he never clarifies exactly what such “further steps” entail nor the larger significance of having each season constitute a unit for analysis.
67 An example of this would be FX’s popular series *American Horror Story* (2011-present), in which each season is a self-contained narrative set in a different temporal and spatial location that feature many of the same actors.
70 Yet when pressed, critics and fans of the series generally offer two characters as approximate protagonists: Detective Jimmy McNulty (Dominic West) and the criminal vigilante Omar Little (Michael K. Williams). In many ways McNulty, through his Irish American swagger and his drinking problem, corresponds to stereotypes of East Coast white working class policemen, whereas Omar, a gay black stick up man, is often described as “enigmatic” and “intriguing” precisely because he has no cultural antecedent in either detective fiction or the police procedural. Indeed, Omar’s relative uniqueness has attracted many fans, including President Barack Obama, whose admiration of the character has been widely cited in reviews of *The Wire*.
74 Writes Williams: “The point of the ‘game’ metaphor as it operates throughout the series is that the rules are not the same to everyone” (*OW* 192). Paul Allen Anderson has thoughtfully critiqued the metaphor of the game for functioning as a tautology that allows those in power to maintain it. See Paul Allen Anderson, “‘The Game Is the Game’: Tautology and Allegory in *The Wire,*” in *The Wire: Race, Class, and Genre*, eds. Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 84-109.
Notes to Chapter 4


5 Shepherd’s choice of words is not quite right, here: while she maintains that pedophiles watch the program – an entirely justifiable claim, as pedophiles can watch without acting on their taboo sexual desires – she also mobilizes an aggressiveness to the audience that I call predatory in this chapter.


14 Weber: “The implications of this second theory of anxiety for the problem of the uncanny are nothing less than decisive: it implies that it is not the return of the repressed as such which produces das Unheimliche, thus relegating castration to the level of one thematic-material element among others; on the contrary, the castration-complex now appears as the nucleus of the Freudian theory of the uncanny, permitting this theory to bring its otherwise disparate elements into a coherent connection.” Samuel Weber, “The Sideshow, or: Remarks on a Canny Moment,” *Modern Language Notes* 88 (1973): 1110-1111. While Weber is not being dismissive of Freud here, I glean from a number of critiques of the essay that castration becomes a convenient albeit unpersuasive foundation for the uncanny. It would not be farfetched to claim, then, that such reception situates castration as the least interesting element about the essay.


16 Fathers participate as coaches as well, yet the infrequent appearances of these “pageant dads” construct an entirely different parental relationship, one of passive investment and financial support. As Kirsten Pike has argued, this produces a historicized representation of heterosexual parenting, one not unlike those found in classic television sitcoms, in which fathers are images of “patriarchal competence and stability” and mothers are images of “a seemingly endless stream of ridiculous female characters” and stereotypes. See Kirsten Pike, “Freaky Five-Year-Olds and Mental Mommies: Narratives of Gender, Race, and Class in TLC’s *Toddlers & Tiaras,*” in *Reality Gendervision: Sexuality & Gender on Transatlantic Reality Television,* ed. Brenda R. Weber (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014): 294, 296.


28 Jean Baudrillard, Simulations (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), 50.
29 Philip Rosen, Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 259. See also 256-260.
30 Villarejo, Ethereal Queer, 112. See also 110-114.
33 Class issues are present here, too, as Here Comes Honey Boo Boo also presumably attracted audiences happy to look down on “white trash.” For more on this, see Andrew Scahill, “Pigmalion: Animalinity and Failure in Here Comes Honey Boo Boo,” Flow 16.6 (2012).
35 Producer Julia Auerbach justified the added drama in the New York Post review: “If you just dropped in a 6-year-old, (the audience) would kind of be lost, unless you saw all the things going on around her, and what it takes to keep this enterprise going. There is definitely conflict on any team.” Quoted in Daly, “Back seat Eden.”
36 This hews well to Sarah Banet-Weiser’s rich history of the Miss American Pageant as one marked by the gendered politics of respectability. See Banet-Weiser, The Most Beautiful Girl in the World, chapter 2.
38 Stockton, The Queer Child, 38.
42 Cable offerings from the pulpy (Showtime’s Queer as Folk and The L Word) to the sentimental (ABC Family’s The Fosters) update this thesis somewhat.
43 As Wendy Chun writes, “through cyberporn, the pedophile and the computer-savvy child became hypervisible figures for anxiety over the jacked-in computer’s breaching of the home. See Chun, Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 28. I will address the production of the sexual predator across multiple media forms shortly, but would note here how pornography has also been instrumental in situating the child’s relationship to television, both as apparatus (for example, video porn screened through a VCR) and as broadcasting system (pay per view films, the Playboy network). On pornography and the VCR, see Franklin Melendez, “Video Pornography, Visual Pleasure, and the Return of the Sublime,” in Porn Studies, ed. Linda Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004): 401-428. For an industrial analysis of pornography on television, see Jane Arthurs, Television and Sexuality: Regulation and the Politics of Taste (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004), especially 51-52.
44 Tiqqun, Preliminary Materials For a Theory of the Young-Girl (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), 77. Hereafter YG.

