



12-2019

Feel-Sad TV: Sadness Pornography in Contemporary Serials

Blake K. Beaver
Duke University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.28.01>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#).



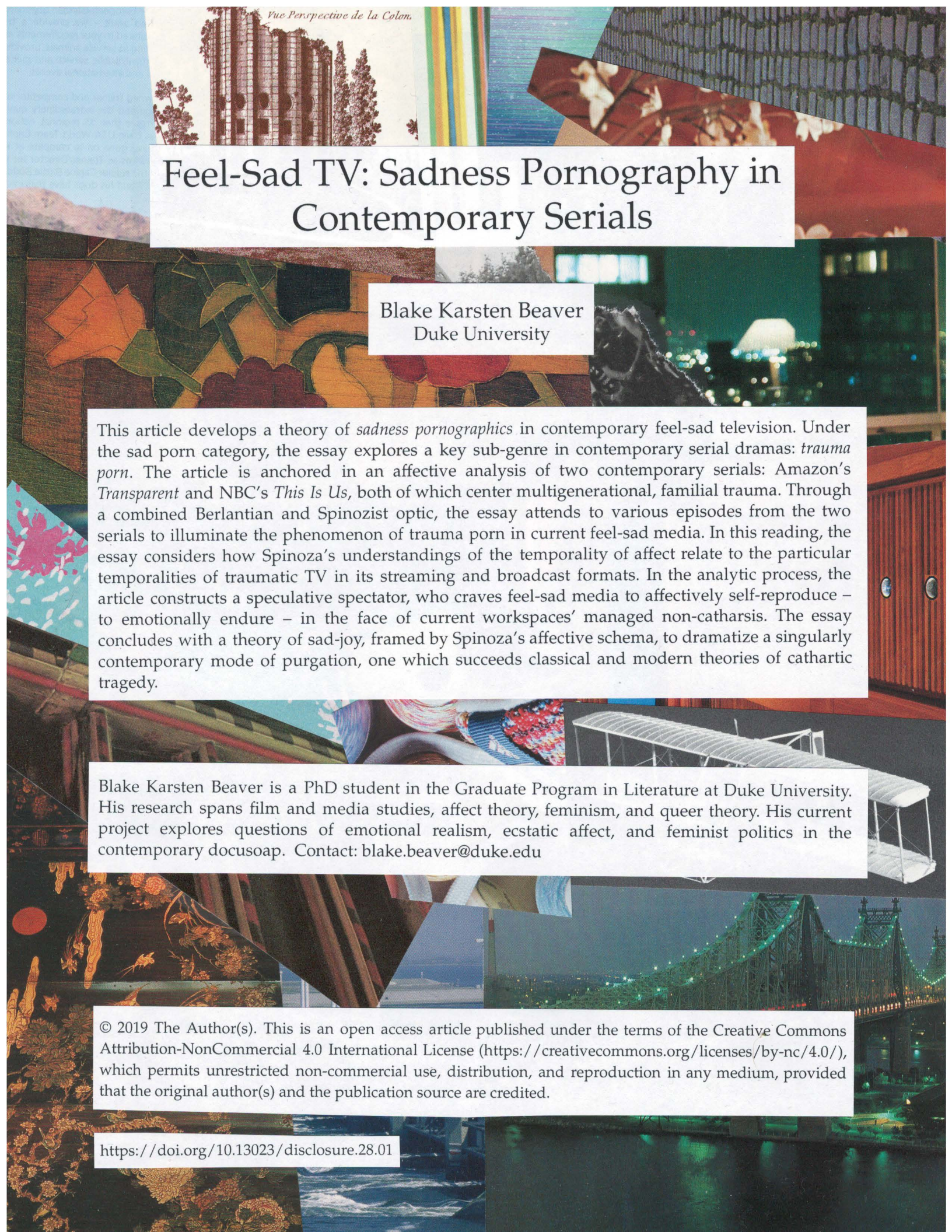
Recommended Citation

Beaver, Blake K. (2019) "Feel-Sad TV: Sadness Pornography in Contemporary Serials," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 28 , Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.28.01>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol28/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Theory at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory* by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.



Feel-Sad TV: Sadness Pornography in Contemporary Serials

Blake Karsten Beaver
Duke University

This article develops a theory of *sadness pornographics* in contemporary feel-sad television. Under the sad porn category, the essay explores a key sub-genre in contemporary serial dramas: *trauma porn*. The article is anchored in an affective analysis of two contemporary serials: Amazon's *Transparent* and NBC's *This Is Us*, both of which center multigenerational, familial trauma. Through a combined Berlantian and Spinozist optic, the essay attends to various episodes from the two serials to illuminate the phenomenon of trauma porn in current feel-sad media. In this reading, the essay considers how Spinoza's understandings of the temporality of affect relate to the particular temporalities of traumatic TV in its streaming and broadcast formats. In the analytic process, the article constructs a speculative spectator, who craves feel-sad media to affectively self-reproduce – to emotionally endure – in the face of current workspaces' managed non-catharsis. The essay concludes with a theory of sad-joy, framed by Spinoza's affective schema, to dramatize a singularly contemporary mode of purgation, one which succeeds classical and modern theories of cathartic tragedy.

