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Very Pressing Television and Other Imaginary Things

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Abstract

This thesis explores the current branding of "post-television" according to Lacanian theories of enjoyment as they inform a definition of contemporary fandom. Written in part from the perspective of a the "viewer," this project takes television's fantasies of itself as a taste-system half-seriously in order to examine deadlocked desire, the context of superegoic enjoyment, and their relevance to critical consumption. For a medium conventionally considered trivial and idiotic, television's current self-importance provides a perverse and critical occasion to consider the urgency surrounding our stuff-loving.

Keywords

Psychoanalysis, Fandom, Desire, Perversion, Cynicism, Enjoyment, Middle, Fantasy, Jacques Lacan, Post-Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Post-Television,

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Introduction

Loving Television Right Now

Fan Sweat

I watch television like I owe it my best effort. And maybe I do. Some of my finest work has taken place in front of that screen. So I am all too familiar with the flashes of “significance” as they overlap with the subsequent *whatevers* that are TV as a Way Of Life. My fandom,¹ a one-note haecceity, is a serial thisness made up of instances of perceived urgency and deflation, a kind of coming-to after what seems like a psychotic episode of like-ing. Is chronic television watching as depressing and disorienting for the viewer as it is for those watching the viewing? Definitely, but not entirely. It seems that asking the subject of television – the fan – to qualify her desire, bypasses a simpler question: does she desire at all? And what does “not desiring” mean when I insist on it for at least thirty-five hours a week? I am examining Very Pressing Television as the medium presents today relative to a subject that identifies as having to watch it. And if between my panting and yawning is the incalculable sum that my fantasy owes to an imperative of enjoyment, what is the impact on my “critical” engagement, and how does it implicate the status of my desire?

Backed by an intensity previously unknown to the medium, today’s television, now almost a totally viral substance, proliferating and fragmenting at a palpable rate, is an occasion to experience and document the terms of my Very Pressing investment, which features both neurotic and largely perverse valences of fantasy and enjoyment. Written from the perspective of a fan, this project takes post-television’s fantasies of itself as a taste-system half-seriously in order to examine how television engages superegoic constraints on desire, while television’s current self-importance also provides a perverse

¹ This thesis does not take up the current literature of fandom and its growing inquiry. Instead, I seek a definition via Lacanian subjects and their figuration of a real that informs their enjoyment. Essentially I explore fandom via “imperative,” such that locating the fan’s desire at all is problematic. See Henry Jenkins for an example of current discussions and definitions, in particular, *Convergence Culture, Where New and Old Media Collide* and *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era*.

and critical occasion to consider the hyperbole of our fandom.² This thesis, unable to widely reflect on a field that is young, massive and always growing (television), will consider today's TV (among limited examples) in accordance with critical postures of fan-loving and taste-“having,” while examining those pathologies of enjoyment that indicate a presumption of access, an elided cost, and are reflected in what is termed deadlocked desire. Thus in turning to Lacanian psychoanalysis and those contemporary readers particularly focused on the problem of the deadlock as it implicates the register of the real,³ I loosely adopt TV's own prescribed map, in which television production, consumption, branding and loving make manifest a *trompe l'oeil* of intense “conversation,” the real-ness of which is less at stake than the imperative that we never shut up about it.

I approach television as an experience of enjoyment and thus as a dilemma of desire. And so while I will take note of the technological and economic shifts that inform television's history, this thesis is mostly concerned with television as both a Lacanian subject and object of fantasy. The remainder of this introduction provides the terms that are required to begin a more intensive reading of high-stakes television according to these desire dilemmas. What I call Very Pressing Television (VP-TV) refers to television's current post-network era, but with an emphasis on the cultivation of its fandom as part imperative. Beginning with a definition of what is currently called “post-TV,” I will outline the theoretical backdrop of VP-TV's cultivation of pathological fantasy, imperatives, and enjoyment. By drawing on post-Lacanian thinkers such as Lorenzo Chiesa, and Slavoj Žižek, I put forth the key introductory concepts, such as superegoic and deadlocked desire that inform our relation to a perceived pay-out, one that is cynical in its annihilative consequence. From there we can establish Very Pressing Television fandom as a desire that is limited to, and by, a fantasy of access.

²Cultural Studies' definitions of “post-television” (also known as “not-TV,” “late-capitalist” TV) are usually referring to non-network productions, for example “pay television (and HBO in particular) is positioned as an alternative to network offerings” (Millar, *Not TV* 1).

³ They are deemed “post” because of their emphasis on the real, explored ahead.

Very Pressing Television

Remember Cinemax?

I don't.

By the beginning of the '90s, HBO was mostly famous for boxing and that day an engineer got mad about the fee rate and scrambled the picture.⁴ Also, *Twin Peaks* aired on ABC. So, rather than pointing to “discerning content,” the words “pay TV” mostly meant stations that were higher on the dial. Consumers that were of-age bought these stations for their syndicated movies, televised *a mere* five months after their release in theatres, while minors kept their eyes out for the passing opportunity to watch satellite-content, late at night, at a friend's house, when no one was watching. These were the “other” stations. Twenty years ago, television content was not wholly accessible by any device, person, or at any hour. Thirty years ago, “getting” a pay-tv channel was like finding porn. Actually, it *was* finding porn. So it was not that long ago that we were still excited by some partial staging of prohibition, however minimal. In terms of televisual content, lack-of-accessibility and what I desired were incidentally branded as roughly the same thing.

We can define Very Pressing Television by beginning with Amanda D. Lotz's periodization of the medium, in which she isolates “post-network” television: Between 1950 and the mid-eighties, television is a “network” affair (NBC, CBS, ABC), as these “networks spoke to the country en masse and played a significant role in articulating post-war American identity” (9). During the network age the television is front and centre as a box, geared toward baby boomers, moving from sponsored programming to thirty ads per program, consumption measured by audimeters, diaries, and sampling. Between the mid-eighties and 2005, television undergoes a “transition” that increases and fragments its access in its push toward digitization, the new platforms afforded to accommodate new devices, and a shift away from network interests and practices:

[T]he U.S. television industry reinvented itself and its industrial practices to compete in the digital era by breaking from customary norms of

⁴“GOOD EVENING HBO FROM CAPTAIN MIDNIGHT, \$12.95/ MONTH? / NO WAY/ [SHOWTIME/ MOVIE CHANNEL BEWARE” (Electronic engineer-activist John R. MacDougall protesting fee, fined \$5000.00; Miller, *It's Not TV* 4)

program acquisition, financing, and advertiser support that in many cases had been in place since the mid-1950s. This period of transition created great instability in the relationships among producers and consumers, networks and advertisers, and technology companies and content creators, which in turn initiated uncommon opportunities to deviate from the “conventional wisdom” or industry lore that ruled television operations. (Lotz 4)

“Post” network “indicates the era in which the cable channels created options for viewers [...] the break from a dominant network experience in which viewers lacked control over when and where to view” (14). And the fanfare among “water coolers” seemed to trend with HBO. By 2001, with the distribution and popularity of *The Sopranos*, television became newly pressing, as HBO started enthusiastically and widely generating its own material.⁵ This “tipping point” (as well as the unfortunate discourse of tipping points)⁶ coincides with new platform variances, the push toward digitization, HBO’s global spread and the emergence of “On Demand” 24-hour access, and September 11th. Permission to explore subject matter encouraged by an ethos of television based on choice, as opposed to advertiser prohibition, along with the overall shift in television format, convene to excite popular imagination and incite a discourse of hyperbole around the television object, even after the most-forgotten HBO debut of all time, the Right-Now relevant, *Oz* and the pre-*Curb Curb: The Larry Sanders Show*. The last decade, in particular, has seen a massive boom in both content and platform that seems to never let up. With the elimination of the “distribution bottleneck” (119), the introduction of new devices, the increased fragmentation of audiences, the celebrated rise of non-network generated programming (from subscription cable to *YouTube* start-ups) and the non-stop supposed emergence and cultivation of new voices, TV is a site flashing all shades of optimism and doom.

⁵ *The Sopranos* was a major ratings success, hitting 11 million by its fourth season. Despite being aired on HBO, which was less accessible than regular networks, *TS* attracted equal or larger audiences than most popular network shows. See Edgerton’s “The Sopranos as Tipping Point Television” in *The Essential Sopranos Reader*.

⁶ See, or don’t, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* by Malcolm Gladwell in “Works Cited.”

While TV seems impossibly new with its offensive formatting and its championed stupidity, today's TV (yes, even network) is also a self-proclaimed event of critical viewing. And like any believable snobbery, it tips its hat to the *Rocks of Love* and whatever else you find happening between and among alcohol, personality disorders, and women who have slept with Charlie Sheen. So, as part of a pervasive discourse of taste, what is also called "quality-branding,"⁷ television's process of commodification welcomes and thus generates its own polarization – another "*this and that.*" Building a "not"-TV⁸ brand happens against television's most notably shameless shit-storms, as these "appeals to ordinariness are often intertwined with quality TV," (Santo, *Not-TV* 38). If excellent TV and terrible TV act as two coordinates of discretion, however vapid, they are also usefully confused, overcome, and "transgressed" by people like me. While alongside its more critical highs and lows, there appears to be very little chatter around television's reproduction of the same old crap, as if its occurrence at an exponential rate made it invisible (And, yes, this includes TV proudly proclaiming *itself* a middle object).

According to networks like HBO and whatever On-demand devices exist, at stake in my watching is my choice, and not my ritualized gaze. This frees up my body from a certain staleness of habit and banality of watching. Or at least prepares my body to do as such. Whatever the actual case, which feels somehow both uniquely my private disciplining - from G-d's lips to only my ears - but happening everywhere all of the time, I am both comforted and encouraged by this new free zone, one no longer beholden to "those stuffy censorship and time limits." David Chase tells me that TV doesn't have to be a camera following a talking head as it walks down a hall to another talking head for seven-minutes at a time. And my parents and I think this is great! And so discretionary television, the Show-minus-the-ad, operates like some anxiety amalgam between "My Choice" and "TV's Potential" that TV and I *must* fail to live up to and *must* continue

⁷ See f.n. 8.

⁸ I am referring to Toby Miller's foreword "It's Television; It's HBO" to *It's Not TV*: "Q-Word—quality, or what Rupert Murdoch termed 'drama run by the costume department' in deriding class-laden notions of history on television (referring to Murdoch's "Freedom in Broadcasting" in this thesis' "Works Cited"). For more on the matter of producing a discourse of taste specific to HBO if we look at the history of the discourse of quality surrounding cable television in the United States, see Janet McCabe and Kim Akass's "It's Not TV; It's HBO: Producing Quality TV" (83).

failing.⁹ Yes, TV has developed a new intensity, as it is bifurcated by two occasions of access: television-as-my-very-special-choice and a camera on any subject that you can imagine. Post-TV is THE BEST and it is *the worst*. It's a twitter bomb going off against a constant Facebook whimper. It can be transference-inducingly critical and/or the same old shit with more frequent cutaways and shorter episodes. And most of the time, it is the latter. For our purposes, post-TV is "pressing": widely discussed and constantly enjoyed. It is not only a job that doesn't pay you, it's your duty *and* the best place to curl up and die that I can think of.

If I am positioning post-television as a fantasy of its own importance relative to contemporary organizations of enjoyment, thereby defining that TV which is pressing, I can draw the following delineations: 1) Today's post-television finds its critical "voice" as this brand intersects with new digital media and a palpable proliferation of content. For the meantime we can sum it up as follows: exceptional television is often a branding instance that emphasizes its status of access (demand, binge, stream, surf); 2) Television is bifurcated (as described above) and this branching permits a reproduction of enjoyment via pseudo-transgression. Television is always drawing lines and identifying "beyonds," in part because it is like anything on sale that has to keep inventing itself, but also, as we will see, this impulse creates and supports landscapes in which the stakes of enjoyment and discernment are high, depending largely on its proliferation within a narrow scope of critique; 3) Television is, in historical terms, a baby, which, again, makes its perpetual renewal even more ridiculous while highlighting television's general stance of obscenity – its peculiar nudity. Television is both pre- and post-shame. It behaves as if nobody is watching, and so do its fans, but against the demand that all is watched. Yet, even though I perceive my viewing to be viewed, the gaze is strangely elided. This matter of shame is taken up in chapter three; 4) In terms of technology and precisely what object we are talking about when we talk about television, it should also be noted that the rebirth of television happens at a time when the television-set supposedly lies down and dies before the expansion of its own technology and the

⁹ On-demand devices ensure more television content is viewed. And so the discourse around television (immensity, accumulation, transcendence) is matched by a game of *actual* quantity. Even if I watch 30% of ads at a normal speed accidentally, my consumption has multiplied to such an extent that I will get my fill nonetheless. Product placement, an irritation that seems nostalgically quaint, is everywhere, and is both cynically and straight-up encouraged by content branding (Lotz 138).

traversal of its content. If a fragile and “innocent” viewer desire can be fantasized, it is a pair of eyes longing to just rest on one screen – more exhausted than melancholic. The golden age of television is described during a time when TV-content does not discriminate, hopping from surface to surface and providing an unending fabric between any and all screens anywhere, at any time. In the post of television, eyes are always redirected and looking to retire.

Post- Television’s Fan

One of the objectives of this thesis is to sketch out a fan-subject by drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis and the experience of watching television today. I am suggesting that even the desire to hold television accountable is proof of this subject at work. Much of the work ahead demonstrates how these attempts implicate a kind of participation that projects its own imperative, its own enjoyment, onto a not-that-great object. The fan itself – associated with the overlap between cultural whim and obscene attachment – is also not the most flattering of subjects. Most of us don’t consider ourselves one, particularly among the *others*. When I think of a “fan,” I think of that girl I met in a Forest Hill Park wearing metal stilts to practice her digitigrade walk for comic-con while her parents thought she was at work. And when I think of comic-con, I just think of machines wearing machines built by and for machines. But the abject face of the fan is not really the whole story, is it? Not only is the difference between Metal Stilts Costume and I not that great, but fandom – already ill defined – extends to everyday behaviours relative to everyday commodities, describing a hostile but intense attachment and a kind of “fuck you” to the ordinary social. What does “the fan” specifically indicate that may be applied to more generalized stuff-loving? Can we talk about post-television without its pressed fans? To push even further, could a post-fan offer clues to a passage between imperative and *techne* or simply emphasize the bad-faith insistence that this passage is even psychically conceivable?

This section provides those initial terms as they inform an elaboration of fandom and post-television by defining three major Lacanian concepts as they have also been interpreted by Žižek, Chiesa, and Jacques-Alain Miller: the superegoic, the deadlocked, and the social link. Establishing these concepts from the outset will accomplish the following: 1) All three concepts provide the general context and illustrate features of the

enjoyment imperative (the “high stakes”) relative to that subject’s presumption of access; and 2) They will also prepare us for a more thorough discussion of the perverse and neurotic dimensions of the fan-subject as it relates to presumed access and the television-object.

