Box-set mind-set: Psycho-cultural approaches to binge watching, gender, and digital experience

Caroline Bainbridge

Debates about binge watching as an increasingly commonplace cultural practice linked to the changing interfaces of media consumption in the era of online technologies are now numerous (Brunsdon, 2010; Jenner, 2015; Matrix, 2014; Perks, 2015). However, these largely do not consider the psychodynamics at work in binge watching, paying little attention to the pleasures, gratifications, and experiences afforded to viewers who watch in this way. The now infamous strategies of "on-demand" streaming services such as Netflix include the construction of "taste communities" that drive content provision, the use of algorithms to harvest data on viewer interactions, and the development of tools such as "post-play" that entrench binge viewing habits by coaxing the viewer to stay with their selected show or with the audio-visual paratexts aligned with it.

The term "binge watching" connotes both gluttony and addiction, and media panics about the inherent dangers are commonplace. Newspaper articles pronounce that binge watching can give you cancer (because remaining sedentary for hours on end can lead to bowel and bladder problems), or even kill you (Anon, 2016; Donnelly, 2016). Paradoxically, however, binge watching has also given rise to new forms of relatedness, offering opportunities to defend against intensified feelings of loneliness and isolation that emerge from mediated experience. The textures of emotional and psychological complexity in the binge viewing phenomenon are closely knotted together, requiring not only scientific but also ideological analysis: this form of media consumption is related to forms of subjectivity produced by late neoliberal capitalism, where the intensification of unregulated workdays, and the expansion of leisure time, is heralded so widely.

There is an important unconscious dimension to digital mediated experience and its entanglement with self-identity, and I argue that object relations psychoanalysis is key to understanding the inherent processes involved. Specifically, I use a psycho-cultural[1] approach to explore the continuities between textual representation, cultural politics, and viewing practices, adding to important recent scholarship that advocates for a return to object relations psychoanalytic concepts in order to grapple with the contemporary (psychological and aesthetic) uses of what we might understand as "media objects" (Bainbridge and Yates, 2011, 2014; Bainbridge, Ward, and Yates, 2013; Krüger and Johanssen, 2017; Whitehouse-Hart, 2014).

The psychodynamics of binge-watching are not easy to categorise but must surely be linked to an underpinning strain of oral craving. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the idea of the "binge" is linked to over-indulgence, greed, and a kind gluttonous desire that cannot be sated, suggesting an experience of hunger that

cannot be waylaid. Arguing that in devouring visual media viewers put on display internal, existential emptiness, this article asks whether binge watching is also symptomatic of a broader sense of psycho-cultural malaise. To do so, it reflects psychoanalytically on specific examples of television drama in which themes of greed and gluttony dominate, asking questions about the parallel processes at work for viewers who binge watch such material, with the aim of exploring how such analysis provides insight into contemporary ideological experience. What can we learn about binge watching drama from shows in which greed itself is on display and under critique? Can binge watching be understood as a cultural form of working through, where media is used as a kind of psychological object? And how does this inform a deeper understanding of the ideological context in which binge viewing has come to the fore?

 Throughout this article, my key examples for analysis include Walter White (Brian Cranston) in *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-13) and Betty Draper (January Jones) in *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-15), both of whom receive diagnoses of cancer during the narrative exposition of each show. Cancer draws attention to the interiority of the body in ways that parallel psychoanalytic discussions of hunger and greed, emphasizing both the continuum between fullness and emptiness, and the process of devouring/being devoured at the same time. In *Breaking Bad*, Walter responds to his diagnosis by becoming a greedy drug-baron who tries to sustain appearances of ordinariness in his family relationships. The story-world becomes a metaphor of his repressed bodily experience as the cancer works its way into his lived identity. In *Mad Men*, Betty, like Walt, is eventually affected by cancer (although this does not emerge until the end of the series).

 Throughout the drama, Betty's psychological experience is written on and through the body as discussed below. In contrast to Walt, however, Betty's insatiable greed manifests as envy, so that she becomes a poisonous, aggressive character who does damage to *herself* as well as others. These important distinctions between embodied experiences of masculinity and femininity usefully help us to understand the role of greed and its relationship to envy through tropes of cancer and the body in each show. By extrapolating from my textual analysis of the narrative and aesthetic examples under discussion, I trace the 'mapping fantasies' (Donald, 1985, p. 121) at work as symptoms of the broader cultural and political *zeitgeist*, suggesting that insights afforded by a psychoanalytic reading illuminate what is at stake ideologically in the current cultural preoccupation with binge watching, particularly in relation to cis-gendered experience. As I argue below, in a climate dominated by discourses of fear and loss that seem to deepen every day, the phenomenon of greed offers a fantastical defence against experience.