The only reference in Tiqqun’s polemic about the child as in need of protection prefigures her always-performed victimhood: “The Young-Girl requires not only that you protect her, she also wants the power to educate you” (YG 35. Here she is the active subject in this construction, manipulating others through a demand for protection counterintuitive to her complete and utter subsumption into the commodity.


**Ibid, 127.**


**Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence*, 319n90.**

**Today, NBC, 20 March 2000.**

**Larry King Live, CNN, 13 January 1997.**


**Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 15.**


**Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 33.**

Notes to Chapter 5
11 This is a slightly different definition from the one proffered by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in their landmark *Remediation*, in which “convergence is the mutual remediation of at least three important technologies – telephone, television, and computer” and that “means greater diversity for digital technologies in our culture.” Both Jenkins and Bolter and Grusin agree, however, that the movement between individual media forms is neither unidirectional, as the corporations that produce these technologies, often claim, nor is it directed towards a single hybrid media apparatus. See Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 224-225.
14 In the glossary to *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins notes that “the technological determinants of interactivity (which is most often prestructured or at least enabled by the designer) contrasts with the social and cultural determinants of participation (which is more open ended and more fully shaped by consumer choices).” See Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 328.
15 Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 41. Jenkins first used the term “participatory culture” in his 1992 book *Textual Poachers* to describe the cultural production and social dynamics of fan communities, thus creating the signifying chain between participatory culture and “fandom” that, while modified to reflect the changes to media consumption and technology since, still remains intact.
20 In the same paragraph, he writes that “affect is what gives ‘color,’ ‘tone’ or ‘texture’ to our experiences,” perhaps foregrounding Eve Sedgwick’s own gloss on texture/texture.
23 Ibid, 58. Massumi responds to this definition of affect dismissively, claiming that “Grossberg slips into an equation between affect and emotion” despite his claims to the contrary; as “unformed and unstructured” and as outside of conscious awareness, affect “is not fundamentally a matter of investment.” See Brian Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 260n3. See also Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 60-64.
24 Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of this Place*, 255.
33 In 2010, researchers at the Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project proposed utilizing a model that produces generational categories through a series of “mini-generation gaps” organized around the specific technologies available during a generation’s formative stages of development. See Brad Stone, “The Children of Cyberspace: Old Fogies by Their 20s,” *The New York Times*, 10 January 2010, WK5.
50. [Raw text content cut off.]

51. Ibid, xi-xii. Original emphasis.


56. “It Gets Worse” is also the name of a short article by Jack Halberstam in a special issue of Social Text’s online forum Periscope on queer suicide. In it, Halberstam eviscerates Savage and Hecker’s campaign for its bourgeois sensibility, though without Jiz’s trademark profanity:

“The touchy feely notion embraced by this video campaign that teens can be pulled back from the brink of self destruction by taped messages made by impossibly good looking and successful people smugly recounting the highlights of their fabulous lives is just PR for the status quo, a way of patting yourself on the back without changing a thing, pretending to be on the front lines while you eat caviar and sip champagne in the VIP lounge. By all means make cute videos about you and your boyfriend, but don’t justify the self-indulgence by imagining you are saving a life.

While Halberstam’s critique about the project’s enabling narcissism is certainly justifiable, it also implicates participatory culture as equally self-indulgent: “real” grassroots activism, it would seem, cannot be disseminated as a “cute video” online. The irony of this, of course, is that Halberstam has a rather notorious online persona, co-facilitating the bullybloggers website that posts regularly on happenings within current US-based academic queer theory. See Jack Halberstam, “It Gets Worse,” Social Text: Periscope, 20 November 2010; available online at http://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/it_gets_worse/ (accessed 5 May 2015).


60. de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, 18.

61. Jenkins, Convergence Culture, 62.


63. Sara Ahmed, The Cultural Politics of Emotion (New York: Routledge, 2004), 45. Drawing from feminist philosophers Alison Jaggar and Elizabeth Spelman, Ahmed, too, resists a distinction between affect and emotion, believing principally that such distinctions inevitably lead to hierarchies in which emotion is epistemologically subordinated in concert with the feminine. Ahmed directly engages this debate in a footnote, arguing that a model that separates affect from emotion “creates a distinction between conscious recognition and ‘direct’ feeling, which itself negates how that which is not consciously experienced may itself be mediated by past experiences” (40n4). Here, the notion of the body emerges as an archiving machine beyond the realm of conscious signification, similar to theories of embodiment and subjectivity offered by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler in continental philosophy, and by Carrie Noland and Rebecca Schneider in performance studies. See Alison M. Jaggar, “Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology,” in Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy (1st edition), eds. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (New York: Routledge, 1996), 166-190; and Elizabeth Spelman, “Anger and Insubordination,” in Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy (2nd edition), eds. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (New York: Routledge, 1999), 263-273.
Quoted in Knoedelseder, Jr., “’Truly Outrageous’ Dolls Sing Triple-Platinum Tune.”