The fabric of Television’s subjects

This section acts as an introduction to post-TV’s subjects (both its content and its fan) by means of key concepts: superegoic enjoyment, deadlocked desire, and their “social” pathologies as determined by Lacan and his readers. I will note from the outset that these concepts are best thought through initially as a constellation, despite whatever developmental narratives can be strung through Lacanian registers and various relations to the signifier. Much of this thesis’ analysis is the result of my reading Lacan’s *Seminars VII, XI, XVII, XX and XXIII* (with the exception of *XXIII*, these are Jacques-Alain Miller editions) and a handful of “post” Lacanian scholars, including Miller, Bruce Fink, Slavoj Žižek, Lorenzo Chiesa, Alenka Zupančič’s and Mari Ruti, and argues for a cultural diagnostics relative to how this shift redefines enjoyment for the subject. While I cannot represent the enormity of this task, that of Lacan’s and his readers, I do my best to provide initial clarification that effectively explains the subject’s dilemma of desire, as it will set us up to discuss particular logics of enjoyment and the experience of post-TV in the chapters ahead.

Let’s start with Lacanian enjoyment or *jouissance*.¹⁰ Lacan’s *Seminar VII* develops an ethics of desire (psychoanalysis) and conception of enjoyment according to the problematic of the real in relation to the symbolic. *Seminars X and XI* are organized, respectively, around the affect of anxiety and the objects of the drive, as problematics of desire situated against Lacan’s more assured notions of the real and the function of fantasy and an Other that does not exist. The world of “desire” which operates between

¹⁰ The libidinal substance “jouissance” originates in Freudian conceptions of the death drive. Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents* and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle (BTTP)* examine how the civilizing dynamism between the pleasure and reality principles cannot account for the repetition of painful and destructive acts (26, 79). *BTTP* repeatedly admits the activity of irrational pain and excitation and the role of “return” in relation to its articulation. Following suit, and comprising a career-long consideration, Lacan’s concept of *jouissance*, “enjoyment,” is defined as the co-existence of pleasure and pain. Freud’s *BTTP* theorized the dialectic of the repetition-compulsion as what happens between loss, mastery-as-compensation and an “additional” loss as enjoyment. Lacan’s theory of *jouissance*’s “negativity” accounts for the body of this loss, the remainder.

“not enough” and “more than” will constitute what Lacan’s *Seminar XX* deems as a “phallic” system of fantasy. In turn, those seminars following *Seminar XX* revise the real as symptom (*objet a*) according to an Other enjoyment that also does not exist (but in this concretized negative). *Jouissance* is thus reworked throughout Lacan’s career, from a kind of mythical “beyond” against which the subject desires, to the only *jouissance* the subject can apprehend in the form of the *objet a* and/or that point of lack (the symptom as *sinthome*) at which the subject can self-situate if he traverses his “fantasy.”¹¹

But suppose enjoyment were not the territory of the symbolic in the technical sense – that is, the *jouissance* located in the “imaginary” to which the title of this thesis alludes– that which does not desire. Enjoyment logically “prior” to desire implicates the maternal or a direct link between law and the drive that, too, overlaps with an obscene (m)other that is not technically Other. The superegoic conditions in which a subject establishes his or her desire imply a tight space in which a constant and unmediated enjoyment is fostered, so that the source of my enjoyment is located at the same site as the psychological agency supervising the whole affair. That is to say, my guilt and my drive are so mutually embedded, I can barely ascertain an object without implicating how terrible I am – as if this too were simply grist for the same mill. Consequently, enjoyment-as-duty sharpens “habit” over practice, which informs the nuance of my consumption and critique. In other words, the direct access to the other of the Law comes at the price of the potential intricacy and the dynamism of my relationship to the symbolic order: “[The] super-ego removes an ego-Ideal [...]. The symbolic order is left in its place [while the] ego-Ideal [is] no longer there to pacify it” (Sharpe 67).

This “tight space” directly implicates superego activity, which is associated with an absence or deformation of the ego-ideal, that point of introjection that allows the subject to emerge as that which is seen: “The deficient paternal ego-ideal makes the law “regress” toward a ferocious maternal superego” (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 100). And so superego intensity is linked to a deficient paternal variable, which we will explore later.

¹¹ The fundamental fantasy is considered the retroactive material of analysis. Whether worthy of desire (neurosis), or the fixation on its terms (perversion), the subject’s fantasy, for our purposes, is an organization of the subject’s desire, his or her mode of enjoyment. Loosely speaking, this organization is constituted by a relation to a big other and can be named along a spectrum of psychotic-perverse-neurotic pathologies.

For now, we can describe this coordinate as that space that fosters the negotiation of “the rules” of no (the “names” of the father, the symbolic order), which, developmentally speaking, can be located where the nascent subject asserts itself in the second phase of alienation-separation. The paternal name and the no emerge to “name” mom’s desire while inciting the subject to get anxious about his own desire.¹² Failed maternal prohibition enables a “maternal superego” as the site of that gaze which is focused squarely on you as an object of satisfaction.¹³

As an isolated agency, the superego does not always explicitly mark a particular subject ensconced in enjoyment, but perhaps reveals what is at stake: the anxiety-provoking dyad that begs for some kind of intervention or naming of desire that, in turn, incites the subject’s own desire. The experience of any number of neurotics, psychotics, and perverts could apply here, but I am particularly interested in those for whom dyadic demand and access is at stake. For example, the pervert who presumes an unproblematic access to the other is in cahoots with a (m)other who demands he sacrifice himself to her enjoyment; thus, the pervert faces off against a kind of superegoic figure who insists on the perverts misrecognition of himself as the object that would satisfy her demand, both the pervert’s fantasy of eternal sacrifice and the simultaneous temptation of leaving herself open to a paternal intervention that can never really happen. Perversity, then, is both “a feature of” and “defense against” a kind of mother who demands, or, instead, a dyadic agent of demand that is also the only site of absorption and interpretation of this intensity (suggesting an impossible psychosis). Perversion, like neurosis, is a means of negotiating the difficulties of desire, but unlike neurosis, perversion has not processed the terms of desire. We will explore the nuances of these subjects ahead,¹⁴ but for now I want

¹² The maternal is the material that is blocked off as *das ding* and corresponds to the subject’s anxious point of origin.

¹³ This is also the same maternal demand that plagues the anxious subject that lacks the psychic space to self-establish. As cited above, Žižek’s early work locates the superego at the maternal in addition to an analogous obscene, “anal “father (101): “The father is absent, the paternal function (the union of pacifying law, the Name-of-the-Father) is suspended and that vacuum is filled by the “irrational” maternal superego, arbitrary, wicked, blocking “normal” sexual relationship (only possible under the sign of the paternal metaphor)” (99).

¹⁴ The possible subjects and their many expressions worked out by Lacan over several decades cannot be fully explored here. But for now, we can note that the imaginary of the subject depends on where the subject can be located along that spectrum, one which implicates his or her alienation in language, the

to diagnose a more general condition of desire, which is correlative to the superegoically inflected, that which is “deadlocked” as it produces a discourse that is “antisocial.” And finally introduce how these features affect our consumption, critical and/or otherwise.

“Deadlocked”

As a viewer, I am a modern agent always learning how to funnel any number of social and creative efforts into a machine with a very narrow hole and its bottom-line (cash, narcissism). I may even revere its reproduction mechanism, its endless survival, as a kind of caring, as “fandom” or true engagement, or more resentfully and grotesquely, as a kind of sacred finitude, as an index of my humble peasantry. At its nadir, my freedom to engage is strapped to a semi-demented narcissism, as the uniqueness of my symptom owes its sustenance to the *privacy* of my epiphany and subsequent erasure – my very special fetish object and its depressing universal. In my more flattering moments (and don’t I know it) of critically accounting for terrible behaviour that I have no plans on changing, I look for the good here. And I look! I look everywhere! *I look constantly.* LOOK.

Thus the intensity and recursion of enjoyment’s mania, and the problem of desire therein, speak to the unforgiving terms of an enjoyment that is “superegoic,” but also reflects the crass defense against a crass dialectic (desire/law) that fails to manifest an escape from what is defined as “deadlocked.” If desire is a problem of the real and the real is, as they say, a “thing” because it is prohibited (indicating the necessity for the mediating and negotiating powers of an ego-ideal) then the terms of subjectivization are transgression-based, and desire and law present themselves as deadlocked. According to Lorenzo Chiesa’s *Subjectivity and Otherness*, Lacan’s *Seminar VII* is Lacan’s not entirely successful attempt at working-through a problem of prohibition relative to the drive:

[Lacan] is forced to lay his cards on the table – that is, to admit that his (inconsistent) postulation of a mythical pre-symbolic or post-symbolic

strength of the paternal non/nom (name) and the problem of sexual difference. For our purposes, which are informed by Žižekian cultural diagnostics, we pay attention to patterns of investments, modes of enjoyments, machines of neurotic and perverse fantasy, and their critical mobility.

totality, the “primordial real necessarily entails as its correlative the massive jouissance of the One. (190)

By Chiesa’s reading, Lacan isn’t quite “over” a thing-ified *jouissance* and its short satisfaction, no matter how opposed *Seminar VII* is to the Kantian and Sadean attempts to overshoot the problems posed by the primordial real (179). The subsequent delimitations of desire consistently posit a “beyond” that must be either accessed or overshoot. Even if one opposes this entire set-up, the same “explosive” figuring of the real occurs in the gesture of opposition (Chiesa 165). Thus Chiesa asserts that Lacan’s ambivalence regarding where to situate a “pure desire” that opposes superegoic terms can actually be explained by Lacan’s insistence on a) a primordial real that b) implicates a kind of “pay-off” of a “massive enjoyment” and a “short-satisfaction” (154).

My references ahead to a crude access allude to Chiesa’s use of the terms, “massive enjoyment” and “short satisfaction,” as they reflect and reproduce deadlocked desire, such that subjectivity (locating desire) sets itself up to anticipate a site of charged identification.¹⁵ This identification amounts to a sort of homecoming for subjectivity and an imaginary access point that implies that enjoyment is real. Thus if we consider “massive” enjoyment and “short” satisfaction as those primary features of the subject whose figuration of a primordial real is incriminated by a deadlock, then locating her desire is secondary to the demands of and, recursively related to, defenses against enjoyment. As we will see, this is a subject that is primarily “superegoic” and/or perverse, guilty of a kind of overshooting.¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, the face-off against and for

¹⁵ Chiesa’s discussion of the superego is also an attempt to extract desire from the deadlock – what “pure desire” might be. You are obviously punished for acting out against it, for breaking the law. You are also punished for any investment at any point in this process: “whoever enters the path of uninhibited jouissance in the name of the rejection of the moral law ... encounters insurmountable laws” (Chiesa 184, fn. 205). But your obedience is also punished, in that you have ceded your desire – a desire that can only be pursued outside this particular dialectic. In other words, the conflation of No and the drive set the terms for desire, and desire is condemned to resist these very terms. The question is how we distinguish between superegoic transgression and the transgression of the superegoic terms themselves.

¹⁶ These gestures of overshooting (real-ization) are mined from Chiesa examination of *Seminar VII*’s consideration of Kant’s categorical imperative and de Sade’s sublimely enduring body as a “self-saturation” of the symbolic, which are perverse responses (anti-ethics) and real attempts at overshooting a deadlock that they ultimately reaffirm (167). This real-ization of the symbolic closes down a space of negotiation (or a Kantian “sentiment”) (176). Opposed to this real-ization, we encounter the figure of Antigone, who makes “appear” a “real-of-the-symbolic”, a point at which the collapse of psychical agents, points, registers and operations is prevented by her achieving an irreducible object that refuses the universal law (Creon, Kant)

the real is profoundly hostile to *coexisting* instances of subjects getting weird about their beyonds.

The Social Link

One of the peculiarities of the post-TV experience is that almost all of it “happens” all of the time everywhere, to a diffuse nobody read against the very pressing event of my singular viewing. Network oriented watching, however, was a series of shared “appointments” between slow moving targets. And some of this watching was definitely culty, weirder. I remember re-enacting *Twin Peaks* in a schoolyard, and I, at least, *know* about *Star Trek* and the *SNL* skit that parodied its fans. But if we follow Lotz’s periodization, we can speculate that network television had a cozier relation between the social and the private in that private watching was palpably illusory and the fact of the illusion paints a less anxious picture. And the “transition” period of television temporarily alienated my viewing to my person, which means there was a brief era where I owned the DVD collection. You could see it on my wall.¹⁷ My access and my choice somehow stopped short of overriding *me* or so the nostalgia goes. So I will always remember 2004 fondly: if I was binge watching *The Wire* on DVD, it was because I was going to Blockbuster a few times a week and calling in advance, so that I knew *who* had how-many copies before *I* had them. Only as new technologies and platforms began to match my demand, like PVR and more intensive time-shifting, do I note the split between my liking and my viewing, the peculiar habits of watching, the way it demands apart from my “taste.” Thus TV’s transition out of the network era is a nostalgic period that I will and do remember for the ways in which the process of alienated consumption gloriously coincided with the curtailment of my viewing to my perceived discernment, and a sense that there were others that concretely shared my tastes.¹⁸

but which also can’t subsume her refusal (187). Standing in as “pure desire” that “is no longer the ultimate beyond” (190), Antigone is an instance of desire that is “on its way” to a beyond but is a “static,” inanimate, and impossible instance of beauty.

¹⁷ See Lotz on DVD ownership and the effects of shifting distribution (141).

¹⁸ The end of TV’s transitional era seemed to shape a discourse of television as it could be practiced and reproduced online by television’s new fan (and this content could be read by other fans – fans of fandom, you could say). There were, as you would expect, forums for discussion, but also notably the rise of the internet recap, in which a struggling comedian/ practicing lawyer retells an episode.

Arguably, post-network television paints a particular picture of “others.” My current watching is an experience of a more anxious private and an ill-defined social, in that the social occasion of a Very Pressing show is only marked by imperative and its trending on social media, the eternal presence of which is both loose and intense, both universal and exceptional. I am watching alone and with all; I am always watching; I am never watching. To a degree, loving television is a hostile experience, so that if a discourse emerges, it’s because it’s fucking lonely here, and I’m speaking so I don’t die. But if not to survive, to insist on a gaze, then to what other does my fandom speak? Why do I lazily assume my private consumption is a social affair, when I clearly have so little investment in the social? Do I mistake this imperative for a social link? *Even though I enjoy alone with my self, “alienated,” in private, I am always exposing myself.* Within a discussion of superegoic imperatives to love and speak about our loving, we are “expressing” a kind of social or lack thereof.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the “social” refers to a kind of attachment bond established maternally, or the transference between analyst and analysand, those ways of relating to an Other onto whom I trust I can project all of my nonsense. Transference, specifically Lacanian, indicates symbolic activity with all of its civilizing and neurotic building and destroying. There is no imaginary transference per se, as transference – “the social” - is not dyadic. And if there is a social, it is because desire is at work, however clunkily, so that all social links are of the symbolic order.¹⁹ Those examples of “not desiring” implicate a pre-symbolic and also a kind of pre or failed transference. We will explore this more ahead in chapter two. For now, I am introducing the social link in part because pathologies of desire, whether they are hard disavowals or are favourite hysterias, as they manifest in any social network (which is where TV lives now) implicate an investment in types of others/Others that not only elaborates these

¹⁹ However, we can consider an imaginary based attachment – in a manner of Julia Kristeva’s reading of Freud (*Tales of Love*, the introduction and first chapter of which will be considered ahead) – should we understand that the Other’s intervention (the triangulation of the social) is dependent on a complex dyadism established “beforehand.” The point to take away is that the social link is erotic and, for the most part, neurotic in its symbolic manifestation. An absence of, or problem within, a social link suggests, perhaps, non-neurotic activity – those in which we are “stuck in the imaginary.”

subjects as symbolic discourses (as in Lacan's *Seminar XVII*) but also articulates degrees of "belief" in these networks.