Walter White: Greed and the cancerous male body
Viewers are invited to sympathise and identify with Walter White from the opening episode of *Breaking Bad*. After being diagnosed with lung cancer following a fainting episode, Walt approaches a former pupil, Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul), to propose working together to produce crystal methamphetamine. Walt's aim is to secure enough money to cover the cost of treatment, and to ensure the well-being of his family after his death. Despite Walt's decision to manufacture illegal drugs,

viewers are encouraged to sympathise with him. The numerous overhead shots shown throughout the series as Walt undergoes his scans are indicative here, offering a bird's eye view of his experience, and allowing viewers to develop an omnipotent sense of "seeing it all" despite Walt's clear propensity to pull the wool over the eyes of his fellow characters. In the series finale, this bird's eye view shot is used at the very end of the story, so that viewers once again have the illusion of understanding the whole picture as Walt is shown smiling wryly as he (presumably) dies of his gunshot injuries.

 Such aesthetic strategies illustrate the way that viewers experience a repeated sympathetic pull into Walt's narrative despite his deeply objectionable actions. As the series unfolds, Walt becomes increasingly treacherous and violent, wilfully murdering both innocents and rivals to ensure his status as kingpin of his drug empire. Many commentators remark on 'the appeal of Walter White' (ismael676, 2016), asking how and why so many viewers come to root for him for so long (Doucleff, 2013), and, as discussed below, at what point the audience 'loses' its sympathy for him (Noble, 2013).[2] Showrunner, Vince Gilligan, has been upfront about the deliberate use of cancer as a means of drawing in viewers and sustaining their interest – an aspect of the show that was crucial in ensuring its enduring appeal.

Cancer is a particularly powerful narrative trope, constituting the disease of our time, one that instils fear and metaphorises all that is malignant in our culture. In a resonant turn of phrase for viewers of *Breaking Bad*, Susan Sontag (1977, p. 5) states, 'Now it is cancer's turn to be the disease that doesn't knock before it enters'.[3] For Sontag, cancer arouses dread and is feared as 'morally contagious' (1977, p. 6). She suggests that cancer is often linked to unexpressed feelings of rage and anger (1977, p. 22). This clearly relates to Walt, a mild-mannered character, who lives an unremarkable existence despite having once been part of a Nobel Prize winning team and whose disappointment with life is therefore tangible.

Psychoanalytic discussions of cancer suggest that it is envisioned 'as a deathlike enemy in the interior of one's own body' (McDougall, 2000, p. 47). It emphasises the powerlessness of the patient, who is impotent in the face of its capacity to control (Parkinson, 2003, p. 419). Filling up the empty spaces of the body with its poisonous growth structure, cancer makes the patient immediately conscious of the interiority of the body, its limitations and incapacities. Mainly invisible to the naked eye, cancer of the internal organs fills up the patient with rotten material, suffusing the body with a sense of the failed integrity of the corporeal insides (Goldberg, 1995, p. 84). For the cancer patient, the psychic losses linked to subjectivity and autonomy are unquantifiable, prompting Goldberg to observe that cancer is a manifestation of the death drive, generating in the patient a desire, not to be hidden, but rather, to be in the world. The opening episode of *Breaking Bad* (S1, Ep. 1) draws attention to this when Jesse asks why Walt is suddenly 'breaking bad', and Walt states that he is 'awake'. The audience watches as his character comes to life, attempting to take control and call the shots.

However, Walt's pursuit of control is illusory and inscribed in disavowal, and his hidden negative aggression leads to the development of hostility, violence, and

feelings of superiority. Melanie Klein (1958) argues that the death drive leads to experiences of annihilation, and it is clear that Walt uses projective impulses to rid himself of internal malignancy through the externalisation of its aggressive, annihilating forces. These take shape in Walt's alter ego persona, Heisenberg. Interestingly, as Judy Parkinson (2003, p. 419) suggests, in cancer patients, 'the illness may even feel like an uncontrolled sub-personality within the patient'. Heisenberg's will toward total power and control is symptomatic of the depth of Walter's disavowed loss in the face of impending death. It is as though the cancer paradoxically gives Walt new awareness of what *should* be empty spaces inside his body (for example, the lungs that ought not to be filled up by a tumour), and that these coincide with the empty feelings of loss that he faces as he gets to grips with his terminal diagnosis.

As Giovanini (2019) argues elsewhere in this volume, the formal characteristics of television shows link to cultural and ideological processes. In the case of *Breaking Bad*, the symbolisation of Walt's impulses of projection in the Heisenberg persona is heightened by a shift in aesthetics. Heisenberg's "look" is notably oppositional to Walt's everyday demeanour. Walt's quotidian dress is remarkably "bland" and undeserving of comment. The beige/cream/pale grey palette of his costumes is inoffensive, connoting quietness and a desire to conform. By contrast, Walt's choice of outfit for Heisenberg is bold and stark: he famously selects a black Goorin Bros porkpie hat to cover his shaven head, and this becomes a signifier for Walt/Heisenberg's new mode of "gangster" behaviour and dark, fearless self-confidence.[4] This aesthetic division between aspects of Walter White's character conjures up Kleinian notions of splitting as a key defence mechanism of the mind, enabling viewers themselves to mimic the strategy so as to be able to both judge and laud Walt's actions at the same time.