Blake Karsten Beaver is a PhD student in the Graduate Program in Literature at Duke University. His research spans film and media studies, affect theory, feminism, and queer theory. His current project explores questions of emotional realism, ecstatic affect, and feminist politics in the contemporary docusoap. Contact: blake.beaver@duke.edu

© 2019 The Author(s). This is an open access article published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided that the original author(s) and the publication source are credited.

<https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.28.01>

This article's founding observation states that sadness pornography constitutes a vital genre of contemporary media production and consumption. Urban Dictionary user Brendogfox describes sad porn as media "that exists for the sole purpose of making people feel deep sadness. Usually there is no sexual theme, yet like regular porn, some people seem to get off on it" (2016). Sad porn constellates a network of exemplary sub-genres, each of which are defined and circumscribed by sorrowful affects. Prominent examples include disability, inspiration, and as we will observe most closely, trauma porn.

The pornography in sad porn designates an ironic tone. *Oxford English Dictionary* defines pornography as "the explicit description or exhibition of sexual subjects or activity in literature, painting, films, etc., in a manner intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic feelings." Although sad porn does not necessarily represent the *sexual*, it does require from the spectator an erotic attachment to unhappy, depressive, solemn, and/or mournful viewing affects. I describe these attachments as *erotic* because they mediate a relation of passion and amorousness (rather than one of genital and other erogenous pleasures) in/to the emotional labors of televisual consumption.¹ In this way, the metaphoric nature of pornography in "sad porn" figures a desirous drive for sad media similar to traditional pornography's erotic force, while maintaining the full sincerity of sadness. Said another way, the descriptor *sad porn* may be tongue-in-cheek, but the actual emotional turbulences of its viewership – *sad porn* – represent genuine sorrow. Sadness pornography as a genre marks an erotic attachment to feelings of sadness when viewing contemporary television.

In imagining sadness pornography as a *genre*, I think with Lauren Berlant's revaluation of the term. With Berlant, I argue for sad porn as an overarching "aesthetic structure" across

¹ Thus, I distinguish between the sexual and the erotic, here, based on the latter's associations with passion and love.

televisual mediation that creates "affective expectations" of joyful sadness (2008, 4). As we will see in a discussion of representative serials' relation to the contemporary emotive spectator, the sad porn genre "brackets structural and historical antagonism" by providing spaces of affective intensity closely interlinked with the saturated yet administered affects of contemporary labor, affects upon which businesses capitalize at the same time as they prohibit a threshold of cathartic intensity, whether in the corporate workspace, the retail store, or sites of gig-economic production. The sad porn genre generates viewers' desirous attachments to feeling powerful through feeling disempowered. Moreover, sad porn manages moods of political powerlessness in the governed non-catharsis of contemporary labor environments.

In heavily invoking the concept of genre, I aim to do justice to sad porn's moving-image genealogy. Regarding the sad-pornographic serial's *televisual* lineage, we should look to Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine (2012), who trace the contemporary primetime serial drama, perhaps the most lauded mode of television programming in the convergent era, back to its primary serial-narrative predecessor: the daytime soap opera. For Newman and Levine, soap operas' vanguard approach to "long-form, novelistic storytelling" is both co-opted and erased in legitimating discourses that inform the cinematization of contemporary, high-culture television. Moreover, for Newman and Levine, the legitimization of current serials at the expense of soap operas' denigration poses anti-feminist and anti-feminine consequences (82). One strategy for distancing serial dramas from their soap operatic precursors is to manage seriality's temporality. As soap operas are historically associated with non-endings, narrative gaps, and the modes of feminine fantasy that the "forbidden gap" and "illicit non-ending entail,"²

² For a discussion of the relationship between soaps' narrative form and feminine political aesthetics, see Martha Nochimson (1992), *No End to Her: Soap Opera*

primetime serials impose endings “to keep that seriality and its associations with feminized excess from overrunning the narrative” (92). Newman and Levine’s generalization, however, may not prove so simple. Exemplary primetime and streaming serial dramas in the current moment nurture the feminized and affectively charged never-ending-ness of soaps in what we will observe as their multi-generationally traumatic and temporally layered narratives. In the case of *Transparent* and *This Is Us*, the “forbidden gap” of trauma sustains seriality and the political-narrative potential such seriality awards.