A "genuine" social proclivity, according to Lacan, is that subject who addresses an Other.²⁰ So to fan-wank is to "do" which discourse? For Lacan, the social link is comprised of a finite number of discourses that assume an Other; so that if I don't, I don't "speak" in a technical sense. Thus the remainder of this thesis partakes in and explores this terrain of "not-speaking" while loving an object (television) that is famous for disciplining a kind of social. If I partake in a fandom that is marked more particularly by an imperative (those supergoic constraints on desire and their hostile defenses) and the deadlocked condition of desire (that which contributes to my perversions and limited hysteria, as we will see ahead), to what kind of other do I address this? The terrain of these questions is more excitable than it is ambitious. While alongside imperative, the same terrain is marked by a desire not only to love bad shit better, but also to hold on to the hope of locating desire at all, which is ultimately a social affair, right? For I am insistent! *I have to be honest. I'm not going to lie because at the end of the day, it is what it is, we all have to step up because THIS IS A THING.*

A note on *My* fandom

To a degree, post-TV is the insistent voice of like-ing TV content. That much is clear from reading the internet forums: the weird self-importance regarding a medium that, historically, is known for its banality; the massive applause for delivering above-terrible writing; the bizarre coming together of an episode's absolute spirit after the addictive thrashing of viewer histrionics. And while this thesis is concerned with the libidinal investment in liking television, it is also guilty of discretion relative to culture-objects I simply deem worth talking about: in my TV-loving I "have to say" what "I feel" about "X show," which in part I believe with the same compulsion I would assume with anything I think is worth loving. But mostly, I really, really enjoy *telling* you this, which, at best, is my symptom partially freed from the vortex I cultivate between my retina and the screen,

²⁰ Simply put, you don't watch and thus speak alone, and if you behave otherwise, you aren't speaking: "Speech is addressed to another place in the direction of which it is delivered. Discourse as a signifying articulation establishes the social link that proceeds from the place of speech as performance, to the place of speech as destination, to speak to another is to act upon him" (Wacjman par. 10).

such that my “fandom” is repeated and alleviated via signification - what we can call a *techne* of fandom that is both discursive and affective. The following consideration of television and its relevance to fan-love is partly ficto-critical, because, for better or worse, my fandom insists on itself and is developed partly around the alienating object that is the Very Pressing instance of my Voice, as it intersects with feeling stupid about that voice. The logic of this enjoyment is compelled to ratchet up the stakes – that is to say, it is driven by the superegoic conditions that inform “massive” and “short” figurations of the real as they reproduce and renew pathological defenses. Despite my efforts to give this fandom a language, appropriating its voice for academic use is as much a “symptom,” and thus ultimately more demonstrative than it is instructive.²¹

Protocol

Ahead I will consider different dimensions of television-loving as they are a negotiation of neurotic and perverse defenses against a superegoic enjoyment of the medium that undermines your desire. In part, this thesis is an attempt to measure the recent high stakes attributed to television by television and why it feels like my job to care. The first chapter situates television according to the critical allowance afforded to the fan-subject by superegoic enjoyment, its pathologies, and its relevance to a “neo-liberal” negotiation of permission and its attendant cynicism. Without considering the specifics of the television object as it is regarded today, establishing a general scene of popular critique, what can we say first about its inevitable reception and reproduction? What “opinions” are generated and encouraged in space that is at once proliferated and narrow? Chapter two looks at two of “the best” shows, as they infamously kick-off current television’s self-proclaimed emergence as a critical messiah (*The Sopranos* and *Mad Men*). In part, both shows read as an attempt to “contain” the perversity of their own reception, thus taking up the problem of desire with particular emphasis on fantasy as time spent or an object of duration – that is, can I enjoy forever? The third chapter

²¹I do not make a clean separation between my regard for television and my reading of television recaps and TV blogs, those items that make up a giant portion of post-TV discourse and distribution. In my own enjoyment as a “poster,” as it appears in this thesis, I note the influences on my critique and the ways in which my rhetoric accommodates both hyperbole and “comedy” insofar as they can “talk back” to the media to which they partially owe their vitality (and my exhaustion).

examines the disavowed “bulk” object of current TV, the heaviness that TV’s new world forgets as this object coincides with the complexities and stupidities of the mass-cult object. Thus the discussion of TV’s different “brows” is read as a staged thing happening “within” an intractably middle object, suggesting that TV’s middle is one of its critical attributes, insofar as we challenge its disavowal. Chapter four, also this thesis’ conclusion, looks at some of television’s designated trash-heap in the language it demands while considering the theoretical implications for fan-love’s “short distances,” beyond reinforcing the explosiveness of massive and short ruts presented by superegoic enjoyment and perverse defenses. Is there any identifiable passage between imperative and establishing a *sinthome*, like I so clearly hope, or in order to locate the latter do we have to confront the former? Is this even allowed?

Chapter 1

Big Picture for TV-Loving: Egos, Opining, and Other Pop Musts

If *Watch What Happens Live* is a real thing and somebody is dutifully writing AMC fan-fiction, it is probably safe to say that being a participant of the Great Television Renaissance of 2000 and Forever may be critical, but it is also gross. And, no matter the content or the screen, my favourite television is all over this requisite perversion. This chapter looks at the parameters of critique relative to the rules of fandom as imperative. We will look at post-TV hyperbole as a critical affect determined by the terms of perversion with the intention of establishing a more *generalized* landscape of loving popular objects. Thus I will outline the critical limits of perversion and the consequence for typically “neurotic” critical gestures as they are relevant to the current fever of our pop-scene. If our landscape of superego enjoyment and neo-liberal “bullshit” permits all so that nothing is “permitted any longer,”²² what is allowed versus what is proliferated? What is the pathological landscape for masscult critique? And how is it relative to my quality of fantasy-production (imaginary), as it accommodates a fantasy of permission and access within a politico-economic climate of instability?

Obscenity, “guilty-pleasures,” and hard stupidities accompany the conventional melancholic and the neurotic gestures of disrupting the other -- gestures that are not, and never were, simply the pristine territory of the right kind of hysteric or the obsessional philosopher of a Germanic yesteryear. So as a viewer who cares about the status of her belief but also *believes*, I am always fighting with and for the “short circuit” I revere as a total pervert: 1) I have a weakness for “you and me,” insofar as there is no cost to my access to the other; 2) There is a short and “well-trodden” distance between my “subjectivity” and its enjoyment, as if the rules did not apply (Lacan, *VII*, 177). And if they do apply, can they hurry up and assert themselves and put an end my suffering?! 3) But not entirely because I can keep this shit up forever, while the rest of you burn in the hellfire of the enjoyment I believe is a real thing; 4) My perversion is a response to the

²² “If God doesn’t exist, the father says, then everything is permitted. Quite evidently, a naïve notion, for we analysts know full well that if God doesn’t exist, then nothing at all is permitted any longer. Neurotics prove that to us every day” (Lacan *Seminar II* 128).

narrow and proliferated space of superegoically-determined critique, which I ultimately reproduce; 5) There is some part of me that believes I can oppose all of this by simply outlasting myself, like a sublime Sadean lady-body.

Pervert: massively short ruts and other status quos

Perversion, at its most fundamental, resides in the formal structure of how the pervert relates to truth and speech. The pervert claims direct access to some figure of the big Other (from God or history to the desire of his partner), so that, dispelling all ambiguity of language, he is able to act directly as the instrument of the big Other's will. (Žižek *How to Read Lacan* 116)

This section acknowledges a distinction between perversion as an organization of enjoyment and desire's perversion – its deviation from the object (aim-oriented).²³ We are simply revisiting perverse subjectivity and other imperatives relative to what Chiesa deems false figurations of enjoyment (massive *jouissance* and short satisfaction) with the intent to examine the current landscape of urgent and terrible things. Technically, running below the Lacanian gamut of subjects is the problematic presence of big Otherness – that Other against which I organize by dividing it into a maternal-Other I access while tempting an annihilative Other to end my suffering. Lacan's interpretation of Freudian perversion argues that the child who refuses the unsettling world of desire – that is, the “intrusion” of the phallus and thus the trauma of the “third,” which thereby steals the maternal gaze – is a subject that remains fixated on sustaining the maternal gaze, of asserting a maternal phallus (a “penis”), and *ultimately assumes a direct line to her that he is constantly tempting, daring another Other to intervene*. Unlike those neurotic pathologies that are repression-based, in which the subject does not know and was hoping you would know, the perverse subject knows, such that the split at stake is technically conscious. Thus, in the Freudian example, the boy who regards the vagina as only a penis that lacks is also the boy who knows that this is not so, and thus he “knows” of a phallic structuration, but fixates on a penis as fetish object. Perversion relies on a mechanism that is termed “disavowal.” The significant split then, the fundamental

²³ See the introduction of James Penney's *The World of Perversion: Psychoanalysis and the Impossible Absolute of Desire* for an elaboration of this distinction.

disavowal, is between the pervert's stance toward the structure of desire (the law) and his insistence on the law's return. Oedipally speaking, the pervert engages mom in order to indefinitely pit those intervening little daddies, whose failure can only enforce the whole predicament, against the fantasized big daddy who can, theoretically, bring the whole house down. Perversion offers weirdly high stakes for a subject not in the desire-game.

As in criteria (2) and (3) mentioned above, the perverse subject is between a thing he knows and a thing he insists on, between the terms and the private object that resists the full absorption of those terms. And while the perverse split encompasses a simultaneous knowing of the terms of desire and another, more preferred scenario, there exists a split between this whole system of enjoyment and ending the suffering it produces (which is obviously not distinct from the first split), such that each gesture that maintains my enjoyment is also supposed to destroy it. In other words, perversion is a paradox, occupying a space between insisting upon maternal enjoyment at the pervert's expense, and the law that would put an end to it.²⁴ This means that my "access" is relative to several figurations of explosive "beyonds" which will reproduce these terms. If (2) and (3) are the co-existing dissonance required for this condition, it is because my dyadic access of the (m)other tempts overlapping functions: intervention, annihilation, and inanimacy.

If we simply isolate the real-ization of the symbolic, its self-saturation, as a pathological (defensive) response to an assumed primordial real, how is the pervert precisely implicated?²⁵ And why does this perpetuate what I will call "the narrow space of more"? The above criteria for superegoically determined enjoyment refers largely to a perverse subject who generates a logic of "excess" and "access," a kind of proliferation (demand, imperative, enjoyment) and a narrowing of desire's range (reactivity, imaginary others, and the split other of temptation and intervention that suggests a primordial real at

²⁴ "While the pervert seems to be able to obtain a kind of 'primal satisfaction' – transcending his own subjective division as a subject of language (who, like the rest of us speaking beings, is not supposed to be able to obtain more than a mere pittance of *jouissance*; as Lacan tells us, 'Jouissance is prohibited to whoever speaks' (*Écrits*, 821/319), and finding a kind of wholeness or completeness neurotics can only dream of [...] anxiety, in fact, dominates the pervert's sexuality. The pervert's conscious fantasy involve a kind of unending *jouissance*, but we must not confuse conscious fantasies with concrete activity, and the latter is designed to put limits on the former" (Bruce Fink, *Clinical Introduction to Lacan* 180).

²⁵ Please see Stephanie Swales *Perversion: A Lacanian Psychoanalytic Approach to the Subject* for a thorough theoretical and clinically applied consideration of Lacanian perversion.

work). As someone of perverse inclinations, I assume a sort of proximity minus the anxiety of castration or the potentially dignifying (properly shaming) effects of the gaze. I assume total access to belief without the risk:

The recent tide of religious fundamentalism in the US - around half of US adults have beliefs that can be considered 'fundamentalist' - is sustained by the predominance of a perverse libidinal economy. A fundamentalist does not believe, he knows it directly. Both liberal-skeptical cynics and fundamentalists share a basic underlying feature: the loss of the ability to believe, in the proper sense of the term. What is unthinkable for them is the groundless decision that installs all authentic beliefs, a decision that cannot be based on a chain of reasoning, on positive knowledge. (Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* 116)

Again, Chiesa links massive enjoyment as the location of desire to my mistaken assumption that the real is One, which we can link more explicitly to superegoic subjects and perverse effects/affects. That is, I am responding to the desire/law deadlock that effects a link between primordial real and a massive *jouissance*. The result is a generalized perversion as this deadlock functions in lieu of a kind of pre-oedipal establishing of ego-ideals (or symbolic mobility), in addition to necessarily locating desire (my *sinthome*) against the demands of a punishing superego. There are many ways to respond to this culture of demand and anxiety: a) I ratchet up the stakes by insisting on the obscenity inherent to the law/desire dialectic, in which transgression is reabsorbed, perhaps to ultimately refuse anxiety as it relates to castration (ego-ideal); b) I choose perversion specifically because its high stakes "match up" with the massive enjoyment in which I ultimately invest myself. Hell-fires are thus all over my perverse refusals: I attempt to incite desire by assuming access to the other, which indicates a "wish" that a kind of real father will change the terms. This is a "beyond" correlative to the maternal "beyond" to which I am all too near. I am always pushing against this "real" intervention. This "moment" is my investment in a kind of annihilation. It's suicidal but only insofar as it reinforces the status quo. My "beyond" is a pseudo-transgression that can be absorbed by the whole set-up. So as a pervert, I am taking up these delimited spaces of

impossibility in order to reproduce them. I struggle against but always for. And, thus, I real-ize the symbolic by assuming a short distance between the other and myself and between the symbolic and its beyond, thereby acting out the desire/law deadlock. My postures of choice are “certainty” and “overshooting,” thus adding another frontier through transgression, and behaving as though this can go on forever (sublime body of endurance), in order to out-enjoy the superego imperative as the event of my desire. It’s really just *Survivor* across the board.