Quality television, with its very high-end production values, presents viewers with hyperreal imagery, and this is often viewed on either a large screen in the living room, or on handheld devices held in close proximity to the face. Television here fosters a particular kind of intimacy for viewers, filling up the field of vision, and heightening the propensity for identification and entanglement with the narrative. Psychological mechanisms of projection are modelled in the narrative as a means of coping with unmitigated psychic disintegration, and the intimate relation to the screen and its content enables viewers to do the same thing. Through its invitations into identification, and particularly into projective identification, televisual intimacy offers relief to those viewers for whom Walt's experiences resound with both personal (lived) and ideological experience, as discussed below.

 The emptiness at the root of Walt's experience is, importantly, linked to his intensifying greed as the series unfolds. As Joan Riviere (1937, p. 173) explains, the emptiness of the hungry baby is the first experience of something like death or a recognition of the non-existence of something, and this prompts a sense of overwhelming loss. Greed, hate, aggression, envy and jealousy are derivatives of this primary unconscious experience, and in particular the acquisitive impulses of greed are a defence against disintegration (Riviere, 1937, p. 185). In this psychoanalytic account, greed is formulated in terms of 'hopeless emptiness inside' (Krüger, 1997,

p. 630), and Thomas Wolman explains that 'Greed … is a wild and frenetic compulsion to live even in the face of death … For the most greedy, wealth becomes an expanding mass whose growth is unstoppable' (2015a, p. 55-6). Walt's greed for the acquisition of ever greater wealth is linked to the cancer inside. It can never be satisfied.

 Even once he has accumulated the $737,000 that he calculates necessary for his family, Walt persists in his illicit actions, eventually earning so much money that it cannot safely be laundered and has to be hidden in a storage facility. Moreover, the acquisition of vast sums of money helps Walt to anticipate a form of immortality. As Arthur Nikelly puts it, 'Just as men [sic] assure their perpetuity by leaving behind their children, so their material wealth, being part of themselves, becomes a form of immortality as it is assigned to their beneficiaries, thereby strengthening a sense of control over their destiny' (2006, p. 70).

However, greed also functions as a magical defence against the dangerous lack felt inside, so that, as Harvey Kaplan states, 'greed can be seen in individuals who feel as though they lack the right kind of supplies to live their life, a lack that puts them in personal danger. They possess the fantasy that it is through the acquisition of these supplies that they will be protected against the possibility of harm or jeopardy' (1991, p. 508). Ryan LaMothe notes that 'avarice represents a defense against further loss and mourning as well as a defense against experiencing emptiness' and, thus, 'greed is the desire to be alive with others' (2003, p. 24, 29). Paradoxically, for Walt, his greed kills off his family relationships completely, exposing this defence as one of pure fantasy. However, the roots of greed as defined by these psychoanalytic commentators have much to offer in the analysis of contemporary ideological imperatives linked to neoliberal capitalism, and perceptions that this began to disintegrate following on from the fiscal crash of 2008. By surveying the psychoanalytic literature, it is possible to piece together fragments of critical thinking, and to make connections to the operations of hegemony. In tracing the role of greed as a force that shapes lived experience at both the conscious and unconscious levels, my aim is to demonstrate the value of object relations psychoanalysis for critical cultural analysis.

In light of this, how *are* we to understand the appeal of a character such as Walter White – a character whose greed, violence, and disregard for the people he destroys is so blatantly portrayed? *Breaking Bad* began to air in the US in January 2008, the year in which the global fiscal crisis started to take hold. Much of the show's emphasis on greed can be read as a critical commentary on late forms of capitalism that thrive on greed and ambition. Several commentators have noted the parallels between Walt as the master of an evil empire and metaphors of western capitalism and corporate identity (Ammar, 2013; Echart and Garcia, 2013; Eskow, 2013). Walt's downfall also foreshadows the cultural and psychological ramifications of the financial crash of 2008, with all the losses that it entailed, especially for white men, in terms of a perceived loss of authority, ideological standing, and control. The show is often used as to illustrate the widespread collapse of structures of paternal authority that characterises the period following on from the financial crash of 2008, in which hegemonic institutions of finance, governance, and

law were all implicated (Hudson, 2013; Kovalli, 2013; Van der Werff, 2013; Leyda, 2013; Scott, 2014; Johnson, 2016), drawing particular attention to the vulnerability felt by older white men, for whom familiar tropes of patriarchal masculinity began to disintegrate. Since then, of course, global campaigns around institutionalised sexism and racism have bolstered this sense of hegemonic collapse, as patriarchal collusion with multiple forms of oppression has begun to be exposed.

Breaking Bad illustrates for its audience the lived cultural experiences of hegemonic masculinity, whiteness, and the associated disintegrating fixities of western ideals, and the show could therefore be seen to provide a containing function, enabling the anxieties of some hyper-identified viewers' to be held at bay. In offering up a distinctive split identity in the main character of Walt/Heisenberg, the show creates a holding space into which such viewers can project their own anxieties, and thus feel somehow more assured. Prolonged engagement with the story world has a potentially therapeutic quality in this regard, allowing such viewers to experience something akin to emotional containment in the face of the broader cultural collapse of certainty, and the pace of change associated with it. What does the greedy desire to seek out such containment tell us about the unconscious ideological motivations of audiences who choose to binge watch the show, and for whom identificatory pleasures are pronounced? It reveals a strong appetite for the potent force of psychological containment on offer, alerting us to the depth of psychological disintegration in contemporary experience for those whose identities have been aligned with power and authority by default, and suggesting that the escapist fantasies of television drama provide psychological space in which to re-work lived experience through vicarious identification with characters and their travails and successes.