As part of a *filmic* lineage, sadness pornography’s soap operatic roots reach back even further to a cinematic forebearer: the melodramatic “weepie.” Linda Williams (1991) predicts sadness pornography and sad-joy in her articulation of the affiliation between pornography and melodrama as interpenetrating, excessive, gross, and sensational genres. In Williams’s argument, the relationship between pornography and melodrama is complex. Pornography and melodrama share an excessive and sensational status in their imaging of gratuitous sex and emotion; in their treatment of “the spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion”; and in their emphasis on forms of ecstasy and the ecstatic body, primarily a feminine body “beside herself” in pleasure or overwhelming sadness (4). For Williams and myself, what appears to be most gratuitous in porn, melodrama, and sad porn, by extension, is the mimetic relationship of the viewer to representations of ecstatic affect. The sad-pornographic spectator, like her melodramatic and pornographic predecessors, mirrors the rapturous body onscreen. Furthermore, for Williams, melodrama functions as a meta-genre encompassing the unique forms of excess and grossness at play in pornography and weepies. This aligns with my insight that sadness pornography operates as a

and *the Female Subject*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, in particular 35-6.

parallel meta-genre, one that integrates sub-genres like disability, inspiration, and trauma porn in its pleurably sad representational and spectatorial strategies. As a “problem-solving cultural form,” what I would term *melo-porn* or *porno-drama* in Williams’s analysis alerts us to the unique social and political-economic complications that sadness pornography aims to disentangle: namely, a situation of affectively suffused yet non-cathartic labor in the workspace. This emotional labor in the workplace then implicates scenes of spectatorial emotion management in pornographic weeping at home or on mobile devices, with each viewing situation mediated by various televisual and/or digital representations and technologies.

Under the sad porn meta-genre, I wish to explore a key sub-structure of aesthetic expectation. In television, across broadcast and digital channels, sadness pornography emerges in serial dramas, particularly centered around the (ab)normal family, through what I and others call *trauma porn*. I anchor this article in an affective analysis of two contemporary serials, Amazon’s *Transparent* and NBC’s *This Is Us*, both of which represent multigenerational, familial trauma. I read various episodes from the two serials to illuminate the phenomenon of trauma porn in current feel-sad TV. In this reading, I consider how Benedict de Spinoza’s understandings of the temporality of affect relate to the particular temporalities of traumatic TV, both in its streaming and broadcast formats. In this analytic process, I construct a speculative spectator, who embodies the emotional dialectic of contemporary capital, torn between *cathartic* (sad-pornographic, purgative, unmanaged) and *non-cathartic* (capitalized, administered, supervised) affects. Finally, I conclude with a theory of sad-joy, framed by Spinoza’s affective schema, as a contemporary revision of Aristotle’s catharsis and Hume’s tragedy. By sad-joy, I suggest a dialectical vacillation of the mind in which the ambivalent tension of feeling sadness economizes joy. Sad-joy expresses a paradigmatic affect in recent mediation, one

which greases the emotional survival of the contemporary laborer *as* televisual spectator.

The relationship between sadness and trauma, and consequently sad porn and trauma porn, appears convoluted and deserves close consideration. In my analysis, trauma porn is necessarily a sub-genre of the *mediatic meta-genre* sadness porn, and we could think of the broader relationship between trauma and sadness similarly. Thus, I imagine sadness as an overarchingly *bad* affective genre, a meta-ugly feeling (following Sianne Ngai), that forms an affective-aesthetic umbrella under which variously unhappy and grieving emotions fall. If trauma articulates states of intense psychic upset caused by equally intense emotional wounding, then trauma's constitutive upset (and the interrelated grief and unhappiness associated with such injury) could be thought of as categorically circumscribed by sadness as an *affective meta-genre*.

Turning to the issue of contemporary TV's traumatic narrativity, I look toward current television programs such as Netflix's *Orange Is the New Black* (OITNB) for context, a series that has received backlash for what many critics call its traumatic pornographics. One headline reads, "*Orange Is the New Black* Is Trauma Porn Written for White People." In said article, Ashleigh Shackelford voices grief about the "exploitation and voyeurism" of black pain "on a platter for the world to gawk at and consume" (2016). Critics link OITNB's trauma porn to the spectacle of black death in police murders and associated historical atrocities. Shackelford continues, "Sociohistorically, we have seen white people aroused and grotesquely infatuated with the violence and exploitation of our bodies, pain and agency." On the violent murder of OITNB character Poussey, who is strangled to death by a prison guard, Shamira Ibrahim (2016) writes, "Her lifeless body [was] left on the cafeteria floor for what seems like days, in scenes clearly drawing from the painful tragedies of Eric Garner and Michael Brown." These criticisms provide necessary context for imagining how the viewer's enjoyment of trauma porn is linked to

histories of racialized, sexualized, and gendered violence. These criticisms also speak to the legacies of transgenerational trauma in black and queer communities.³ Thus, in my reading of sad-pornographic TV, I suggest that multigenerational trauma accounts for numerous identity formations and identity histories.