In a more general sense, the pervert, fixated on the space between terms of desire and undermining their effect is never “in” desire, and thus undermines the labour of speech as a social link. The enjoyment of the cynic, then – he who both believes “x” and knows “y” - is dislocated from any metonymic activity between signifiers falling outside of the subjugation to language. This occurs because subjective alienation requires an Other, a paternal name or interdiction (*nom/non*). It might be the big Other that the neurotic resents, but it is that Other the neurotic cannot confirm and remains a problem for desire and thus its underpinning. The pervert, however, opts out of discourse and thus desire, refusing the paradox of social dependency and the fabric of the symbolic. So, for example, if we define the neurotic-as-hysteric as that subject invested in failed discourse as a partial means of generating discourse, the pervert is invested in serially-failed others so that we may never speak. Thus if the hysteric cannot be spoken about (but we cannot stop speaking around her), the pervert shuts down discourse production, as his enjoyment is bound up not in signification but its terms. Thus the pervert’s antisocial effects cut much deeper. If the hysteric speeds through interpellations, signifiers, the pervert is positioned to stop this movement without accounting for the movement or the stopping. Stopping-as-erasure is the indirect fantasy of perversion – that he/she will truly undercut the activity of fantasy in one final stroke. If the hysteric might eventually know her desire, and enjoys based on this *nevergonnahappen*, the pervert enjoys the terms of desire but his enjoyment is elsewhere, its terms disavowed, its concrete reality *enforced*.

The Narrow Space of More

The narrow space of consumption and critique, also that narrow space between pre-subject and (m)other, and that disavowal between two active points that occur

simultaneously (my “knowing” and my doing – my “access”), occurs in the context of a, generally speaking, “neo-liberal” economy of sprawl and atomism, in which the value of labour and objects, relegated to the private sector, is definitively unstable. David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neo-Liberalism* defines “individual liberty and freedom” as protected by a structure that, by decision, legislates “strong private property rights, free markets and free trade” in order to “restore high rate of profit and the power of a ruling class” (56). Thus a dynamism and presumed agency is generated along with its feverish discourses of exaggerated individuality and possibility. Ideologies of meritocracy are warped to accommodate a belief in totally accessible material wealth insofar as that dynamism relies entirely on a totally unstable economy that only protects its abstraction. This thesis cannot deal with the politico-economic scope of a culture of instability and sprawl, but we can isolate the relevant postures, affect and psychological “movements” that support the logic of access, excess and sameness, a logic that also presumes the impossibility of exhaustion while invested in the ultimate exhaustion, the economy of cynicism.

My perversion, which assumes access as it intersects with annihilation – functions accordingly in this “economy,” in which my insistence on my own freedom is always a “knowing” otherwise and an appeal to an intervention that is split between the serially impotent and the deeply annihilative: as far as my investment is concerned, the problem of the invisible hand’s “regulation” is a joke and as far as the costs are concerned, what do I care since I can do this forever? And so I am most likely a volatile subject that when unchecked, proliferates a narrow range of “opinion” at an alarmingly high rate. As it turns out, my favourite media platforms accommodate and reproduce “positions” of critique and consumption that use feverish words and “did you knows” and refers to urgent freedoms I don’t really believe unless I have finally become the psychotic golden loon at the end of this test-pattern rainbow.

Culture produces and reproduces fantasies (and fantasy loving) that support my access, even if those fantasies are “critical” of the last fantasy’s effects. Žižek provides a bounty of material on this love, interpellation and “belief.” Although throughout Žižek’s work, belief is located and relocated, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* locates belief in accordance with a definition of ideology and interpellation in a

secular/enlightened/pragmatist context, and thus in the pervert's practice, which also formulates the *cynical* structure according to a divide which separates everything I do from what I ultimately know. If the pervert inhabits a minimal difference between law and drive, and all of its edifying demonstrations of enjoyment relative to prohibition, the cynic, as typically practiced, incites enforcement, which is also why ideology finds a useful definition here.

And it is in this split between doing and knowing where Žižek identifies the cynical sub-type of perversion in the everyman, the mass-cult-y cynic who couldn't possibly know "better" as far as being an intellectual exception is concerned. Nope, these are your unnerving brass-tacks types. These cynics want their enjoyment served straight up because what else is there, right? Don't be fooled by the class thing. We are all touched. If perversion pits mom's demand against dad's serial failure, *but* ultimately in order to threaten a "more profound" or massive event, the reason is that the pervert is staging an enjoyment context that by definition ends in some kind of infinity holocaust. The cynic is guilty of the same nonsense. Again, access and excess are key elements, as ideologies of transparency and transparency as ideology (cynicism) function as an organization of perverse speech and object relations, just as my assumption of direct access organizes and depends upon my actual investment in destruction.

How is cynicism linked back to a belief in a primordial real counted as one? Like the more general category of perversion, the cynic real-izes by assuming a psychotic presence, even if he only partly believes in this access, which is perhaps a nihilistic response to an overwhelming landscape that the cynical subject cannot tolerate, insofar as this anxiety might provoke actual desire, etc. But the cynic is as Sadean and as he is Kantian: while I disavow the idiocy to the presumption that everything is free if I just snatch it up, my more significant "neglect" is that having offered up my own dumb-ass speech occasion as an instance of access, I am behaving in four ways: 1) There is no cost. I can be an instrument indefinitely; 2) I am naked and nobody is watching (shameless); 3) Anxiety can be side-stepped; and 4) my own "split" means that I reinforce the terms of speaking against a simultaneous backdrop of apocalypse that is only and always about me. I defend against the obscenity of desire by out-accessing and out-enjoying its most fundamental, and non-obscene, terms.

Imagining a weak critical imaginary and its blunt pre-subjects

Certainly, my critical in/capacity draws largely on how my loving is both instrumental and instrumentalized. Fevered egos and “opinions” protect regressive polarized positions and ensure the prolonging of their “conversation” – so long as the pleasure is minimal-to-none and the enjoyment *extreme*. And so my critical imaginary is weak, stressed by an enjoyment that encourages the repetition of an imaginary-based ego-relation. To elaborate further on a weakened critical register – that which “discerns” and hierarchizes -- I will emphasize two fantasy-lands: Julia Kristeva’s objectification of (or imagined) the imaginary in *Tales of Love*, which locates similar activities and hones in on a broken primary-narcissism as the locus of pathology; Jacques Lacan’s imaginary relations in the context of stressed enjoyment and tired critical gazes.

Kristeva deems the Freudian “space” of narcissism as the orally-inflected “impossible spaces of ‘lovehate’ ” threatening “infinite transference,” the “hypnotic” object-relation where “having amounts to being” (*TOL* 22- 25). Thus we can define the imaginary (object othering relative to symbolic capacity) according to Julia Kristeva’s reading of the register, which is identified as, in fact, that “psychic space” in which I can cultivate my fantasy, the nuance of which largely depends on its pre-objectal dynamism. We will consider this critical “activity” ahead, but for now, it is enough to identify this space as that which reflects and determines a subject’s symbolic mobility. Part of Kristeva’s unique and difficult system (a response somewhat in conversation with Lacan) is her emphasis on “*signifiance*,” which is correlative to a pre-verbal pre-subject that implicates the maternal body/subject. *Signifiance* is the activity of “meaning-making” according to a conditional “movement” or gesture – a formation and deformation – that can be identified in the murky territory of the subject that is coming-to-be. *Signifiance*, while not a verb specific to a subject’s act, is still indicative of a “working” imaginary (or for Lacan, a desire in motion relative to a fundamental fantasy) (*TOL* 23-56). It is what is compromised and encouraged in these early stages of development, as well as the fantasy-finesse of the subject-to-be. In fact we can link *signifiance* to the activity of ego-ideal building (although the specifics are tricky) insofar as this psychic coordinate is able to identify new S¹s (master signifiers), or in Kristeva’s case, prepare the subject to do so.

Signifiance matters to us insofar as we can imagine a weak critical register through a kind of imagining of the imaginary, as it were. The Kristevan imaginary, developmentally speaking, in correspondence with Lacan's mirror stage, is a feverish period of activity that psychoanalysis generally associates with very early childhood, and what I consider to be my more piss-poor critical instincts: push-pull, love-hate, bad-good, accept-refuse, absorb-abstract, etc. More specific to Kristeva than Lacan, these movements are indicative of a kind of mechanism necessary for the nascent subject to negotiate the earliest instances of otherness. For Kristeva, then, there must be a therapeutic apprehension and cultivation of those pre-objectal reflexes that takes place in primary narcissism in order to ensure the efficacy of the subject's fantasy. In this way, Kristeva is more concerned with what "contains" the subjectivizing instant than she is with what incites it. This means that love-hate, push-pull, and bad-good, etc. are also the symptoms of a bad narcissism. Thus the Lacanian subject who is "stuck in the imaginary" and the Kristevan subject with a poorly cultivated imaginary both have a similar "borderline" affect – that which "splits." In both of these examples, the subject's world is narcissistically bifurcated and the response to a perceived other/object is immediate and reactive as a) there can be no relationship to the other/one's object and/or b) there is no access to whatever psychical "material" is necessary to make and sustain those relationships. It's what everyday lunatics call "a lack of coping skills" or "under-socialized" or "personality disordered." It's the casting call for *Bachelor In Paradise* or why people on Facebook think they give a fuck about lions and vocal fry.

While the bifurcation of narcissism made of a single neglected gesture or failure to bear the father's *non/nom*, far exceed this thesis, they are useful to situate the "critical imaginary" available to a "pre" subject, even we simply take this to mean that subject that has no symbolic access or social link worth speaking of. If I locate critique psychoanalytically, I am still referring to a mechanism that can apprehend an object without completely annihilating the very gesture – although even this cannot be said and so I will abstain from even defining critique. What can be said is that a "pre-subject," particularly of the narcissistic variety, is likely a subject that will over-read his object, will feel it reads him, but only to the point that he must simply self-exaggerate; it is a case of feast or famine, to kill or be killed. Every "soon" will seem like now and every

silhouette will seem like a flat-out denial. And so, in one way or the other that subject will insist on her ego and insist on the immensity of it all while having limited material with which to articulate this. Even if she looks around her “psychic space” to pick another object she will not “choose,” she will simply react. And what is available to her other than another blunt-object?

Within this pre-zone of subjectivity, in which an ego-ideal is the potential future finesse of fundamental fantasy, is also an implication, as noted in the introduction, that should this process be disrupted (or in Kristeva’s case, not “contained” or pre-objectified), we leave a zone open for an unmediated “ferocious” superego. So barring their temporal distinction, pairing Lacanian imaginary activity with a Kristevan imaginary landscape, suggests an “immediacy,” immensity, and reactivity but with the addition of a superegoic imperative, one which lacks an ego-ideal to absorb, however briefly, all of the theatrics located in the space of infinite love-hate. Locating the pervert’s psychic space within pre-objectal demand relative to an enjoyment-imperative results in a poorly cultivated “space” in which the subject can negotiate objects and otherness. Certainly, we can add that the pervert is located on “the other side” of the fantasy function – a matter we will consider later – so that specific to the pervert’s “imaginary,” should we assume one, is his relation to the Other as a toy. Positioned on the other side of fantasy, he is ripe for instrumentalization by whatever agency can appeal to his guilt and promise its reabsorption, by any agency that simply requires the material for an important discourse position. If the narcissist will engage the pleasure of oration, the pervert will enforce its imperative. And thus – no matter how you parse it – a lack of a sufficient mediating variable (whether pre-object or symbolic) leaves the gates wide open for psychosis and/or the superego to reproduce your guilty efforts until you die.

My critique is my affect

We come up against the “affect of critique” as soon as we plug in: reaction, co-opting, repetition, and hyperbole are the order of the day, all of which should sound familiar if you engage any screens, any digital platforms, any “person,” or hear yourself talk. Whatever one makes of critical distance and a “snobbery” of reflection/contemplation, should one dismiss their necessity (and we do), they had better

be excellent on their toes or engage in some kind of mystic-exceptionalism. In any case, the desire to opine now about something happening now is probably my most over-used and most problematic reflex. And it is a strained reflex. But primarily, the immanence of MY OPINION speaks to my instrumentalization, not counting whatever is instrumentalized as a means of continuing in this position for as long as I enjoy.

Yes, My Critique Now disavows its cost by definition. My reactivity speaks to whatever other I imagine I must kill (narcissism) or whatever perversely imagined Other I think cares to make this all go away (perversion). And that same movement of reaction is one that absorbs as quickly as it objects, seemingly hysterical in its theatre and all of its co-opted affect, even as it lacks the neurotic nuance to generate a discourse relative to an Other. That is, this reaction is simply another instance of ricocheting between positions I can momentarily occupy, as if I exist merely for the sake of reaction. It is precisely this movement that is commonly deemed “reactionary.” And while this is an inaccurate use of the term -- as what is meant is something closer to “reactive” -- the consequences are reactionary insofar as this back-and-forth supports a status quo it cannot apprehend and has no investment in challenging.

The pre-subject, that subject marked by the early stages of negotiating otherness or that subject who does not negotiate except by means of circumvention (in which the other is entirely accessed, as I play to that other who will make that stop), lost without a mediating variable, is emphatic *without* hysteria. And so we are talking about a certain theatrics of opinion in which reaction, absorption, refusal, and adoption are psychic reflexes of hyperbole of that which does not desire, that does not speak, but instead “overthrows” as a means of apprehending her object.²⁶

All One Thing – some deadlocked objects

Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part. Even the aesthetic activities of political opposites are one in their enthusiastic obedience to the rhythm of the iron system. (Adorno, Horkheimer, *Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* 120)

²⁶ “Hyperbole” etymologically refers to beyond (hyper) and to throw (bole). For more details see “Hyperbole” in this thesis’ “Works Cited.”

In certain company, by which I mostly mean the company I count on my screens, I have that choice, and I choose wrongly. But it is kind of a set-up. Clever types will say things about this scene like: “In a contest between the neoliberal pragmatist who wants to help me, and the neoconservative loon itching with the death drive, I’d rather have a beer with the latter.” And they aren’t wrong. Except, bullshit on beer because it is heroin-ice-cream with that lady or nothing. So based on the smart guy’s pick-your-poison, I never believe this particular picking of poison. But, keeping my own reactionary tendencies in mind, and to be fair to that guy, there aren’t that many “takes” on consciousness that vary from the choices of cynical company such that I can afford to get picky. Also, his friend, the funny depressed guy guilty of outward offences of false consciousness is, compared to the usual asshole, a refreshing hysterical exception. Besides, that second “guy” is usually a television hero so, you know, I like him; and, yes, I probably date him.

The “lived experience” of grappling with a desire-deadlock, and between one crazy subject to another, usually results in a flailing “believability” of critical registers. As soon as someone starts talking/posting/texting about “triggers,” refugees, and whatever fake freedom is today’s symptom (Don’t tell me; I don’t care), I am safe in assuming that this isn’t really happening. Because it’s never a conversation; you are being flashed – but in slow fucking motion. Look, I’m fine with this, too. You want to slo-mo expose yourself in bad faith, be my guest. But since you are pretty sure nobody’s watching, and you keep saying you are “kidding” against the booming absence of any laughter, I really resent having to sit through its duration. The point is that my (“our”) responses (neurotic, perverse, psychotic – restricted and warped desire relative to this deadlock) to masscult objects of interest, popularity, curiosity, concern or connection reflect an investment in a kind of explosiveness that resents having to negotiate any terms whatsoever (because enjoyment’s free, or at least, nearby and waiting). So our opinions are fast, hard, dumb, randomly whimsical and “randomly” in sync with some agent who’s literally invested.