Television offers such containment through its mechanisms of intimacy, and it is important to note that this is not merely available to those viewers for whom identification is a key textual pleasure. Instead, in its provision of alluring, imaginary spaces through its aesthetics, television can provide space for the re-presentation of important ideological shifts, making them accessible and "real" for viewers, and providing assurances that hegemonic shifts in power can be mediated and therefore thought.

The way that audiences displace unconscious hatred of Walt onto Skyler (Anna Gunn), Walt's wife, is also instructive here, as I discuss below. It shows how drama becomes a media object of the mind, allowing viewers to work through their own experiences of loss in relation to social structures of authority by means of watching television. As Roger Silverstone suggests, media can function as 'transitional objects' (1994, p. 12), following the schema proposed by Donald Woods Winnicott (1974, p. 116). Arguing that 'television will become a transitional object in those circumstances where it is already constantly available,' Silverstone demonstrates that television becomes such an object by

extending our reach and our security in a world of information, locking us into a network of time-space relations, both local and global, domestic and national, which threaten to overwhelm us but also to provide the basis for our claims for citizenship or membership of

community and neighbourhood. … [and by] … providing in its genres and its narratives stimulation and disturbance, peace and reassurance (1994, p. 19).

Following Silverstone, I have argued elsewhere that psychoanalysis is essential for understanding 'the ever more entrenched relationship of everyday life to processes of mediatisation and emotional experience' that dominates in contemporary culture (Bainbridge, 2011, p. 35). Media objects have become imbricated with identity in the digital age, shaping ideas of the self as an on-going project, and allowing the observation of how personal emotional and psychological experience is mirrored in characters that populate the screen worlds of consumption. By considering media as objects of the mind, with all the scope for psychological usage that this implies, I consider how binge watching helps to fill up the emptiness of contemporary hegemonic subjective and social experience in ways that avoid simplistic nostalgia and lament for the loss of previous forms of social order linked to bourgeois paternalism, heterosexuality, and whiteness. The plethora of mobile devices available to us helps to gratify our need to disavow difficult and unpleasant feelings associated with this, while at the same time facilitating exciting engagement with the possibilities that are opened up in moments of ideological change.

Binge watching, then, is symptomatic of the cultural loss of certainties associated with dominant modes of white, heterosexual masculinity and forces of ideological power, or, at least with their transformation. Such feelings of loss cannot effectively be articulated, leaving viewers unable to get enough sustenance from the show when watching in small chunks. The process of binge watching facilitates a greedy devouring mentality that is gradually sated by prolonged engagement with "on demand" media services.

This raises interesting questions about the psychodynamics of binge watching. On the one hand, it opens up a holding space, a transitional arena in which to concede that the underside of hegemonic masculinity is often unpleasant, threatening, and unbearable. At the same time, however, a greedy, devouring mode of watching also threatens to overrun the subject with a sense of its inevitability. On Netflix, for example, the "post-play" feature automatically cues and plays the next episode within 15-45 seconds, requiring no action on the part of the viewer (Perks, 2015, p. xxv). The pleasures of viewing in this mode become perverse, coaxing viewers to watch even though they may have decided to curtail their viewing session. Such experience shores up feelings of disintegration and loss, making them seem omnipresent. The act of viewing brings to life both the mechanisms of insatiable greed and the duality of the cancerous body (which feels simultaneously colonised and devoid of life) in a way that resounds with unconscious structures of feeling and experience. Binge watching simultaneously offers viewers an opportunity to metabolise social anxieties through projective identification, while paradoxically thwarting anxiety by warding it off through the opportunities it affords to take perverse pleasures in bingeing. However, although the binge watching phenomenon often involves narratives in which (white) male antiheroes feature strongly, there are also many examples of drama that do not focus (solely) on masculinity. It is important to consider how narrative tropes of greed and cancer work beyond the domain of white, hegemonic masculinity, and to consider the viewer experience of

female characters in drama where similar narrative themes are on show.

Betty Draper: Gluttony and the losses of femininity

In *Mad Men,* Betty Draper offers a nuanced depiction of thwarted femininity inscribed in the pre-feminist era. In contrast to Walt, we see much more of Betty's bodily dysfunction, and her body becomes the canvas for her symptoms: she experiences numbness in her hands in season one, crashes the family car, and feels consumed with guilt when she realises that she could have disfigured the face of her daughter, Sally (Kiernan Shipka). She also becomes unexpectedly (and unhappily) pregnant at the end of season two, suggesting that she has little control over her body. Betty's constant smoking emphasises her oral cravings, and this, together with her ambivalence about motherhood, the death of her own mother, and her unresolved grief, feed into her characterisation as a profoundly dissatisfied and lonely woman. This is echoed in Betty's secret sexual encounters with strangers as she works through the loss of her relationship with Don (Jon Hamm).