Amazon's *Transparent* exemplifies trauma pornography in a queer-trans modality. The serial focuses on the Pfefferman family in contemporary Los Angeles as children Sarah, Josh, and Ali, and ex-wife Shelley, live in the wake of their father and ex-husband Maura's coming out as a transgender woman. The initial trauma of coming out constellates a network of sub-traumas. In season one, episode four ("Moppa"), we learn that Josh's college-age babysitter Rita sexually abused him while sustaining an exploitative age-differential relationship for several years (Fitzerman-Blue et al., 2014). In season one, episode eight ("Best New Girl"), we observe Ali's abandonment by her parents at thirteen years of age, when they

³ For examples of scholarship concerning black transgenerational trauma, see Anderson J. Franklin, Nancy Boyd-Franklin, and Shalonda Kelly (2009), "Racism and Invisibility: Race-Related Stress, Emotional Abuse and Psychological Trauma for People of Color," *Journal of Emotional Abuse* 6(2-3): 9-30; Gilda Graff (2017), "The Intergenerational Trauma of Slavery and its Aftereffects: The Question of Reparations," *The Journal of Psychohistory* 44(4): 256-268; Jennifer L. Griffiths (2009), *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance*, Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press; Janice P. Gump (2010), "Reality Matters: The Shadow of Trauma on African American Subjectivity," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 27(1): 42-54; and Gabriele Schwab (2010), *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*, New York: Columbia University Press. For a seminal example of queer transgenerational trauma, see Ann Cvetkovich's writings on the gendered-sexualized traumas of butch-femme cultures and cycles of incest: Cvetkovich (2003), *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

allow Ali to cancel her Bat Mitzvah against her best interest, ending in a troubling set of scenes in which Ali hitchhikes to the beach only to be sexually propositioned by an older man (Bedard and Soloway, 2014). In season two, episode three ("New World Coming"), we view an erotic fantasy in which Sarah partakes, featuring Sarah masturbating to flashbacks of her high school disciplinarian (Soloway and Heller, 2015). Finally, in season three, episode eight ("If I Were a Bell"), we see twelve-year-old Maura dressing up as a girl and consequently shamed by her grandfather; in the same episode, we realize the psychic fallout of twelve-year-old Shelley after she is sexually abused by her music teacher (Our Lady J and Arnold, 2016).

Beyond a content analysis, I want to think through the unique modes of streaming television as they facilitate forms of multitemporal trauma and screen-intimacy. In Ali's trauma ("Best New Girl"), the majority of the episode features the past. Toward the end of the episode, young Ali dances with an older man she meets at the beach against a background of tango music, intercut with shots of Maura similarly dancing at a camp for cross-dressing women. Both events occur in 1994. Ali and the older man begin to wrestle as Maura and her dancing partner get physically more turbulent and intimate. Then, when Ali's traumatic event is coming to a head, we observe present-day Ali overlooking her younger self, making eye contact with the preying older man. We then cut to younger Ali approaching the pair, grabbing the man by the shoulder as the camera tracks to a shot of adult Ali and the man kissing, with younger Ali, behind the man, continuing to tug at his overalls.

In an almost inverse narrative device, toward the end of "New World Coming," we view Ali's older sister Sarah gazing depressively out the window of her new apartment (Sarah's separation from her husband, caused by her cheating with, marrying, and then divorcing her college girlfriend, has ousted Sarah from the family home). The camera cuts to a reverse shot, in

which we see Sarah's high school disciplinarian "Mr. Irons" at the other end of the apartment; another cut presents Sarah matching Mr. Irons's eye contact. The following reverse shot images Mr. Irons in the hallways of Sarah's high school. Similar to the episode with Ali, changes in lighting technique and color correction perform most of the work of designating another historical period. The scene then continues to intercut between the high school and Sarah's apartment, featuring teenage Sarah walking down the high school's hallways toward the disciplinarian's office; next a subjective shot that pans across the placard on Mr. Irons's door. The shots get tighter as Sarah and Mr. Irons converge at her apartment table, finally including the two in the same medium close-up. Sarah bends over the table to be spanked, while a subsequent over-the-shoulder shot represents her younger self at the far end of the apartment overseeing the scene. Reminding us of Williams's feminine body in melo-pornographic or porno-dramatic ecstasy, the sound of the paddle hitting Mr. Irons's hand gets progressively louder and quicker as Sarah reaches climax.

I identify in these two examples a complex of sexual-traumatic temporalities: 1994 and the present; high school and now; confused generationalities of primary characters; and self-gazes and self-pleasures in the contemporary and past. What is unique about platforms like Amazon are their streaming formats and "binge-watching" conducts, engendering something more akin to five-hour films (comprised of ten thirty-minute "episodes") than the discrete episodic format of broadcast TV. Furthermore, the streaming format can allow a more intimate contact between viewer and screen, often watched on laptops, mobile phones, and tablets rather than on the traditional television set and its contemporary smart capabilities. I suggest that these multigenerational, traumatic temporalities are a characteristic feature of feel-sad TV and televisual sad-joy, in which present-day characters and their proxy viewers can only process sexual hang-ups and erotic

A Real Happy New Year

frustrations through an inter- and intra-generational sexual gaze and an intimate screen-contact. Through a presentist temporality of streaming ("I can watch it all now! The season is *all now!*") and vulnerable screen-connection, *Transparent* moves toward a unique force of sad-joy, in which the character and viewer's increase of power in the present relies on a presentism of past trauma.