Regardless of your thoughts on our daily practice of clunky critique of those things we love- hate, the ways in which I flash my taste, the objects themselves reflect the critical maneuvers that engage them – which means they are always somewhat grounded in the obscenity that drives the desire deadlock in the first place. This object-relation can

mean many things: 1) New great stuff can be a reflection of the deadlock, pure and simple: We are obsessed with criminality, transgression and desire-as-crime; 2) It can mean that the object is operating on behalf of a more pathological response to the deadlock – so that the “obscenity” is uniquely reactionary. The latter instance is usually when people start complaining about political correctness, or whatever they call not being allowed to use hate speech, or “freedoms” of the individual versus some imagined external threat. This is the mind-numbing vortex of neos, transparency, more neos and whatever urgent identities can be found among the rubble; 3) Pop discourse gestures like bifurcation, reactivity and weak dialectics, are situated along an obscene will-to-enjoy that assumes the real is a real thing – so that the law is both not applicable and the last word.

The reactivity inherent to a run-of-the-mill neo-liberal pop-object generally reflects the volatility upon which this ideological organization depends while at the same time providing you an automatic critical response. Check out my TV: See the identity-politics obsessed criminal prosecutor who is too into the punishment. And, the pragmatic racist that is totally up-to-date on police posted crime rates. Oh, and my favourite down-to-earth lizlemonSNLliveruthbaderginsBergbogGledyborkamericandreamer wants you to know that fear is a gift and she can take down an intruder from all sleep positions – *especially sleep positions*...Like a prayer that never stops, a beloved single lady over forty-two is shitting all over her last chance to bear children as she is hunting down a brilliant serial killer allofthetimeforever.²⁷ Just nudge the dial up on your average neo-liberal fantasy of law (and lack thereof) and you’ll either find the critique to be located somewhere in the neo-con reaction or whatever people call the thing that reacts to that, or nudge that dial down and you have the obscene underside it requires to sustain itself.

The mutual reliance/antagonism between the law and desire means that explosive *jouissance* at the end of a short road is a structural temptation, as much as any pathological response. If we accept this Lacanian condition, then it’s not specifically contemporary. Perversion is – as Žižek instrumentalizes and is evident in the obscene dimension of the superego -- a kind of “honest,” if symptomatic, approach, insofar as it

²⁷ See *Law and Order: SVU*, *Criminal Minds*, *The Fall*, *BBC*, *Top of the Lake*, as examples among so many. Their reference details can be found in “Works Cited.”

takes what it wants, withstanding all the delusional prerequisites. But, again, seen as the first step in a series of more alienating and reactionary moves, the perverse transgression is both annihilative and regressive. If I attribute perversion to the most “certain” and “upfront” voice in the room, I am struck always by his first point: “I’m really glad someone finally said that,” I actually think. After that, it’s all downhill.

The desire deadlock corresponds with our unsurprising obsession with the law as an object of interest in order to stage critique and wax-boring about freedom. Within the fantasy-curio, you have a fractal relation between law and desire, splitting off into various permissions (you do or do not deserve “x”; “Y” needs an infinite-room-of-“y’s-own; it’s out there, just take it, etc.), regulations (usually a variety of discourses ranging from attempts to regulate to attempts to identify) all “reactions” and reactionary positions sustained and “stabilized” by the obscenity of enjoyment, which is itself “split” according to sustaining the fantasy that the law has no effect but it’s apocalyptic power is somehow contiguous to my massive *jouissance*. How else do I explain Donald Trump other than to assume there is a much more profound wish to instigate a kind of radically real “government,” or profound monstrous emergence of a regulatory body from this dumb-shell. Pitting daddies against each other usually just means the serial non-event of the first, while the cost is “happening elsewhere.”

The same relation that exists between neo-liberal fantasy and its approximate dark echo – a mutual and mostly palatable critique, mutual transgressions -- generally means that the move to protect the effects of the former fantasy also pushes on its disavowal by taking up morality as a kind of fetish object. The proximity of these fantasies, however, means that objects that are as much critique as they are symptom become dicier once they are conspicuously enjoyed, once permission, fake-regulation, and fake-protection takes on the obscene texture of their terms (that is, the law). I refer you back to heroin ice-cream. And if pop-musts are your repertoire, as they are mine, this critique of the deadlock (itself the deadlock) is sometimes the best for which you can hope. And so the short distance between the law and desire parallels the short distance between the pervert and her massive *jouissance*, such that when good-enough television isn’t doing its worst and terrible television is doing its finest work, my fantasies of access without a trace of law and the law-that-lusts occupy the same glorious suspended point.

And this suspended point as the conceptual point around which a solid narrative and character spins are some of television's recent best, or at least make evident that we consider discerning objects that that can perform the delicate maneuvering that this "site" as deadlock requires. But be warned, this same television rarely if ever sustains it: *Deadwood* is a show about the body of a law in the making, the material of creating and regulating a desire-law space with a certain indifference regarding the horror of its events sustaining this space (the body, actually) is primary. *Mad Men* does a partial job of showing you the costs of assumed and unproblematic freedoms with its leisure-driven deaths or when what's-his-name cuts his nipple off for Peggy because computer code is the flesh of the world and the show never regains its footing. *The Sopranos* never stops staging the body-count for assumed access until the show literally disappears from our screen.

The above examples are among the more contemporary move in TV Heaven toward dramatic "realism." Unsurprisingly, these shows most critically engage desire's strange position with respect to an obscene law when they delve into dream. But that's another project and I can't tolerate the fantasy genre even though I am willing to bet this genre probably maintains this coordinate of critique better than everything I just mentioned, *and* is perhaps why I don't care for the genre. The same deadlock as its own sustained critique points you to anything ever said on *The Bachelor* franchise or anything that wants to get real really, really badly by perpetually staging it against an annihilation of apocalyptic proportions. Because, yes, this point of shared occupation is the occasion of reality television, which is one hetero-nom away from a virgin sacrifice (please, please, please make this happen *Bachelor in Paradise*). But for the most part, the many moments of "realziness" I can imagine are devoid of performative interpretation, and are thus merely pitted against their echo, and as a result, constitute two faces of the same reactionary object that share an obscene underpinning I can forget in five minutes. What, to religious totalitarian psychopaths, are structural equivalents are about two degrees removed from whatever it is that just gave me total permission to be myself right through my free gluten-free gluten.

Free to Be You and Me! And the lure of generations

But this indulgent generation did not want to transmit anything to its children but the rejection of authority as an arbitrary restraint. And the kids of the baby-boomers have made their deficiency a dogma, their indifference a virtue, their resignation the last word in liberal pedagogy. Now we have the supremacy of dads as pals, moms as girlfriends, denying any difference between them and their kids and offering the youngsters only an ultra-permissive creed: do as you like! (Pascal Bruckner, *Living in the Age of Entitlement* 127)

Boomer-perseverating in any direction is a “critical register” that probably applies to any current pathological engagement of enjoyment. The boomers are also the first television generation and, as a generation-fetish, they get a lot of airtime. And while the Bruckner citation above is a bit too resentful for me to believe, it links boomers with permission and mistakes rebranded as virtues, so that the boomers can be situated along an axis of deadlocked desire, perversion and a tendency toward an imaginary splitting (hyperbole) that idealizes access against a body of excess, more events of an individual “individualizing” against a zillion disavowals. But I’m mostly going to pick on boomers because they are the correct generational index that accounts for the frisson of my own Very Pressing critical imaginary.

As a cusp-Gen Xer (obviously)/millennial, it’s my job to always be outraged by the boomers whom I also love. So it’s my great pleasure to tell you that I have more memories of my dad being way too pissed off about missing a Rolling Stones concert after 2002 than any person should, ever. When I was eleven, it only took *TIME* magazine’s release of some crappy music collection from 1960-9 because it was the early 90’s and so it was time to train me to love the 60’s and this just in: it totally worked. Because if you are a North American between fifty-two and seventy-two and you miss something, or there’s a thing that doesn’t work or there’s another thing that works *so well* it’s like *magic*, and you know the perfect song with which to score all of this, I am the audience for you. Even if you are just a dude who lives in New Jersey who isn’t *technically* a boomer but gets the music and has a whole comedy rap about how you are really a nice guy and you mean well, I’ve probably heard it all *and I’d like to hear it again*. I have a large collection of boomer and boomer-sympathetic objects (These are white, male and tri-state, if that wasn’t clear). If you are born any time after 1956 and

you want me to care, you need to give me a minute to re-jig whatever critical apparatus gets mad because I can no longer auto-immediacize you. It's bad.

Slippery investment as it intersects with truthiness and my parents' adolescence is a problem for me. And I'm sure, one day, tomorrow, whenever the kitsch clock turns whatever way it must such that it becomes possible for me to reconcile hippie-clothes with hippie murder so that not everyone involved is an opportunity for me to be a terrible person, I can unclench from baby-boomers. Until then, I fight my own deep perversion here. I actually want the summer of love to be a real thing and Judy Blume (Bloom?) to teach me how to masturbate. I think Julie Klausner is contemporary and that the New York Jewish comedy scene is still a thing. I still cry when I think about Angela Chase's relationship with her mom. If the sin of the father is just the sin of his hyperbolized adolescence however many years later, then I guess I can be thankful that HBO "pre"-emptively hit with a tepid Kurt Cobain documentary long after anybody even cared.²⁸ Obviously, the other fantasy-object here is *My Generation*, which, other than the weird fugue that takes over my parents when the *West Wing* is on – is, obviously, a whole field of study that reads like horoscopes or the DSM, as it should.²⁹ If one wants to turn reading cynicism (access presumption and disavowal of the law) into the first phase of critique in a larger project of redemptive displacement à la Walter Benjaminian nostalgia and our obsession with generational theory, I'm sure the same clock spins against all the objects I think are *thises*, as they intersect with culture's weird issues with *No*.

Empathy fetish and other boring stuff

The few discourses always available for critique tend to cluster around fantasies of the criminal and the rehabilitative, always doing their best to nullify whatever potential nuance may or may not exist within these structures and their critique. Thus regardless of what you "actually" think about rehab, prison, and the mall, only one dumb tepid reaction-based conversation exists, over and over, eternally spinning like the ring of

²⁸ *Montage of Heck* (2015)

²⁹ Please see William Strauss' and Neil Howe's *Generations: The History of America's Future: From 1584 to 2069*. It is a 90's delight and its theory of generational cycling, repetition and reaction is as rigorous as it is intuited. Enjoy!

Saturn: "...broken people need prison, criminals need doctors, and those that enforce should be institutionalized in one way or another because they are either broken or criminal, repeat..." At best these secretions yawning from the same object periodically embarrass themselves and each other and there's a *Law and Order SVU* episode³⁰ featuring Kathy Griffin resentfully portraying a resentful lesbian activist protecting the purity of her community, except, *she has hetero-sex in secret because the heart wants what it wants, so your fake grandpa was right and cops police identities that police them, too, you know...* and, dear lord, a weak imaginary. Also, what do you know? Master signifiers are oddly amenable (and dismissible) to discourse-swapping that ultimately restructures nothing and sustains the status quo. And so while these discourses split off from each other, as reactivity generates micro-positions, and your eyes simply cannot roll back further, you sustain the hope that these reactions choke on their mutual huffing.

But not all deadlocks are worth their weight in drama. Those familiar sites of cultural fascinations, deadlock based enjoyment and stressed superegos are those that designate and link up the criminal and the therapeutic to reproduce cheap dialectical thrills around an urgency that repeatedly, insistently, falls flat. Thus popular urgencies around symbolically-bound institutions that situate subjectivity relative to transgression and renewal (as if we care), in the territory of Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* and *History of Sexuality*, as they are fundamental to any disciplinary structure of the self and the circulation a the regulatory effects of permission stage a strange relationship between the obscenity of the law and utter dullness.³¹ By dullness, I'm not referring to the inherent banality of murder and other unthinkable things, although we can bore that up too. I am referring simply to the aesthetic perception of the unengaging and/or unabsorbing. Banality can do both. And while this thesis does not consider the Foucauldian implications of television and the popular culture of critique, nor the vastness of the criminal and therapeutic, it also does *not* consider today's current representations of

³⁰ See "P.C." but you can't unsee it.

³¹ Please see "Works Cited" for Foucault texts mentioned. Written earlier *MC* links discourses of madness to spaces built to contain "leprosy" and goes on to argue for a relationship between discourse production and exclusion, as they intersect with shifting historical beliefs regarding "madness." The *History of Sexuality* elaborates on surveillance, sexuality and discourse proliferation.

a Foucauldian medical and criminal united apparatus as much more than a fevered repetition without a temperature.

Television's reflection and "engagement" of this explosive network is, most recently, a zeroing in on this nebulous and ubiquitous problem of empathy (the capacity to understand another person's perspective, as if anyone knows what this means), which both reeks of ideological nonsense and should bore you to tears, as if the direct aim at this frisson didn't simply assure an afternoon nap. Yet television persists: The history of ordering up law on the small screen is as old as Dick Wolf because Dick Wolf is as exactly as old as the oldest television set (the rumour is Vanishing Twin Syndrome). Nonetheless there is an attempt at splitting and hyperbole, which, too, has its own bizarre reactionary components. Thusly, crime-TV can be found along the spectrum of television stuff, from quality-TV and the "rest." And apparently, if I'm the worst kind of person, I only like my true-crime fed to me on loop by American basic cable as it may be devoted to entire channels, weekend long marathons about women who surgically remove other women's babies from their uterus and wherever Googling "Dateline" lands me. But if I'm feeling more discerning, I may hunt down this same content among more sober and judicious fare. When in doubt, or seeking its pleasures, this good critical subject of television can always "engage" the neo-realism of bureaucratic uncertainty and its impossible fog within the same genre, affecting the well-intentioned bewilderment of a white lady that just discovered that there's more to crime than the act. The latter accounts for the current obsession with the micro-details of court cases retroactively re-consumed (*The Staircase*, *Bloodline*, *Serial*, *Making of a Murderer*), tossed up again and again as if the vertiginous not-knowing and the quick decomposition of a fact's integrity or an institutional absolute were really a matter of anything other than its being a strangely impotent *fun*.

But the worked-up puzzled gaze of a viewer who has blown past every worrisome suspicion and every discursive certainty is a paltry compensation, more reflective of a demand stripped to its bone or whatever happens when my direct access reveals its own boring-ness. And the fact-chasing and bureaucracy fetishism is not restricted to the crime universe. As much as I love spotting the innocent and jerking off to that ineffable moment when I ceased to see a person as anything more than a profile, my enjoyment levels

similarly reach the heights of middling when it comes to illness-naming. Currently much “excitement” circulates around identifying an Axis II psychiatric diagnosis. Very Pressing TV, in particular, has really gone out of its way to explain the sociopath to me, as if the very survival of the Self depends on my ability to perform this one diagnostic mission wherever necessary and as feebly as possible. (However, I’m pretty sure my own internet diagnostic practices have been a solid contribution thus far. FYI, your allergies are probably mini-strokes).