Betty's hunger for gratification is intensified in season five when she begins to binge eat so that her body becomes obese – a representational feat that is managed by the use of a "fat suit" worn by Jones. Betty's obesity stands in marked contrast to her behaviour around food in earlier seasons of the show. As Sally remarks in the episode entitled 'Meditations in an emergency' (S2, Ep. 13), 'Mommy doesn't like to eat'. This shift from one mode of eating disorder to another is crucial in terms of the show's display of psychological pain, and its experience on and through the body. Once Betty becomes caught up in habits of compulsive eating, viewers are once again confronted with what looks like greed in a key character. Betty's gluttony signals a greedy state of mind, one that is inscribed in an internal feeling of emptiness, as in the case of Walt. However, Betty's compulsions, firstly to smoke, and later to eat, are more inscribed in pathological envy rather than in greed *per se*, and this is linked to the representational politics of gender and the body.

Eli Marcovitz argues that women began smoking as part of the feminist protest against the masculine prerogative (1969, p. 1075). In a notably fetishising aesthetic approach, Betty smokes in almost every one of her scenes during the seven seasons of this series. This is quite astonishing. She is most certainly *not* a feminist. However, her smoking does relate to her experience of a masculine prerogative, and to an incapacity to express a sense of who she actually feels herself to be – the camera often lingers in medium close-up on shots of Betty quietly smoking as a means of articulating her silenced/repressed experience. In the psychoanalytic literature on smoking, Eric Hillier notes the exhibitionistic tendency inherent in the act (1922, p. 479).

For Marcovitz, however, smoking enables the conscious and unconscious perception of the boundaries of the interior of the body – it becomes 'an attempt to delimit the body image in the quest for the sense of self' (1969, p. 1079). Martin Grotjahn goes further, suggesting that the acts of inhalation, exhalation and visualisation involved in smoking equate to respiratory introjection/projection and reveal the inner ego boundaries, allowing the smoker to feel them. 'It fills his [sic]

inner body emptiness … It is as if the person now deeply feels that he [sic] is "me, here, now"' (Grotjahn, 1972, p. 345).

The exhalation of the smoke makes one's breath visible, providing reassurance that one exists, and creating an illusion of strength thanks to the unification of inner and outer worlds. This relieves the threat of suffocation and is symbolically about the loss of a love object, providing the subject with the illusory feeling of introjecting the lost object through inhalation. Exhalation also provides an outlet for the projection of feared introjects and/or for the re-appearance of the destroyed object that was taken in for the purpose of enhancing a sense of selfhood. Smoking, then, entails a form of greed, but it is one that stands in marked contrast to the kind discussed above with reference to Walter White. In Betty's case, the greedy addiction to smoking fills up a void that is felt long before her diagnosis of cancer (with its concomitant sense of interior emptiness). Her emptiness is metaphysical and existential, and the drama cleverly links this state of mind to the socio-cultural constitution of repressed femininity.

From season five, Betty's inner emptiness is depicted more starkly through her binge eating. Like cigarettes, the food that Betty consumes highlights her oral cravings, which, Nikelly suggests, 'are … linked with the fear of alienation and loss' (2006, p. 70). For David Krüger, the accumulation and consumption of food 'can shield one from the world', allowing the creation of 'a body armour of unattractiveness' (1997, pp. 619, 624). In Betty's case, this internal emptiness is linked firstly to the recent death of her mother. Later, it is linked to her loss of faith in Don, and to the loss of her sense of herself as a legitimately sexual woman, and this is depicted in excruciating detail during season two, as we watch Betty picking up strangers in bars, at her riding club, and at parties.

Betty's becomes increasingly aware of Don's infidelities across the early seasons until, eventually, she demands that they divorce. It is important that Betty's compulsion to eat sets in after Don marries Megan (Jessica Paré), a much younger, sexually attractive woman with no children. The existential emptiness that Betty feels deepens as she observes this relationship at a distance, and especially as she observes Megan's good relationship with Betty's daughter, Sally, heightening viewers' awareness of Betty's ambivalence about her own maternal feelings. For viewers, Sally's imitation of Megan's chic 1960s style heightens awareness of Sally's growing hatred of her mother, showing how aesthetics can be used to strengthen appreciation of the psychological development of characters.

Marcovitz argues that, like smoking, eating is a strategy to fill up bodily spaces of emptiness (1969, p. 1079). In women, pregnancy can serve the same function. In Betty's case, the wilful pursuit of sex with strangers as she comes to terms with the end of her relationship with Don, and eventually, her cancer, also serve this purpose. As Marcovitz suggests, eating to gain a sense of fullness is an attempt to deal with difficulties concerning a sense of self and boundaries (1969, p. 1080). Betty's binge eating is an attempt to gain a sense of control via the stimulation of her body. While this is similar to Walt's desire for control in *Breaking Bad*, there is an important distinction. In Betty's case, as her binge eating shows, her attempts at *self*-control are unsuccessful, and she displaces her aggressive impulses

onto her relationships with others. This is seen most clearly in her relationship to her daughter, Sally, and also in her attitude to Don's new wife, Megan. For Betty, aggression drives the gluttonous desire to take in all that is good but results in the expulsion of poisonous elements that nevertheless survive inside. This constitutes envy rather than greed and can be linked to the experience of gendered identity, a point to which I shall return below.