Transparent's multigenerational trauma speaks to the non-eternal temporality of Spinoza's passions and the intensity of the imagination as the mind regards a past or future thing as present. For Spinoza, an affect is stronger if we imagine its cause as present and, vice versa, an affect regarding a past or future cause is weaker than a presentist affect. By imagining a past trauma as present, *Transparent's* characters and consequently the viewer are affected more intensely. In *Transparent*, the streaming affect of cathartic joy and increase in power in the present relies on an imagination of traumatic sadness as past *and* present.

To account for the viewer's sad-pornographic relation to the multi-generationally traumatic text, I risk a speculative spectator based on the contemporary emotional laborer. Arlie Hochschild's seminal study of flight attendants and debt collectors in *The Managed Heart* (2012) proves the thoroughgoing permeation of emotional labor in the corporate workspace, whether normatively affectively positive (the flight attendant) or normatively affectively negative (the debt collector). Though her study focuses on middle-to-upper-middle-class corporate laborers, we could glean from the increasingly service-based economy a trend toward swelling affective labor in variable workspaces. I think here of professional functions from fast food servers to Uber drivers, whose "smiles" surely mimic the pivotal example of Hochschild's beaming stewardess. For example, take notice of Uber's rating and tips systems, which measure drivers' conversational capacity. Furthermore, note how Uber employs a gradient of expressive faces

from fuming to overjoyed to gauge (and mirror) customers' (dis)satisfaction with their service. While Hochschild's flight attendant and contemporary gig workers are pressured into and authorized an at-times jarring smile, I wager that they are never, under supervision, encouraged to grin or laugh in manic or ecstatic affect at customers and superiors. Thus, in my speculation, and I argue in accordance with Hochschild and other affect theorists' interpretations, the affective laborer is barred from a level of emotional intensity that I name catharsis. By this, I mean to communicate that, in normatively affectively positive professional functions (positions unlike Hochschild's debt collector), the laborer is prevented a level of both good- and bad-affective intensity: cackling hysterically, screaming in anger at customers and managers, crying in situations of client or administrative harm, and so on. In this way, I suggest that we conceive of the space of contemporary affective labor as one of *emotional saturation without cathartic intensity*.

A more recent example of such non-cathartic intensity emerges in Berlant's comments concerning the exhaustive destruction of contemporary Western service labor. For Berlant, the combination of waning social security and extending life expectancies entails a situation of slow death, "the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence" (2011, 95). Most simply, people live longer, have fewer societal guarantees to cap the length of their labor, and thus work longer and die slower. It is Berlant's insight regarding the affective conditions of slow death that speaks to the contemporary emotive spectator in my analysis. To counteract the condition of slow death, of working longer and dying slower, workers partake in moments of "interruptive agency" – what Berlant variously calls "self-suspension," "counter-dissipation," "self-abeyance," and "floating sideways" – in

behaviors such as overeating.⁴ With Berlant, I imagine sad-pornographic catharsis as an analogous mode of emotional self-interruption, a counter-agency – sideways and non-sovereign – in which the emotive spectator achieves a threshold of affective intensity fenced at work. In feeling sad-joy, the emotive spectator suspends herself in an antagonistically emotional overindulgence beside *and* against the under-authorization of emotion in the workspace. It is no coincidence that the contemporary rhetoric around excessive spectatorship – particularly in the form of binge watching – accords with the very example of interruptive, lateral agency Berlant describes: overeating.

Having established the emotive spectator of sad porn, I look to NBC's *This Is Us*, which returns us to multigenerational trauma and the political-economics of its affective spectatorship. *This Is Us* follows the Pearson family (adopted African-American son Randall; biological twins Kate and Kevin; and parents Rebecca and Jack) across multiple temporal blocs: the many stages of the children's upbringing, the ebbs and flows of Rebecca and Jack's past marriage, and the contemporary events of Randall, Kate, and Kevin's adulthood. In season two, episode seventeen ("This Big, Amazing, Beautiful Life"), we follow the rollercoaster of Randall and wife Beth's foster child Deja, as Deja and her struggling, young mother (Shauna) endure poverty. However, instead of Deja's plotline, I focus on the very beginning of the episode, which features four interlocking traumas, all births: Shauna's birth of Deja; Rebecca's birth of twins Kate and Kevin; Beth's birth of Randall's and Beth's first daughter Tess; and the birth of Randall, whose father leaves him at a fire station (that same day

⁴ Berlant also terms this "self-medication through self-interruption" (2011, 115-6). Overeating, as opposed to over-drinking, over-smoking, over-injecting, and over-insulating, exemplifies slow death in that "food is one of the few spaces of controllable, reliable pleasure people have," and "food is necessary to existence, part of the care of the self, the reproduction of life" (Berlant 2011, 115).

adopted by Jack and Rebecca, who lose their third child in their triplets' delivery) (Oyegun and Asher, 2018). I suggest that, by framing Deja's multi-generationally traumatic plotline – racialized poverty experienced across generations – within four birthing traumas, the writer and director provide the emotive spectator with sad-pornographic generic cues. The viewer can then attach to these cues in passionate endurance from the episode's outset.