In particular, the satisfying coincidence that is television and the hot-button cluster B “drama disorder” (which, again, is focused on the pressing matter of empathy) coalesce in laymen legibility of personality in order to play out a developmental and structural inevitability around the integrity of the deed and its punishment – particularly around the dead-end empathy fetish. As part and parcel of emphatic pathology, the criminal is a predictable bore of narcissistic types that effortlessly reproduce fantasies of their recognition, discipline and reproducibility by doctors and courts and law, which almost always promises its audiences the same “problem” on the other side of the glass. This coupling is the endgame that awaits any inquiry into the system that produces these agents as if this dyad simply self-qualifies as a pin-balling of where to locate “empathy.” Another conclusive and soporific feature of the criminal is of two minds. His sociopathy, while perhaps technically applicable, either overdramatizes his banality (he does portraits of his victims in their blood) or it dramatizes this banality (the reveal that he is either just like you and me or a selfish idiot who only kills when he makes a mistake à la Robert Durst). Again, this can be an interesting symptom in terms of locating banality relative to enjoyment except *it is really boring* as empathy remains the fetish object in lieu of a legible social link. Like the mutual aggression dyad, but split only by what side of the law exists, the two desired contexts for ungodly acts are just “deliberation” and its profound absence (incompetence, chance), as they share an explanation or merely swap sides. The emphasis remains on “intent” or intent as that which failed or can be labeled as pathologically missing (lacking compassion and frontal lobe activity). Remarkably, the above clichés (not entirely without merit or curiosity) are repeated *ad nauseam* and the response is always amazed, as if we’ve really come a long way with this whole criminality thing.

Thus, for all of this drama disordering, there is a profound lack of drama. Despite having mastered it in 1989, dead-kid shows abound with nothing new to share as if they can't get past telling us about this trauma of the non-reveal. All of my pop-disinterested friends rave about *Broadchurch*. So be warned, this is the kind of thing that happens when you stake your critical claim on refusing television: you believe *Broadchurch* is good. The best thing about *Broadchurch* is that almost nothing happens and all of the drama has been relegated to shots of worried UK coastlines heaving to glass armonica.

Demanding times

And so enjoyment, certainly demand, of critique is not limited to intensity of engagement. But what kind of high stakes are “meh” (excluding the fevered term)? The “modern” fad/forever binary³² is relocated, reproduced, and recombined again and again in the banality of the exceptional, the pseudo-event, the singular mundanity, the flat hyperbole (to name a few), and is repeatedly associated with the tension within and between the modern and its “posts.” In his *Introduction to Modernity: Twelve Preludes*, Henri Lefebvre describes the relentlessly modern as a drive throughout history, in which its current instantiation is the increasingly managerial, and distinctly incompetent, organization of two temporal streams, e.g. the mythic and the ephemeral, and, for our purposes, that strange effect of the intractably banal as instantiation of demand and perhaps an affect of access and the ways in which its organized.

But what of time? Is there a superegoic timing, or temporalities indicative of desire's deadlock? Written between 1959 and 1961, and published in 1962, as both a description and criticism of the New with respect to its Now, Lefebvre's *Introduction to Modernity* takes up the conditions and dynamism relevant to a “neo-liberal” critical register, the ideological operations of which support,³³ and are supported by, advancing

³² “Frenzied activity and the constant renewal of News are in no way incompatible with an underlying stagnation upon which they float like some phony St. Elmo's fire.” (Lefebvre 166)

³³ “Immense disillusion with ideologies. They all disappoint [...], concealing realities, [...] in the service of vague and dubious enterprises; advertising, propaganda, agitation tactics [...]. At the same time, ideologies have not completely stopped being effective [...], more extreme [...]. There are institutions powerful enough to force ideologies into social practice [...]. By offering consciousness its only means of expression [...]” (193 - 4)

technology, increasing globalism, “information,” the acceleration of history and the subsumption of the aleatory in order to pre-emptively capture a process of “becoming,” as the peculiarly alienating modern approach to its own present (164 – 5, 204). *Introduction to Modernity* identifies modern binaries in their peculiar context of incompetence, implicating and incriminating our reflective capacity of critical assessments of Right Now. As I discussed above, “right now” is an urge, and largely a bad one. Nothing dates worse than the present. Nothing is more alienating than the assumed familiar. This “immediacy” to our desire, our reactive face-off against the enjoyment therein inflamed by this presumed access, even the baldness of our demand is, at best, suicidal.

Suicidal (or murder-suicide, as is the case with perversion) time tends to circulate around fantasies of apprehending the present and the scotoma that awaits this failure if you are so neurotically inclined. Nostalgia is usually the lauded order of the melancholic, the subject who may attribute a symbolic to this “failure” and live somewhere in this movement so that nostalgia (and its “modern” technologies – those that binarize, superimpose, or accelerate according to an increasing decomposition) becomes a means of containment and renewal and building up our relation to fantasy. Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as that slippery love affair with our own fantasy, a super-imposition of home and abroad, a yearning for another time (xviii).³⁴ Boym distinguishes between restorative and reflective nostalgia, the former a bid to return to a point of fixed origin and the latter a recasting of the origin so that it has some dimension of re-symbolizing. The psychoanalytic rewrite is to identify the restorative as an imaginary-based fantasy problem, while the reflective relation to ends implies new master-signifiers – the “symptomatic” to the “*sinthome*,” for example as the former can be aligned with points of fixed origin and the latter with constellatory origin as the subject-of-the-real.

The restorative ideation of yesterdays is not simply imaginary in that it indicates a foolish and simplistic notion of return. Rather the restorative return is a more general narcissism that can also be explained as a perverse face-off against the perceived superegoic demands of History (a “face” of the primordial real as “beyond”). Typically, neurotic disenchantment belies a tantrum toward an Other who is supposed to account for a totality as well as a resentment against a dependency upon this other, even as it

³⁴ Please see Svetlana Boym’s *Future of Nostalgia* and my “Works Cited” for reference details.

produces signifiers that sustain the fabric of this problem. Thus hysterically bent nostalgia as “death-driven” is the investment in a symbolization process that relies on the thanatic effects of eros and the erotic effects of the death drive as they coincide with a symbolization of any number of time related bodies, for example, a pathological totalizing significance of past mistakes or a more desire-seeking failed account toward some fantasy of “now” that has thus far gone unseen, this activity itself begging the only discernible end to endlessness. In other words, like most neurotic apprehensions, it’s never-going-to-happen is what and how it happens, such that the re-symbolization of events can occur. But the perverse bent on nostalgia reveals any other-oriented labour to be an intolerable attachment (that is, access as enjoyment) one that will be put to rest by something even *truer*: annihilation. Perverse nostalgia fantasies are apocalypse/event-based, that when opened up, reveal a profound unaccountability (or as mentioned, a counting “out”) as it can be squared with genocidal everything.

The perverse structuration reflecting a hiccup around the paternal-nom generates a more fundamental and non-nuanced No, which enforces an organization of *jouissance* that is more death than *thanatos*. The currently modern binaric figuring of ephemera against eternity happen against a *No* that is irrelevant to challenging the “nature” of whatever terms are implicated in a fantasy of history (as is with the “reflective” relation to origins and homelands as “ends”), which deems the pervert that sado-masochistic subject that *is* relative to a *No* only invested in the non-existence (the “end) of his suffering bound up with that *No*. And so perverse “return” is not a gesture of refiguration/interpretation, and thus has little to do with any erotic paradoxes of the death drive and everything to do with total destruction that is happening “elsewhere” (since it does not happen *per se*).

Conventionally, the temporality of television is “serial,” as it is marked by seasons, premieres and finales – those last two items being currently loaded with the cynical presumption and consumption of the NOW and the death-driven lunacy it belies. Following a perversely inflected logic, today’s investment in the finale articulates a wish for release from my ease of access so that it “engages” an annihilative other that can step in and mark the “suffering” produced by and for this fetish object. The discourse of the finale speaks according to familiar melancholias and their anxieties, while wracked with an elided wish that we be released from the demands of having insisted on the present.

Thus the chatter around the finale corresponds with the paths of psychoanalytic definitions of neurotic enjoyment even if all we are talking about is your basic but brutalizing limits of phallic *jouissance*³⁵ but the more fundamental investment is to be located in a perverse present and a demand that we escape its intensities. Thus the matter of ends flickers in its urgency and stupidity against the ubiquitous expression of tomorrow's possibility, dissolving into mere excitation, reactionary finger-pointing and what amounts to a silent and delusional belief in being currently saved by a Now. The future? *What future?* Our only investment in the future is that we destroy it or beat it.

DEPRESSING, RIGHT?

Television is a lot of things, but it is rarely an opportunity for lasting hope, at least not immediately. Now that we've shed a crocodile tear for history, critique, and the fantasy register relative to my belief in a massive enjoyment, we can probably dial the intensity back or at least consider more hopeful fare or varied viewing. The next chapter will continue to examine TV's urgency, but according to its more explicitly critical examples, both real and imagined and located during the transitional era. How do television and its fandom account for the ways in which I love bad things and actually believe good things are watching? Does television know what I've done with television?

³⁵ The *sinthome* is the late Lacanian revision of the symptom and enjoyment. It will be discussed in chapter four (which is also a conclusion). See *Seminar XXIII: Le Sinthome* for its origins.

Chapter Two

The Bestish

Everyone who hates television loves *The Sopranos*. It's the rule. Even if you can't love *Mad Men*, you can love *The Sopranos*. But who didn't love *Mad Men*? I did not love *Mad Men*. Not always. Look, if I'm going to sleep in the warm and gooey space I totally imagine exists between David Chase and Matthew Weiner, and I have to pick one, then based on this very pressing made-up compulsory comparison, I choose *The Sopranos*. Both shows are the subject of hyperbole, event-staging, and other recent-ish nonsense in your inbox. And because this is Very Pressing television and I could definitely provide you with *twentyreasonswhyyoushould* to qualify the success of either show, I struggle between my imperative to love these shows, engaging the critique of fantasy they provide, and the undeniable absolute that TV is watching all of this go down.

After looking at a few characteristics of the more esteemed line of the post-television brand, this chapter samples from two of "the best" shows known for television's redirection toward the "critical," *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men*. Both shows, but *The Sopranos* in particular, engage my ideologies of access relative to time spent enjoying, as these "durations" can be mapped onto a fetish of presence that is beholden to an investment in extinction, and the disavowal of those bodies of exhaustion that might mark this superegoic division of labour (so to speak), particularly *The Sopranos*. In addition, I distinguish these shows by their respective culmination toward their finale, as both hung heavy with a count-down to awesomeness while providing "ends" that spoke to their individual takes on my cynicism. Where *The Sopranos* cuts me off, it also provides a more complex series of positions to navigate my own perverse enjoyment and to grieve my stupidity in better faith. And where *Mad Men* gave me a more forgiving "psychic space" all along, it choked me out with an image of psychotic transcendence that is the end-game of the therapeutic.

In a sense, I am arguing that the success of these shows is due in part to my ability to watch them from both perverse and hysterical distances, as they provide me the material to behold my own enjoyment, and, again, particularly *The Sopranos*. *Mad Men*

and *The Sopranos* “imagine” perverse fantasy’s own end-game, while at the same time sustaining the transference – that “enactment of the reality of the unconscious” necessary for me to stick around to regard perverse fantasies of access and annihilation as a series of critical objects.³⁶ As a viewer I am technically neurotically engaged – that is, at some level, I must buy the shows themselves as a kind of analyst-figure against which I test my desire. Certainly, I remain perversely engaged. At the very least, my imperative becomes the affect of my transference or the imperative of my analysis: I will locate my desire; I *must* do the work, only *faster* and *harder*. I also distinguish *The Sopranos* according to its intersecting with TV’s *tip* into post-network, staging a conversation between melancholia and our perverse practices, as this also reflects the anxieties of the post-network, either as anticipated or read retroactively, and thus a more compelling site at which to grieve our enjoyment. *Mad Men*, however, is more precisely aligned with television’s identification as “post,” perhaps absorbing this position, and thus reflecting a shift from anxiety to embrace (which makes me very anxious). In addition, I consider aspects of “engaging” David Chase and Matthew Weiner, those television writers (and points of imaginary contact) that solidify the position of both *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* as key “moments” in the production of quality television: the imperative that I watch well and that sense of celebrated “unbearable closure” that comes with television’s most recent sprawl.³⁷

The Quality object

The moment television bought its own hype to sell it back it to me must have happened sometime during the third season of *The Sopranos* and all of Netflix.³⁸ But do I even remember when television didn’t believe itself this much? Television was not supposed to do better, as it was (still is) undramatically synonymous with unsexy waste or presumed exhaustion – time, brain matter, daylight, concentration, and sleep. On the

³⁶ Lacan, 1973/1998, a. p. 149 (Swales 214)

³⁷ I am alluding to Žižek’s “Unbearable Closure of Being” as that elimination of a symptom, or exception, by assuming the application of a totalizing universal to evoke a kind of psychosis (See *Plague of Fantasies* PAGE NUMBER?)

³⁸ Again, see McCabe and Akass: “HBO had to account for its existence and take charge of what made it unique as something to be inserted into the system of values institutionally managed and regulated” (86-7)

other hand, this pre-era of a different viewer gaze and/or distinctly different content is an effect of television's own fantasy. If HBO reintroduced television to itself, it was during the first five minutes of its latest renaissance (between 1999 and 2006) via a handful of shows that seemed to sneak onto the set. This TV "event" – *The Sopranos*, which in particular, has this popular distinction – seems to usher in an era of TV experimentation and discernment that is the feedback loop of funding via viewers' subscription payment, rather than their weekly commitment, their choice rather than their eye – again, your garden-variety fantasy of unproblematically choosing your symptom. And if more critical TV is made possible by the economic terms of neo-liberal sprawl and permission, some of its finest work is wracked by this condition's related anxieties.

HBO's industry conditions establish themselves during the early seventies in which there is a growing climate for experimentation, talent and the kind of American dreaming in which looming job-insecurity is just another creative opportunity! So in 1975, cable entrepreneur Charles Dolan used the seed money from The Green Channel to create the network now known as Home Box Office (HBO), with the goal of emphasizing the cinematic quality of their programming as well as some kind of home theatre experience (Edgerton, *The Essential Sopranos Reader* 3). Branded by the presence of auteur, as opposed to a focus group or a sponsor, the typically twenty-two-episode season was cut in half to pay for the shift to a more cinematic approach, with its sophisticated reaction shots, multi-camera angles, and to-die-for casting.

Obviously, I am not sold on quality television branding. In part, I think something like *The Sopranos* was a chance "creative" event that provided the industry an opportunity to brand these technological and economic shifts as "critical."³⁹ We can thus define that quality "thing" as it passes through television's "transition" era and into its "post," which Lotz defined as a breaking away from network standards and practices, a move into multi-channels, and toward a "mobilization" of screens (53) - a generalized displacement of those real and imagined bodies of the TV cosmology, and with that, a kind of consumer consent to enthusiastically suspend their re-imagining or simply ignore

³⁹ For a discussion of how the industry's shifts in "dominant financing structures" affect "types of programming" (116), see Lotz's "Making Television."

it.⁴⁰ That last point speaks more to this thesis' assertion that post-network implicates a pressed television subject that sustains access via disavowal at all costs, as well as a screen-based subject that describes an alienation from, and a psychological removal of, those bodies that might speak to this disavowal.