 In the psychoanalytic account, envy is a development out of greed. As Kaplan suggests, greed turns into envy with the realisation that another is the possessor of what he or she wishes, where previously ingestion alone insured the feeling of possession (1991, p. 519). In Betty's case, this is clearly linked to the contrasts between her own relationships with Don and Sally, and those between Betty and Megan, and Don and Sally. For Betty, envy becomes a defence. In the face of her overwhelming sense of emptiness, which is partly linked to her femininity and sense of subjectivity, Betty feels a profound need to store up all the good available to her. This 'leads to envy in a perpetual circle of desire, frustration and hate' (Riviere, 1937, p. 185) – feelings that characterise pre-feminist womanhood rather neatly. Indeed, of all the female characters in this show, Betty's life bears most resemblance to the image of pre-feminist womanhood depicted by Betty Friedan (1963) in her landmark book, *The Feminine Mystique* – a source that Matthew Weiner (the showrunner of *Mad Men*) has described as a key influence shaping the series (Mulkerrin, 2015), showing how psychoanalysis (and Friedan's take on it) has haunted the show from the point of its inception. Given that Betty is represented as a woman consumed with envy, aggression, and empty rage, her eventual diagnosis of cancer in the final season of the show comes as no surprise. The malignant forces of envy and self-punishment lend themselves well to the development in a fictional character of an illness that works as a metaphor of hopelessness and despair.

 Given that the show circulated in an era hailed as "postfeminist", however, such despair also becomes symptomatic of contemporary experiences of femininity with the complex, competing and contradictory imperatives of what it should look and feel like in an age when feminism is allegedly 'taken into account' (McRobbie, 2009, p. 21). I have argued elsewhere (Bainbridge, 2010; 2013) that envy characterises contemporary patterns of relatedness between women that are inscribed in an unmourned sense of loss for the experiences of second wave feminism, and this seems particularly pertinent in the case of *Mad Men*, a show in which the emergence of feminism during the 1960s in the US is a key thematic imperative. Betty represents a version of femininity in crisis and the role of the body is crucial in understanding how the psychological dimensions of gender experience are symbolised and consumed in culture. As Carolyn Laubender (2019) suggests elsewhere in this volume of essays, femininity is deeply inscribed in the tussle for reparative justice, and the depiction of Betty in *Mad Men* very effectively (and somewhat claustrophobically) articulates the embodied dimensions of this struggle for viewers of the show.

        What do such insights tell us about the psychodynamics of binge watching? It is more difficult to binge watch *Mad Men* than *Breaking Bad* because of the show's deeper emotional complexity, and audience studies with fans of *Mad Men* highlight

this. Betty was not warmly received by viewers (Aguirre, 2015; Dill-Shackleford et al, 2015, p. 158), whereas, for viewers of *Breaking Bad*, the horror of Walt's descent into villainy was warded off by displacing aggressive feelings onto his wife, Skyler. The hatred expressed for Skyler by certain fans on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Reddit, spilled over into real life attacks on Anna Gunn, who played her and who has written on her experience of misogyny driven by social media (Gunn, 2013).

Gunn's experience as an actress playing a female character who became the subject of such projected hatred demonstrates how popular cultural images of femininity are ripe for use in relation to poisonous feelings of envy, as highlighted above. As emblems of the postfeminist *zeitgeist* and its fantasies of femininity, the characters of Betty and Skyler provide a funnel for the condensed flow of hatred. That this transfers to the women performing these roles points to the claustrophobic and damaging unconscious uses that are all too readily made of women in popular culture, and this speaks pertinently to the conundrum of postfeminism.

Despite assertions that feminism has been 'taken into account', it is all too easy to identify examples of aggression toward and hatred of women being acted out in popular culture, as recent debates around television shows such as *The Fall* (BBC2, 2013-16) indicate (Jermyn, 2016). The contemporary postfeminist *zeitgeist* leaves women in a profoundly complicated position of both being expected to conform to images of desirability, and also to thwart these through individualism and knowingly ironic self-deprecation. In this context, competition becomes a dominant form of relatedness between women, masking the role of unconscious envy structuring contemporary femininity. It is useful to ask what this tells us about contemporary states of mind and senses of selfhood in contemporary culture.

In contrast to how Walt's greed articulates cultural loss related to the disintegration of the certainties of white masculinity, images of Betty's gluttony speak to the on-going contradictions and impingements of lived female experience that persist despite the assumption that feminism has had its day. *Mad Men* puts this on display in sophisticated and nuanced ways, providing female viewers with a place to recognise that women's experience of loss and emptiness pre-dates second wave feminism, and thus allowing the development of a new phase of feminist awareness in the midst of the oppressive logic of postfeminist ideology (Bainbridge, in press).