In *This Is Us*, which is aired and consumed in a broadcast format, the presentist joy of a past-and-present traumatic sadness features a different presentist temporality: the weeklong craving for a new episode and the consumption of that episode as wholly now, discrete from other episodes in the season/serial. Where *Transparent* requires a weekend binge, *This Is Us* necessitates another temporality of non-labor: the weekday night. In the broadcast and streaming cases, feel-sad TV programs nurture a distinct modality of laboring passionate affect and increase in power, either in the weekend splurge or the weeknight reprieve. Necessarily, these scenes of tragic-cathartic viewership materialize outside such affectively inundated yet non-purgative work environments.

The episodic catharsis of *This Is Us*, a temporality of the *only now, each time this week*, pairs with the form of the births' representation: the temporal ubiquity and simultaneity of the interlocking, traumatic deliveries. In the case of both the viewing temporality and the birthing temporality, episodic trauma-joy formulates as an *all now, only at this time*, with week-long gaps separating discrete episodes and discrete historical periods demarcating the divided eras of the births. The streaming format's "all now, all at once" matches *Transparent's* traumatic erotics of past and present, and the broadcast TV format's "only now, each time this week" dovetails with *This Is Us's* traumatic simultaneity.

As a cold medium "high in participation or completion by the audience" and high in empathy, television facilitates unique forms of personal vulnerability in which an opposing

professional non-catharsis can be superseded through affective intensity in the home (McLuhan 1994, 23, 30).⁵ Writing on TV melodrama and postmodern consumer culture, Lynne Joyrich (1992) argues that “television draws all of us, women and men, into a shared bond of consumer overpresence and powerless spectatorship as melodrama becomes the preferred form for TV, the postmodern medium *par excellence*” (228-9). While Joyrich writes in the pre-streaming era and is concerned with the postmodernization of melodrama (and the melodramatization of postmodernity), I continue to value the convergence of “consumer overpresence” and “powerless spectatorship” in Joyrich’s argument, especially as that convergence pertains to melodrama and melodrama’s generic sprawl across soap operas and serials. Continuing my reading of *Transparent* and *This Is Us*, the consumer overpresence to which Joyrich refers corresponds to Spinoza’s understanding of the increased intensity of affect under the presentness of the affecting thing (in this case, multigenerational trauma in contemporary TV melodrama). Furthermore, the powerless spectatorship in Joyrich’s formulation corresponds to the feelings of social helplessness that Berlant articulates in *The Female Complaint*, wherein the feminine subject experiences a juxta-positionality or asiderness to politics with consequent feelings of political-affective incapacity (2008, 3). Spectatorial powerlessness also invokes Spinoza’s understanding of sadness as a fundamental loss of power, striving, action, and virtue. In this vein, I suggest that this particular junction of overpresence and powerlessness also characterizes trauma porn’s generic-aesthetic structures of affective

⁵ Marshall McLuhan (1994), *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 23, 30. McLuhan’s brief aside about a paradigmatic affect in the electrical age, boredom, is also relevant here. The cool corporate non-catharsis I explore in this article is less a genre of anxiety than a genre of boredom, a tedious feeling of affective non-intensity. See McLuhan (1994, 26).

expectation. Furthermore, following Joyrich, I wager that there is a gendered distribution in the emotion management of erotic attachments to feel-sad media: an affective labor often taken in the home; “marked” by feminized passivity, domesticity, and susceptibility; and a feminine labor impossible in masculinist spaces of managed non-catharsis.

I propose that the commonplace fascination with traumatic, familial situations on TV engenders unique feel-sad formats and sad-joys that rely on a distinctive relationship between the private and the professional. In my notion of the contemporary emotive spectator, the professional public has managed catharsis out of the workplace and delegated purgation completely to the domestic/mobile televisual space. The exhaustion caused by labor’s inhibited catharsis leads to an excitation and desire for traumatic media in the home in which the tele-viewer can achieve an emotive threshold barred at work. The viewer expresses joy in watching televisual families process their own complexly temporal traumas, an intensity of joyful passionate imagination in the present that necessitates the past-and-presentness of trauma in the televisual now.

I call the particular affective dialectic at play in sad-pornographic consumption *sad-joy*. I define sad-joy as a dialectical vacillation of the mind in which the ambivalent tension of feeling sadness economizes joy. Spinoza defines “vacillation of mind” in the demonstration of proposition seventeen of the third part of the *Ethics*. The proposition states that, if a thing that causes us joy is similar to a thing that causes us sadness, we will have something akin to a love-hate relationship with that thing. For Spinoza, this irresolution between love and hate, joy and sadness, defines the vacillation of mind as such. Following Spinoza (1996), in my articulation, sad-joy, as a mental irresolution, exemplifies an affective dialectic in which *joyfulness* – a “passion by which [one] passes to a greater perfection” and a virtuous increase in power and striving for self-preservation – emerges as the *net distribution of sadness* – the passage to a lesser perfection (77).