What *is* a Hulu?

Quality's thing

Maybe the "not" in not-TV marks the taboo of my having ever watched anything at all. I showed up to HBO a little bit worse for wear, like a junkie that needed a shower from the get-go. Because, apparently, my unsexy relationship with television is some of the worst shit I've ever done. And Television knows this. Television has been watching this whole time. But when *was* television's moment of mitosis, when the split between itself and its disgust occurred? You can't locate it on the television, even though we totally try. When was television innocent? I am told it is "before" HBO. And where is "it" on the TV? When did TV and I hook up? What's our primal scene? I would argue that it occurs at the coordinate of "syndication" and "time-shift." Please. I wish. No, before! Look, I know this: the object in question here is supposed to look like Goldie Hawn in *Death Becomes Her*, in that scene where she's in a fat suit and there's a couch. Like a temporal "point" of zoning-out in front of an eternal rerun (Did I? Did I ever really zone out? After all, I remember every *Roseanne* episode). Let's just say "it" was sometime between women being allowed to do Katharine Hepburn impressions during guest appearances and the day I believed a David E. Kelley character. *In there*. That's it. That's the best I can do.

Periodizing critical television is loaded with guilt spotting. You know what pre-post-TV is actually "guilty of," or it reads as such when it is presently viewed? Taking its time. Dawdling. And that has happened for all kinds of reasons, many of them technical, device-related and due to story-telling trends that have redefined how long I am currently

⁴⁰ See Lotz's chapter "Television Outside the Box: The Technological Revolution of Television," in which she describes the effects of technological shifts on mobility, convenience and "theatricality" as they reshape the consumer experience, in particular the "fragmenting" and "polarizing" effects on audience identification (61). In terms of locating one's self in this universe, "viewers could take television anywhere they could receive a broadcast signal, access a wireless environment (...). This capability substantially eroded to which television tethered its audience to a specific space" (50).

willing to sit through a terrible conversation. Transitional television in as much as its critical variant may offer an opportunity to measure the time of enjoyment doesn't take long before it speeds it up. Maybe the most instructive thing I could do now is watch anything produced before *Gossip Girl*. It's like watching time burn. Beyond speed, I am reticent to identify the state of demand pre and post-TV as a thing on the screen, as both the demand and the post-ness is also a structural feature of television. Regardless of its actuality or whether it can be located on a screen, quality television marks a point at which my sin is *restaged*, its scene, which is more demand than content, and it's a matter of time. There was, in fact, a "time" I just kept pressing play every 42 minutes for eight hours and not because it's a Netflix binge clump. And then post-TV sold it back to me as that clump (Netflix, Amazon, etc.) because television knew what I had done – which was watch it very quickly on DVD or PVR – and what should happen next. And though the fantasy that television got better or changed is not untrue, speed and format of television's prescribed consumption speak more to the fever that I associate with superegoic enjoyment or perverse defenses than whatever is or was on the screen. Netflix is the obvious punishment.

Padding the quality imaginary: big-ish auteurs, authenticity scrapping

"Who is David Chase?" asked everything between 1999 and 2007.⁴¹ An answer?⁴² A brooding television writer who spent years labouring at a medium for which he had no respect and found everything else just short of suicidal.⁴³ And if you call him on this, he coyly accuses you of caring too much. No, we've never met but the fervour generated around Chase and his authorship provides a fan with a sense of entitlement. And much of the discourse angles Chase as a kind of imaginary father against which to

⁴¹ See McCabe and Akass for several of these references. And see Robin Nelson "Author(iz)ing Chase" for a discussion of the manufacturing discourse around Chase.

⁴² "*The Sopranos* exists enclosed in a sustained critical discourse ensuring the series is widely discussed" (McCabe, Akass 90), its position in the world on not-TV (quality TV) "widely disseminated" by "journalists and academic critics" (Nelson 43).

⁴³ Steven Van Zandt on Chase: "He's not moody – He's always in a bad mood" (Biskind par.7).

watch *The Sopranos*.⁴⁴ Though throughout his career Chase “desperately wanted to write features and “[t]elevision was a byway he fell into” post grad school in 1971, Chase’s television contribution has been notably cinematic both in format and in content (Biskind par. 9). He is famous for giving us *The Godfather* in an explicit “era of diminished expectations,” the whinier version of a New Hollywood classic with less theatre and more depression, what I ultimately imagine is a remarketing of the older story for Generation X. But we’ll get to the made-up inter-generational conversation I enjoy between television daddies in a moment.

Part of *The Sopranos* appeal is whatever I think about Chase, who is figured as that substance that makes up the show, at least determining its every direction (“Every shot, every word of this is David in one way or another” and “It was understood. It was my show. It was my voice.”), I also think about the show (Biskind par. 48; Itzkoff par. 11). There seems to be a feedback loop between the show’s creative excellence and how psychologically astute I consider David Chase to be, or at least, to be a man whose *deep* suffering is a moving target. *Twin Peaks* also auteur-branded (I routinely forget who Mark Frost is), was probably too weird for me to establish a transferential big Other. I thought I was talking to BOB the whole time, and we know what kind of (m)other he was.⁴⁵ David Lynch, however, was just some mystic with fantastic hair who sometimes got things so right it would ruin your life. But I didn’t think about his “moods” or what he wanted; it didn’t matter and there was no internet in 1990. Chase’s auteurship, however, is further solidified by the viral ado made about his own desire, his awkward-success shtick, and his ambivalence around the television. And this kind of neurosis can present as desire, a hook. Fink begins his *Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* by reminding us that “if there is a desire that serves as a motor force, it is the analyst’s” (4). While the angsty auteur is hardly an analyst - as far as assuming the ethical “risk” of the analytic not-knowing is concerned, as well as not “emphasizing every

⁴⁴ By imaginary father, I mean a preobjectal paternal point of access that provides me with a “bricolage of contradictory features” against which to test my narcissism (Žižek *Enjoy* 157). The imaginary father is a Kristevan term (*TOL*, see introduction) but it also referred to by Žižek in his earlier use of “anal father,” in a discussion of its more obscene dimension.

⁴⁵ BOB is an evil spirit that is a mix between the primal scene as intergenerational contagion and my first identification of a thing that instrumentalizes my enjoyment. That’s right, David Lynch. I can’t believe you are disturbing this beast for a third season.

manifestation of the unconscious” (6 - 7) – so that if I were to locate an analytic function it would be the process of the show itself, “David Chase” operates in part as that which marks a refusal to receive me entirely. Thus as a viewer I am partially recognized by an Other that seems to want something I can’t establish - something else associated with media substance at stake (“I don’t give a fuck – I hate television,” says Chase) (Biskind par. 14).⁴⁶

In a 2007 *Vanity Fair* feature, David Chase “remember[s] seeing *Pretty Woman* on an air plane. Everybody was laughing their heads off. It wasn’t funny to [him]” (Biskind). And so he imagined jumping off the plane. I love this in the way that I love guys that only drink “real” coffee and are mad about smartphones. And *Mad Men*’s auteur Matthew Weiner knows exactly what I’m talking about. Yeah, that’s the fantasy (also a sitcom I am always writing in my head: “Dave and Matt”). Two Daddies. One judging me for my bad behavior; the other offering a more accommodating perspective. One Boomer who behaves like a Gen Xer, the other an Xer who behaves like a Millennial. Because for me, and informed by their work history and historical importance of both shows, *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* are a bit of a package deal auteur-wise. Weiner wrote under Chase for *The Sopranos* and got the job by applying with the *Mad Men* pilot. He’s the reason Lauren Bacall gets punched in the face (“Luxury Lounge”), which is hardly light fare but it is the kind of deviation that acts as a bit of a breather from the show’s main relentless march toward finale. And in those writing rooms, David, always incensed, always disapproving, would meet “Matt’s” incessant “suggestions” with a constant: “No, not really. No, no, no, no.” “*But sometimes moms die, David.*” “*Moms never die, Matthew, they only kill! And I came up with the ending two years before we wrote it.*” “*I know that, buddy, and I love you.*”

SCENE.

⁴⁶ Again, while it might be part of the general fabric of establishing psychic space, I am more inclined to think that the grandiosity of the auteur isn’t really the stuff of the Other-supposed-know. And even in Chase’s case, where the grandness of auteurship is the ubiquity of his ambivalence, and therefore an Other that keeps insisting he does not know, the volume of that insistence makes we think I am just tapping into some television writer’s hysterical interpolation of their place in the television symbolic as it “hooks” me in for the duration of the series.

The popular fantasies of My Generation (variations on Boomers as they manifest as subsequent generations, etc.) play out in the larger mythos of television, as if the job of this and subsequent generations were to hysterically scrap over the status of authenticity until television is over. I say this because, in part, the story of Critically Acclaimed TV has the hopeful spirit of the New Hollywood era (which was explicitly critical and boomer-directed, at the very least) as it is aimed and fired directly at my soul, framing reality according to whatever popular therapeutics and other banalities excite.⁴⁷ This is also one of quality-TV's initial moves: to provide at least one language I instantly forget is a language – which, despite those delimitations of genre, might be the relentlessly “real,” the believable unfoldings of impossible scenarios. Because maybe HBO circa 1998 looked in the mirror and said to its reflection: *You know the organ music in The Godfather during the ceremony-slaughter? Kill that and let's talk routine psychiatry appointments and whatever the sound time makes as it moves through human failure in the suburbs.* And HBO's reflection responded: *Yes, BUT then swap that monster face that Brando makes before he dies for a clever conversation between two people from hopelessly yet barely different orientations that aren't listening to each other as it all can be articulated via trending diagnostic fetishes that feel just like home.* Of course I am all over this.

The times it takes to enjoy – A three point cosmology

Now that we've established belief-objects and/or those paternal agents we can use to self-soothe/harm, let's revisit this thesis' broader theoretical premise. Chiesa argues that problematizing desire according to its deadlock indicates an investment (both ours and Lacan's) in a primordial One, a real that can be “counted” and delineated, a real that self-qualifies and implicates a desired destructive “massive” enjoyment. In support of this insight, and as I have examined in the previous chapter, the pervert may be considered a “reaction” to the deadlock climate, a reaction that is energized by this

⁴⁷ The “new” in New Hollywood is a bit misleading insofar as NH can refer to a post-war and post-studio era while also acting as a header under which to organize several cinematic approaches as they are responses to both cinema and its more recent industrial conditions. For more on the NH era of film, which cannot be explored in detail here, please see Geoff King's *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* and Mark Harris' *Pictures at a Revolution: Five Movies and the Birth of the New Hollywood*. See this thesis' “Works Cited” for details.

deadlock, which it also looks to overshoot.⁴⁸ When I tease by insisting on my fetish item (access), and suffering all the while – so while I watch eternally – I also believe that I can overshoot this state of watching, for example, a duration and frequency of the binge. In Chiesa’s terms, the real that I, in a perverse sense, am, or partaking in, is aimed at something bigger, something massive, something final. For example, I am going to out-watch television against the possibility that it counts me out. Thus I have argued that the pervert, ultimately hostile to desire, situates himself relative to the deadlock (a pressing real) via his insistence on a fetishized point of access and of an annihilative “end.”

But the pervert’s timing is “suspended,” somewhat non-existent. The pervert attempts to out-do this imagined other by never fully asserting his access to it (his tease) or the law prohibiting it (the fact of desire), and thus his sense of duration is limited to a kind of spatialization.⁴⁹ Because the real is cast simply as a fetish and the law never arrives, neither the assumed totality nor the structure of desire are ever fully confronted and the status quo is reinforced. Against the fetishization of a total and accessible real, temporally speaking, a kind of “now,” is also the pervert’s fantasy of a finale, a massive enjoyment, while sustaining this comes at a cost (which we don’t think counts). What you have, then, by these perverse criteria is a static time, a seriality, a repetition without negation or symptom, a sense of the present as it is fetishized but also as it is suspended between the fetish object and its obscene support by a totalizing end.

Ahead, I shall offer samples of that quality television that speaks to a mapping out of durations of enjoyment as they are presumed and disavowed. By time-spent or duration, I mean the shapes of which are a *fantasy* of time-passing, a perception or imagining of that span as it suits disavowal and perhaps more nuanced subjective practices.⁵⁰ Basically, perverse “duration” implicates a three point cosmology of the TV fan’s psyche – why and how one watches television like it’s their job: 1) The fetish object based on the (m)other: I assume a position of immediacy (I watch any time, any place,

⁴⁸ Also arguing for the perverse as reaction, Swales asserts that perversion is, in part, a defense against a perception of demand that disavows castration anxiety (42).

⁴⁹ Again, please see the discussion of Boym’s nostalgia in the preceding chapter.

⁵⁰ And thus I am not referring specifically to Bergson’s duration or any structure of temporality except those fantasies of time that can be extrapolated from the psychoanalytic framework (both neurotic and perverse pathologies, and a more generally activated desire) used in this thesis.

thus always); additionally, I “speak” in those languages that assert immediacy, transparency, and the therapeutic; 2) I am invested in a fundamental end to my enjoyed access, so that my enjoyment will be terminated (its duration decided). However, this termination is not a signification but a nullification, so that my insistence on access is paired with my cynical investment in neither its manifestation nor maintenance. Again, the perversely fantasized big Other is the annihilative No upon which I rest the correlative fantasy of indefinitely enjoying and everything else’s apocalypse⁵¹; 3) I am suggesting a third point: the positivized disavowal of exhaustion, that body that does *not* endure as a Sadean instrument of immortality is in some way, the pervert’s remainder, that “exhaustion” which is perpetually displaced and/or minimized. In television terms, it is akin to that mountain of gadgetry (the “electronic graveyard”) we find in whatever part of the world we are using as an eternal garbage dump (Africa) or any other object that qualifies the refusal to confront the unsustainable.

Accounting for lapsed time in *Mad Men* and *The Sopranos*

Most of the quality-TV content I explored below plays to the theme of lapsed time and whether we are paying it any attention, which alludes to a presumed eternal access of enjoyment. So I suppose it is only fair for all of this watching to personally culminate in hating Cinemax’s latest affront to that which dies, *The Knick*. This series should have been a homerun, particularly where enjoyment and mortality were concerned: *fin de siècle* surgery based in NYC, opium dens, a hospital on the precipice of modernity, cocaine in syringes, and the weird shit Dr. Cotton did to psychiatric patients’ teeth.⁵² Branded as top tier television, *The Knick* is either proof that Q-TV is not a real category, and/or is only ever really referring to HBO, or the desire for this realness of quality amounts to no more than an obscene demand for a time-block made of “stuff” more curious than critical. If

⁵¹ In other words, I look to my television anywhere and at anytime to always and forever enjoy. And in a defense against this duration of enjoyment, I angle my enjoyment as a form of suffering and out-doing toward its end, which also happens to be the television (I look to television to make this stop, which encourages what is essentially a dyadic insanity).