In *Breaking Bad*, the potential holding space for viewers is disrupted by both Walt's unremitting awfulness and the opportunities for viewers to take perverse pleasure in identifying with such a split persona; in *Mad Men*, by contrast, viewers are invited to identify with Betty *despite* her unlikeable character. Her unpleasant, aggressive behaviour is represented as a consequence of lived female experience. The viewer becomes more depressively oriented, finding empathy for a character who will be killed off without ambiguity thanks to the cancer that metaphorises the female condition under patriarchy. In both cases, television drama provides a potential holding function for viewers; whether the promises of containment succeed or collapse, a lens is created through which to understand the phenomenon of binge watching in more depth.

Consuming greed: The pleasures and dangers of television viewing

As Charlotte Brunsdon, argues, the somatic notion of "bingeing" television is inextricably linked to old arguments that television is a dangerous and addictive medium (2010, p. 65). Discussing how the attribution of critical evaluations aligned with cinema and "quality" lead to distinguishing between "good" and "bad" television, Brunsdon demonstrates that the phenomenon of bingeing is often reserved for the viewing of serial drama that communicates forms of social and cultural distinction. Nevertheless, she suggests that 'this verb [to binge], with all its connotations of an uncontrollable, excessive consumption, ironically reconnects the prestige dramas … with the addiction metaphors that have always been used to characterise the consumption of television drama' (2010, p. 65). The discussion of greed I have been advancing so far resounds with this perspective, suggesting that binge watching television is symptomatic of existential emptiness in the digital age. This can be understood as a response to shifting patterns of relatedness across the public body, and to changes in the lived experience of gender and the ideological relatedness of masculinity and femininity.

Newspaper articles abound in which warnings of the plague of narcissism induced by digital media has been linked to increasing mental health difficulties, loneliness, and depression. The personal mobile devices that enable binge watching distract from family relatedness in the home – a phenomenon that is perhaps seen most clearly in viewing habits that involve 'multi-screening' practices via hand-held devices, laptops and so on. Viewers can now curate preferred content on shared platforms by using individual profiles and paying subscription fees that permit content viewing associated with one account on several separate IP addresses. They can also simultaneously watch streaming or live broadcast material while in virtual conversation with other remote (and often unknown) viewers on social media platforms. Relatedness is now imagined in the ether rather than lived in reality for many people, conjuring up what Sherry Turkle terms as being 'alone together' (2011). This sense of loss and emptiness gives rise to formations of hunger, insatiable greed, and envy as we have seen in the examples of characters I have discussed. It also proffers insight into the appetite for watching media made for much larger screens on tiny hand-held devices that can be secreted in pockets on one's person, so that there is an illusion that the coveted/beloved object belongs only to the individual and can be consumed whenever the urge arises. As Carol Vernallis suggests, 'it's media sublime' (2013, p. 20).

However, the sense of loss underpinning binge watching is deeper than that experienced in the immediacy of day-to-day relationships, as the impact of structural losses around the collapse of paternal authority, and the perception that femininity is also in disarray, lead to psychological confusion about the role of the gender binary as a key term defining twentieth-century ideological accounts of subjective experience. Our hungry state of mind reflects the shifting complexity of digital identities as we seek 'the temporary illusion of fullness, completeness and affirmation' that Krüger identifies as central to the process of bingeing (1997, p. 621). The voracious spectator becomes saturated in the experience of viewing as Wolman argues (2015b, p. 107), but this is enhanced even further in "on demand"

viewing, a form of consumption that calls to mind the omnipotent infant greedily devouring whatever supplies it can find.

Our collective propensity for ungovernable greed in such contexts is disconcerting and must surely be understood in terms of the larger impact of a shift into the digital arena – a shift that both tantalises and threatens with its promises of multiple forms of identity and self-experience, as well as the disintegration of traditional modes of gendered identity. Jodi Dean (2005) coins the idea of 'communicative capitalism' to convey the mutual imbrication of neoliberal capitalism, digital technologies, the capture of personal data for profiteering purposes, and illusions of democracy. She shows how this iteration of capitalism fosters both 'a fantasy of abundance' and a fetishisation of technology that results in political foreclosure, allowing participants to abrogate responsibility for the disintegration of meaning, and to sustain an illusion of global connectedness. It is quite easy to see how such states of mind become linked to greedy, devouring tendencies.

However, binge watching ironically also *sustains* relatedness in an era when loneliness is never far from the headlines. The "Netflix and chill" phenomenon is a playful means of establishing flirtatious, sexualised relationships with romantic partners, and there is an emerging etiquette of couple behaviour around shared viewing of box-sets, such that watching episodes alone is seen as a rebuff to one's significant other, a greedy form of selfishness that communicates a lack of commitment to intimacy. That binge watching can bring people into contact with others engaged in watching the same material, whether this involves contact with people in the same room, or with others in the virtual spaces of social media, must also be acknowledged. Indeed, Perks suggests that binge watching might better be understood as 'media marathoning', a phrase that 'connotes a conjoined triumph of commitment and stamina' capturing 'viewers' … engrossment, effort, and sense of accomplishment surrounding their media interaction' (2015, p. ix).