I categorize sad-joy in classical and modern theories of tragic catharsis but with a contemporary historical bent. In this way, I expand cathartic theory by understanding sad-joy's dialectic as a catharsis of the contemporary, one specific to the surveillances of contemporary capital, in which labor is expected to emotionally (re)produce at the same time as catharsis is *managed out*. For Aristotle, catharsis was intimately related to the "purgation of emotions" facilitated by tragic drama and tragic action's unique modes of pity and fear (1997, 10). Following Aristotle's classic tragic theory, I wager that sad-joy is constitutively connected to contemporary formats of feel-sad media, in particular trauma porn's singular modes of fear (traumatic terror) and pity (sympathy *for* trauma), an effect of said sub-genre's equally distinctive purgation (a joy economized through sadness). Furthermore, sad-joy as a contemporary catharsis emerges in the tragic experiential genres of the contemporary workplace and its flows of surveilled non-catharsis.


Sad-joy resonates with David Hume's theory of tragedy, in which he points almost exactly toward sad-joy in the "unaccountable pleasure which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy" (1993, 126). In Hume's account, *pleasure is directly related to affliction*.⁶ Furthermore, Hume's sad-joy counterpart is an express response to unbearable structures of non-catharsis and flat feeling, whether "the languid, listless state of indolence into which it falls upon the removal of all passion and occupation," or "the insipid languor which arises from perfect tranquility and repose" (126). In my account, the managed non-catharsis of the workspace corresponds to

⁶ "[Spectators] are pleased in proportion as they are afflicted, and never are so happy as when they employ tears, sobs, and cries, to give vent to their sorrow, and relieve their heart, swoln with the tenderest sympathy and compassion" (Hume 1993, 126).

Hume's agonizing boredom, listlessness, indolence, and languor. Finally, Hume's model moves us closer to sad-joy's dialectic. Writing on the affectivity of oratory, Hume's rhetoric emphasizes overpowering, effacement, conversion, redirection, and seizing (129). Hume's diction moves us into the language of sad-joy's affective dialectic. In feel-sad media's paradigmatic affect of sad-joy, the overpowering of sadness by joy emerges in an overcoming of sorrow by an erotically joyful attachment to sad televisual objects.

As I have developed throughout this article, the stakes of sad-joy are the affective endurance of the subject under contemporary capital. In this way, the consequence of sad-joy corresponds to the significance of Spinoza's *striving*, an analogue for late capitalist survival. Due to the fact that each thing strives to persevere in its being, striving constitutes each thing's essence, and perseverance in striving endows the individual with virtue, Spinoza awards desire and striving an ethical content. Following Spinoza, we could afford the contemporary emotive spectator's striving an ethical value, as she pursues her own affective endurance in the face of supervised non-catharsis. However, the emotive spectator's striving is not unlimited; Spinoza stresses the fact that external causes will inevitably overpower the force of one's perseverance and striving. Following the limited nature of desire for Spinoza and its surpassing by external causes, I wager that the contemporary laborer who affectively self-reproduces will always respond to and be overcome by the managed non-catharsis of contemporary capital, the external cause of which necessitates the laborer's very affective survival *for* the reproduction of capital. The employee can only endure through abiding by an administered level of emotional non-intensity.

Sad-joy is a dialectical ambivalence that emerges from the contemporary condition of corporate coldness. The tele-viewer craves feel-sad media to feel sad-joy, undergoing a vacillation of mind whose dialectical push and pull will end in a net joyfulness. The




consequences of sad-joy are twofold: first, in Spinoza's terms, an increase in power via a double decrease in power: the affective debilitation of contemporary capital which leads to feel-sad media's own affective (dis)empowerment; and second, the affective perseverance against *and* for the reproduction of capital.

In summary, sadness pornography mediates a unique tragedy of the contemporary, or a unique mode of the contemporary tragic, in which people "get off" on overwhelmingly sorrowful yet cathartic media. As a *mediatic meta-genre*, sad porn constellates a number of distinct sub-genres, such as disability, inspiration, and trauma porn. An *affective meta-genre*, sadness circumscribes pitiful, depressive, and traumatic emotions as an overarching "aesthetic structure of affective expectation," following Berlant. As a contemporary aesthetic category, sad porn succeeds a lineage of televisual and cinematic precursors, appearing at the convergence of the soap opera and the pornographic weepie.

In my analysis, I stress one sub-genre of sadness pornography, trauma porn, and its manifestations in serials such as *Orange Is the New Black*, *Transparent*, and *This Is Us*. Accounting for numerous identitarian positions and identity histories, trauma porn spectacularizes the contemporary abnormal family and its legacies of black, queer, and trans multigenerational trauma. In *Transparent*, multigenerational trauma emerges in inter- and intra-generational sexual longings and gazes, a transgenerationally traumatic erotics that match the streaming format's past-and-present temporality, what I call the "all now, all at once." In *This Is Us*, four interlocking births, which frame a tale of transgenerational black poverty, emerge an aesthetics of traumatic simultaneity that mirror broadcast television's temporality of "only now, each time this week."