73 In this vein it is not insignificant, I think, that *Jem* premiers six days after Ryan White, arguably the most famous child victim of the epidemic, appears on the cover of *Picture Week* magazine. See Paula Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 75.


75 For the commercial, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyrM8_FQykc (accessed 5 May 2015).

76 Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice*, 234.


78 Joyrich, *Re-viewing Reception*, 101-102. Joyrich makes this point in a larger argument about the reproductive politics of *Moonlighting* (ABC, 1985-1989) that takes a similar tack to the argument I offer here: reading the miscarriage of its protagonist at the beginning of its final season as a crucial form that television frequently takes up, such that what appears to be creative and progressive self-reflexivity ultimately ends up neatly containing feminine excess, allowing for the reassertion of the patriarchal sphere as in control of the TV family and that of its viewers.


80 Some episodes during the decade involved women reflecting on their own histories with abortion (*Cagney & Lacey*, thirtysomething), while others covered the politics surrounding privacy and access to reproductive health (*The Facts of Life, Hill Street Blues*). Only in a few isolated instances did characters undergo the procedure: a 1986 episode of the daytime soap *The Young and the Restless* and a 1989 episode of the teen drama *Degrassi High*.


83 This is repeated as the conditions for penetration in general in another episode, “Kimber is a Dirty Lezzie,” in which the Mammograms rehearse a new song with the following refrain: “If you wanna get with me, there are things that you should know / If I knock a bitch up, then the baby’s gotta go.”

84 On this, see especially D’Acci, “Leading Up to *Roe v. Wade*.”


Notes to Chapter 6

1 For a useful overview of these approaches, see Brian McGrath, The Poetics of Unremembered Acts: Reading, Lyric, Pedagogy (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 1-18.

2 For example, this is the approach taken by affect theorists such as Brian Massumi, William Connolly, and Nigel Thrift, the latter of whom has published an entire book on “non-representational” theory.


4 This is not to devalue a category such as race from the history of television studies; studying the early domesticity of the medium, for example, requires an attentiveness to the racialization of domestic and sub/urban space, as work by Lynn Spigel, Herman Gray, and George Lipsitz demonstrates.

5 Consider, for example, Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis’s analysis of The Cosby Show, which concludes by asserting that regardless of the nuanced reactions of white audiences or black audiences, the sitcom’s portrayal of the black upper class distorted the lived conditions of most African Americans during the 1980s, in such a way that distorted the sitcom’s claim to realist representation and authenticity. See Jhally and Lewis, Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992).


7 She ascribes the series’ mediocrity to the style of Dunham’s mentor, television and film auteur Judd Apatow, also an executive producer of the series and famous for television series such as Freaks and Geeks (NBC, 1999-2000) and films such as The 40 Year Old Virgin (2005) and Knocked Up (2007).


9 Quoted in David Haglund, “Why ‘Think Piece’ is Perjorative,” Browbeat Culture Blog, Slate.com, 7 May 2014; available online at: http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2014/05/07/think-piece_definition_and_history_roots_of_the_word_show_it_has_long_been.html (accessed 5 May 2015).

10 Echoing Ward, Johannah King-Slutzky provides one acerbic definition of the term: “that short, poorly researched form of essay that exists to criticize recent cultural phenomena on usually disingenuous political or moral grounds.” King-Slutzky also argues, not unconvincingly, that the emergence of the think piece is concomitant with the concept of the problematic, which she writes “whines” but “does not act.” Johannah King-Slutzky, “The Internet Has a Problem(atic),” The Awl, 25 September 2014; available online at:
The New Yorker

need

White Girls on

14 April 2012; available online at: http://msmagazine.com/blog/2012/04/14/flawed

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original airdate: 20 January 2013. See also Rob Sheffield, 


Girls,” “Pilot,” Season 1, Episode 1; directed and written by Lena Dunham; HBO, original airdate: 15

May 2012.


Girls,” “I Get Ideas,” Season 2, Episode 2; directed by Lena Dunham, written by Jenni Konner; HBO, original airdate: 20 January 2013.


31 Lauren J. DeCarvalho, “Hannah and Her Entitled Sisters: (Post)Feminism, Post(Recession), and Girls,” *Feminist Media Studies* 13.2 (2013): 357. New Yorker critic Emily Nussbaum ties this “male authority” to the languages of both Internet trolling and of academic critique; following a discussion of privilege within the series and of its stars, she provides the caveat that “like every ‘concern troll’ – the Internet term for one who ices her sneer with dignified worry – I’m probably making Girls sound like a dissertation.” See Nussbaum, “Hannah Barbaric.”


37 Ibid, 181.

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Select Episodes and Videos.


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*Toddlers & Tiaras*, “Rumble in the Jungle,” Season 4, Episode 9; original airdate: 10 August 2011.

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_Girls_, “Pilot,” Season 1, Episode 1; directed and written by Lena Dunham; HBO, original airdate: 15 April 2012.


_Saturday Night Live (NBC)_ (Season 39, Episode 5; original airdate: 3 November 2013.


Sienna D’Enema, “Jiz is Dead,” 16 June 2014; available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47zHLMOqsD0 (accessed 5 May 2015).