How, then, are we to understand the complex emotional and psychological dynamics at work in the practice of binge watching? The reassuring glow of television drama provides containment, but it also permits the development of a greedy, yet envious, mode of consumption, allowing viewers to expel the poisonous feelings inside by attacking some characters and performers whilst simultaneously reifying others, as we see in the example of Anna Gunn/Skyler White discussed above. Television shifts from being a transitional object to a transformational one in this sense. As a transitional phenomenon, Silverstone (1994) argues that television fosters ontological security, offering reassurance that, as individuals, we will survive in society. However, as we have seen, bingeing signals that notions of ontological cohesion are in disarray, and any sense of security gives way to overwhelming loss and precarity. In this context, binge watching has more in common with Christopher Bollas's (1987) notion of the transformational object.

For Bollas, the transformational object is linked to the early relationship with the mother and is intricately bound up with feelings of experiential intensity. For Bollas, Winnicott's 'transitional phase is heir to the transformational period' and involves a capacity to articulate experience rather than simply being caught up in its

allure (1987, p. 15). The transformational object, by contrast, entails the seductive promise of transformation, and Bollas cites advertising and religion as key domains that foster this aspect of psychological life. As Bollas explains,

It is usually on the occasion of the aesthetic moment…that an individual feels a deep subjective rapport with an object (painting, poem, an aria or symphony, or natural landscape)… such aesthetic moments… evoke the psychosomatic sense of fusion that is the subject's recollection of the transformational object. This anticipation of being transformed by an object … inspires the subject with a reverential attitude towards it, so that … the adult subject tends to nominate such objects as sacred. … in adult life, therefore, to seek the transformational object is to recollect early object experience, to remember not cognitively but existentially – through intense affective experience (1987, p. 16).

For Bollas, aesthetic experience is crucial in the working of transformational objects. The propensity of aesthetics to induce a deep sense of rapport with an object during its contemplation is central to feelings of being "spellbound", feelings that are often difficult to articulate. Bollas (1987) links this difficulty to early childhood experiences related to burgeoning selfhood and processes of integration. Aesthetic experience is key in this account, firstly, to what it means to be human, and, secondly, to the pursuit of meaning (see also Giovanini 2019). As I have been exploring throughout this article, intense, spellbound experience is similarly central to binge watching. Bingeing viewers often experience a degree of compulsion to keep watching, and streaming services like Netflix foster this aspect of viewer engagement. The regime of viewing becomes urgent and insatiable, so that viewers often watch long into the night, whether they have commitments the next day or not. Such behaviour is resonant with Bollas's identification of gambling as compulsive and transformational. As he explains, 'the subject's relation to the object can become fanatical' in the pursuit of an experience that 'will deliver everyone from the gamut of basic faults: personal, familial, economic, social and moral' (1987, p. 27).

The associations between the ideological context of viewers, the thematics of complex television drama, and the manifest hunger for "bingeable" series coalesce to highlight the psychodynamics at play in binge viewing. Given the emphasis on the pursuit of containment elaborated in this discussion, we might describe the mentality involved as a "box-set mind-set". This mentality tells us a great deal about what it means to be a subject of digital culture during a period of profound social and ideological change. A psychoanalytic perspective on the processes at work provides important insights into the role of greed, uncertainty, and loss in shaping contemporary psycho-cultural experience. In a pertinent moment of wit, Orson Welles (1956) once remarked, 'I hate television. I hate it as much as I hate peanuts. But I can't get enough peanuts'. Whatever we think of the phenomenon of binge watching, the compulsive desire to consume alerts us to what is missing in the experience of digital lives. A psychoanalytic approach allows us to understand this, and therefore to get to grips with the challenges and opportunities of digital experience, and to feast on the possibilities, whether they prove to be good for us or not.

Notes

1. Cf. Chienyn's use of 'psychopoetics' elsewhere in this volume (Chienyn 2019, p. 2).
2. Interestingly, the show's aesthetic strategies around the depiction of Walt's capacity for doing harm shift once his cancer is under control in seasons 4 and 5. The cancer's remission is symbolised through Walt's overgrown hair and beard, allowing viewers to distance themselves from the sleek, distinctive look of Heisenberg at the height of his influence – an image that is frequently used on fan merchandise for the show. The overgrown hair and beard also connote Walt's future as these seasons deploy flash forward scenes, allowing viewers to understand that Walt is out of danger and will not be made to pay for his increasingly violent impulses.
3. In an infamous moment from the show, White proclaims to his wife, Skyler, "I am *not* in danger, Skyler, I *am* the danger! A guy opens this door and gets shot and you think that of me? No, I am the one who knocks" (Season 4, Episode 6).
4. The hat, itself, of course, has become a popular cultural icon of Heisenberg, to the extent that a silhouette relief of the character's hat-bedecked head has become a commonplace symbol of the show used on various items of merchandise and memorabilia available to fans.

Caroline Bainbridge, Ph.D., is Professor of Culture and Psychoanalysis at Roehampton University. Her publications include the monographs *The Cinema of Lars von Trier*(2007) and *A Feminine Cinematics* (2008), co-edited volumes such as *Television and Psychoanalysis* (2013) and *Media and the Inner World* (2014), and curated special editions of journals such as *Psychoanalysis, Culture, and Society*, and *Free Associations*. She is film editor for *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, and a series editor of the 'Psychoanalysis and Popular Culture' book list published by Routledge.

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