Following affective scholars like Hochschild and Berlant, my analysis wagers a speculative emotive spectator, who embodies the particular friction between emotional labor (in the workspace) and emotion management



(at home or on the go). Experiencing variable labor environments that are affectively inundated while administratively non-cathartic, the contemporary emotional laborer *as* TV spectator craves feel-sad media to reach a threshold of affective intensity fenced at work. The sad-pornographic viewer engages feel-sad media in moments of "interruptive agency," modes of sideways and non-sovereign actancy, partaking in an oppositional emotional over-extravagance: a "self-medication" in which binge watching mimics self-abeyant behaviors like overeating. Occupying television's larger structures of participation and empathy, sad-pornographic viewership is characterized by a distinctive juncture between overpresence (such as Spinoza's intensified affect under the presentness of the affecting thing) and powerlessness (like Berlant's understanding of the juxtapositionality or asideness of the feminine subject to the political).

Finally, sad porn generates a unique affect, sad-joy, which I define as a wavering of the mind, or a mental oscillation. In sad-joy, overwhelming sorrow economizes ecstatic joy. As a contemporary form of affective purgation, sad-joy revises classic and modern theories of the cathartic by pointing us toward the current dialectic between experiences of tragedy in the home/on the go – through sad pornographic media – and professional non-tragedies – in non-cathartic work atmospheres. In this way, the stakes of sadness pornography regard the contemporary laborer *as* televisual spectator's affective endurance. Sad porn lubricates the current emotional worker's survival, but maybe, even probably, momentarily.

Works Cited

Aristotle (1997). *Poetics*, trans. S.H. Butcher. Mineola, NY: Dover.

Bedard, Bridget (Writer) and Soloway, Jill (Director) (2014, September 26). "Best New Girl," season one, episode eight in *Transparent*. Amazon.

Berlant, Lauren (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Berlant, Lauren (2008). *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Brendogfox (2016, September 5). "Sad Porn." Urban Dictionary. Retrieved from: <<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Sad%20Porn>>.

Cvetkovich, Ann (2003). *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Fitzerman-Blue, Micah and Noah Harpster (Writers) and Ganatra, Nisha (Director) (2014, September 26). "Moppa," season one, episode four, in *Transparent*. Amazon.

Franklin, Anderson J., Nancy Boyd-Franklin, and Shalonda Kelly (2006). "Racism and Invisibility: Race-Related Stress, Emotional Abuse and Psychological Trauma for People of Color." *Journal of Emotional Abuse* 6(2-3): 9-30.

Graff, Gilda (2017). "The Intergenerational Trauma of Slavery and its Aftereffects: The Question of Reparations." *The Journal of Psychohistory* 44(4): 256-268.

Griffiths, Jennifer L (2009). *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.

Gump, Janice P (2010). "Reality Matters: The Shadow of Trauma on African American Subjectivity." *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 27(1): 42-54.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell (2012). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Hume, David (1993). "Of Tragedy," in *Selected Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 126-33.

Ibrahim, Shamira (2016, June 23). "Yeah, I'm Finished with the Black Suffering Trauma Porn of *Orange Is the New Black*." Very Smart Brothas. Retrieved from: <<https://verysmartbrothas.theroot.com/yeah-i-m-finished-with-the-black-suffering-trauma-porn-1822523097>>.

Joyrich, Lynne (1992). "All That Television Allows: TV Melodrama, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture," in *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 227-51.

McLuhan, Marshall (1994). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Newman, Michael Z., and Elana Levine (2012). *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge.

Ngai, Sianne (2005). *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Nochimson, Martha (1992). *No End to Her: Soap Opera and the Female Subject*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Our Lady J (Writer) and Arnold, Andrea (Director) (2016, September 23). "If I Were a Bell," season three, episode eight in *Transparent*. Amazon.

Oyegun, Kay (Writer) and Asher, Rebecca (Director) (2018, March 6). "This Big, Amazing, Beautiful Life," season two, episode seventeen in *This Is Us*. NBC.

"Pornography, n." (n.d.) OED Online. Retrieved December 2018. Oxford University Press. Retrieved from: <http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/view/Entry/148012?redirectedFrom=pornography>.

Schwab, Gabriele (2010). *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Shackelford, Ashleigh (2016, June 20). "Orange Is the New Black Is Trauma Porn Written for White People." *Wear Your Voice*. Retrieved from: <https://wearyourvoicemag.com/more/entertainment/orange-is-the-new-black-trauma-porn-written-white-people>.

Soloway, Faith (Writer) and Heller, Marielle (Director) (2015, December 11). "New World Coming," season two, episode three in *Transparent*. Amazon.

Spinoza, Benedict de (1996). *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley. London: Penguin.

Williams, Linda (1991). "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film Quarterly* 44(4): 2-13.