⁵² That’s right: SPOILER! Cotton removes all of the teeth and you can check out this unfortunate mishap in psychiatric history by wikipediaing the whole story about Cotton, his kids and *their* teeth. Great stuff. Have fun.

so, the direct line to the unconscious of Q-TV branding is 54 minutes that is appropriately viewed as that material I cannot remember for the life of me, a blackout but with shabby chic beds. *The Knick* serially points at a thing to tell you it's amazing, which is a pretty accurate mirroring of my consumption effort, an unconscious pointer at amazing things that never takes notes. End of effort. *What just happened? Did something happen? Early modern surgery set to electronica JUST HAPPENED.*⁵³ And that's about the degree of complexity of *The Knick's* establishing a relationship between objects, duration and reflecting on my enjoyment. At the end of 54 minutes, you don't know what happened (except you could totally guess). So either *The Knick* is the kind of quality-television that just *doesn't* happen, an a-temporal and a-attention period-piece, or *The Knick* gives us exactly what we want and kind of deserve: interminable access to our favourite vintage shit so long as we don't try to remember it "later."

Speaking of time, let's get to the post-TV canon. Of the two shows (*Mad Men* and *The Sopranos*), *Mad Men* incites this viewer's investment without the same degree of punishment I attribute to *The Sopranos*. I would argue that – my weird daddy fantasy aside - this is in part because *MM's* management of "History" means someone is always checking their watch, and it is checked regularly and rhythmically such that I establish a rather pleasant nostalgia. Not necessarily at odds with this effect, the foregrounded historical period of choice (the 1960s) is both comfortable and loaded. Additionally, *Mad Men* isolates the duration of "history" (including those ways it quietly absorbs anticipated interruptions) as an object against which I test time enjoyed. This is palpable in a number of ways: The mannered affect between *Mad Men* characters is consistent enough to forget about, but there is a unique *Mad Men* "substance" that (a) I learn to identify with *Mad Men* and b) I automatically associate with an era that is simply prior, but in close proximity to, historically loaded events in recent-ish American history. (In sum, it teaches me to desire it, even as it allegorizes the present in the past). As a period piece set at a time that viewers may or may-not remember, *Mad Men* carries with it the anxiety that I get my nostalgia right, or at least be in the game, and the decade itself also assures me

⁵³ Cliff Martinez should just score every modern procedure in its early stages for the remainder of his career and nobody should try to even tell this story if Martinez retires. The pairing of electronic music and turn-of-the-century medical phenomena is truly this show's crowning glory.

that the peculiarity of my nostalgia (however fake) can find its proper groove: the 1960s is popularly marked by the proud divide between memory and authenticity – if you remember it, then “you weren’t actually there,” etc.⁵⁴ While this sentiment reveals any number of current disavowals and fake exclusivity, it’s also a sentiment that gives those who weren’t “there” permission to “remember,” which is the groove the show hopes to and, I think, successfully establishes, and pushes forward to reflect a shift in the fantasy of history relative to our access to that history. As a result I am contained by a psychic space of permissible nostalgia, which is at the same time, an opportunity to regard my imperative around the decade and its objects in question. *MM* is both pleasant and playful, throughout much of its duration, and it cultivates a kind of space to grieve my own practices -- even if that space gets weirdly eclipsed by the grieving and its therapeutics.

For much of its run, *Mad Men* resists totally dismantling history-as-commodity, and exposing my enjoyment as its own entitled thing, by not explicitly identifying its audience with the fevered consumer and by, for the most part, sustaining a believable historical pace and solidifying my transference. *Mad Men*’s temporal starts and stops can seem pleasantly melancholic, to the tune of its David Carbonara soundtrack lulling you into a Betty Draper dreamscape, or Don taking a moment to sit back on that black couch, in that shadow, to survey another amorphous, yet definite change. In fact, *Mad Men* audiences are likely to be more “taken aback” by the non-evental violence of each supposed point of historical rupture – that point in the assumed duration that everything pauses, changes, comes together, falls apart – as if the present of the past is of a movement I cannot qualify except as a “dumb” object within the day-to-day events, in the form of severed feet, nipples, accidental stabbings,⁵⁵ or the fantasy-maps drawn up for Hershey’s, Lucky Strike, Playtex, American Airlines, etc.⁵⁶ And as the cultural objects

⁵⁴ This sentiment is so ubiquitous that it is a sourceless quote linked to a number of famous mouths and pens. Hey, I thought Keith Richards was a slam-dunk but my search pulls up names such as Grace Slick, Robin Williams, and Wavy Gravy. So I guess nobody “remembers.”

⁵⁵ For the foot incident, see “Guy Walks Into an Advertising Agency.” The nipple excision occurs in “The Runaways.” And you can find the stabbing in “The Better Half.”

accumulate and accelerate they also, and with individual effect, gently let you know that the Big Stuff happens during the duration of consumption (in particular, drinking, smoking and identity profiling) or in relation to it. While I am accessing, watching, waiting, or waiting for access, I “miss” the untarnished event, which I am not even invested in *without* its retroactive hype. And in this way, the show teaches me to read its pace according to my anxiety that I have overshot the pace of history, revealing my enjoyment to be a thing that I bring to the table that is not magically accommodated by the narrative. The historical movement that is indifferent to my own enjoyment can simply reveal itself as a more pleasant lag. The clock is still going even when you aren’t maniacally checking the time, which is a quiet sobering feeling like when you realize climate change has already happened or that you never consented to liking Emma Roberts, so what do you do with that?

Measuring its life in coffee spoons is *MM*’s strength.⁵⁷ By captivating my nostalgia, the show seems to promise an eventual, but careful, consideration of its timing and its associated enjoyment. In a more technical sense, the *MM* desire keeps pace with desire’s “never enough” and the playful “too much.” *MM* stages desires measurement of the eventual, such that when it goes back to measure enjoyment, I find object “a’s, which means I’m in the game and I can wait six days for the next episode. But as the seasons pile on, and after we realize Meghan is not just a dream (“Tomorrow Land”), *MM* seems to cumulatively absorb the intensity of its own nostalgia as it also mirrors the show’s increasingly fevered reception. Early on, the show cultivates weight or heaviness, particularly as the past “hangs” over Don as “more true” or potentially and irreversibly disruptive, both thwarting integration while simultaneously insisting upon the effort necessary to its integration. Whatever remains of Don-then (Korean War Don, Don as salesman of hats, etc.) must establish itself according to the demands of Don-now. And we are invited to watch, as these demands are more strikingly and mutually divided by Don’s assumption of a new identity, yet are exacerbated by the sense of the present’s acceleration, particularly since “the present,” as figured by the show, is increasingly

⁵⁶ Examples of episodes where these companies are featured: Hershey’s (“In Care Of”); Lucky Strike (“Blowing Smoke”); Playtex (“Maidenform”).

⁵⁷ This is an allusion to T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” See “Works Cited” for details.

conscious of its own historical moment and the more overarching pressure to be relevant: “Now I am quietly waiting for/ the catastrophe of my beautiful personality/ to seem beautiful again/ and interesting and modern.”⁵⁸ So there is always a sense that Don Draper, the viewer, the show, must get an increasingly effective grip on a historical object and its movement, either to not be crushed by it or to keep pace with it. But by the end of the series, viewers find themselves at odds with their established nostalgia groove as the race has shifted: the show’s “now” inches closer to a figuration of our own, and the imperative of this access becomes increasingly fevered,⁵⁹ and *MM* opts to swap the pace of measuring time in dumb objects with a practice of Now-ness, what I am dubbing the “therapeutic.”

By the therapeutic, I am referring to features of intersubjective truth seeking distinguished from the psychoanalytic, with emphasis on access as it is clinically established: those ego-to-ego interactions as they operate on an imaginary axis; again, the fetishization of empathy; and the presumption of transparency, as if the labour of the social link can be strung up by consciousness so that the potency (and relief) of not having full access to ourselves and each other is repeatedly crushed.⁶⁰ Psychoanalysis, and the ways this thesis employs it as a diagnostic tool, is not “therapeutic.” It is not ego-centred. It doesn’t posit a present. And if good things happen, it’s either a happy accident or you’ve found your own language (a *sinthome*) without totally alienating yourself from other people. The perverse fantasy of the therapeutic, however, posits an achievable “person-to-person” that is outwardly democratic but is cynically hierarchical in that it is deeply conformist. The therapeutic is the magic of everything you could ever

⁵⁸ The Frank O’Hara poem “Mayakovsky” is featured in *Mad Men* “For Those Who Think Young.” Please see this thesis’ “Works Cited” for full reference.

⁵⁹ *Mad Men*’s lead decade and its movements are everyone’s game, which puts added pressure on the finale, as the viewer anticipates events he or she knows are extra-diegetically “about to” insert themselves. *Mad Men* is a continual process of introducing “history” into the narrative as a series of what are inevitably audience-anticipated ruptures, for example, the Cuban Missile Crisis (“Meditations in an Emergency”), Vietnam related news events (“The Forecast”), the assassinations of JFK (“The Grown Ups”), MLK (“The Flood”), the moon-landing (“Waterloo”), and, yes, *Planet of the Apes* (“The Flood”). Certainly, this is the pressure of all period pieces but, again, the sixties’ sense of, and my assumed entitlement to, its own historicity, intensifies its anticipation.

⁶⁰ For an extended discussion, see “Desire and Psychoanalytic Technique” in Fink’s *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*.

want and none of the “work” because nobody actually believes its objective. Let’s leave that here because I know the DSM off-by-heart and the subject of rehab is basically my heroin. But that’s the point. Why do we care at this juncture? Because the therapeutic is an object with which both *MM* and *TS* can measure the status of enjoyment and relevant fantasies of time-spent. In the case of *MM*, the therapeutic slowly and then suddenly eclipses the earlier mannered tone of speech (in which little was said), while the challenge to locate my nostalgia is replaced by an advancing sense of Now that redistributes enjoyment and reorients my desire.

Mad Men’s earlier episodes are a kind of pre-therapy era, mannered and heavy, and, most importantly, while so much is articulated barely anything is “expressed.” *MM*’s pre-era is marked (at least retroactively) as an absence of the therapeutic, whether it be the fetishization of feelings and all that is enjoyed about them or the mobilization of those feelings that are required to reorient the neo liberal subject. But the mutual-actualization of a Hershey’s chocolate bar and Don’s childhood trauma indicate that a shift in the fantasy-structure is in full effect by season six (“In Care Of”). And if Betty Draper is tearing through Dora’s hysteria (“Lost Horizon”),⁶¹ the reason is that Freud is more routine than a literary allusion to the death drive;⁶² and the contemplative is more explicitly replaced by the need to say what you feel: even the boardroom will set you free. By its final season, *Mad Men* shifts the emphasis from the history-object, or that race to the present, to the future-is-now-object, which does away with the pace-keeping altogether, in that Don and his peers appear briefly stranded by the absence of “competitive spirit” that was ensuring one’s next move up, as it is replaced by a permissive “sprawl”: for it isn’t what’s next, but what is *not* next? The moon belongs to everyone, etc.⁶³ *MM*’s last season is explicitly *not* about secrets, the unknown, or the impossible, and features a kind of excruciating possibility, or “access”: So, of course, Betty Draper might be your next therapist (“The Wheel” and “The Forecast”); the moon belongs to everyone (“Waterloo”); nobody cares about Don-angst because everybody has

⁶¹ See Freud’s *Dora* in this thesis’ “Works Cited.”

⁶² In season one, the practice of psychoanalysis is arguably more exotic. See “Ladies Room” in “Works Cited.”

⁶³ See the end of “Waterloo.”

a zillion identities; Peggy has feelings; and whatever is happening “person-to-person” is no longer marked by a kind of heavy absence between characters but is, instead, measuring itself as it is totally, really happening; and, of course, Don and a Coke Commercial Get Married in Heaven!

Mad Men’s “end stage” is marked by the therapeutic’s rushed eclipsing of the series’ litany of dumb objects, as it moves from a desire based enjoyment (economy of nostalgia) to a kind of immediate and impossible access where desire is irrelevant. Whether *Mad Men* believes in the history-object it develops is hard to say because over seasons *Mad Men* shifts its mode; on one hand, it slowly, almost infinitesimally, absorbs its scenes’ reflective cues required to discern that history-object, while on the other, presenting us with the spectacle of Don marrying a Coke ad in Heaven as a psychotic and mystical end to a race well run.⁶⁴ Is the show simply raising the stakes in the way it thinks they were raised by its creepy audience or is it, in fact, snarkily giving you the inevitable result of all of our past-enjoyment, ending on an extremely perverse image that may be Weiner’s version of turning off the television à la David Chase at the conclusion of *The Sopranos*? I don’t know, but that’s because I think Weiner would have written an eighth season of *Mad Men* all about kittens who run a call centre on Facebook and I would have loved most of it. Perhaps that final image of transcendence just threw our intensity back at us, pushing us to the psychotic end of the cynical, in the form of a fevered union between and among souls, fantasies, and identity-molting. But really, I think *MM* leaves you with a frustrating, and ultimately impossible, minimal difference in which you are asked to measure the therapeutic according to the therapeutic, as it takes shape in a final image of transparency and transcendence, or throw your hands up and assume Don got the Coke deal.

***The Sopranos* fetish objects: authenticity, ethnicity, therapy**

What, then, does *The Sopranos* want? In part, *TS* wants to show me the duration of my last fantasy, as it provides an object of belief, which it subsequently deflates. As the show progresses, it gets more serious about the time-spent enjoying those points of

⁶⁴ See episode “Person to Person.”

access. Whether it is Mr. De Trolio/Vin Makazian singing three verses of “Three Times a Lady” (“The Test Dream”), Meadow parallel parking (“Made In America”), Tony Soprano explaining to yet another professional that his mother was a “borderline personality disorder” while pulling a tooth out from his trouser cuff (“The Second Coming” “Isabella”), A.J.’s car *actually* on fire while Bob Dylan’s voice melts into the engine (“Made In America”), or the complete disregard for anything on fire the very next day, as time spent becomes more and more palpable. Because the sin of my watching is usually the sin of my not-really watching even when I was *totally* watching, which, while a structural inevitability of being alive, is also a consequence of a disavowed enjoyment as that subject who watches with everything inside: the viewer who both suffers and consumes on behalf of its access point, as her enjoyment eclipses her viewing.

Shot as six and a half seasons over a ten-year period, *The Sopranos*’ last season looks nothing like its first, while accounting for seasons as signifiers it “refuses” to recognize. This almost biblical insistence typifies the show’s relentless deflation of those fantasies that best support its narrative (The Mafia, Therapy, Celebrity, Eternity), as a process that accelerates cumulatively and works toward locating the television as the object that oddly endures it all. For the series’ duration, self-emphatic premises are always refigured as clumsy fantasy, *and* while it is tempting to fetishize this very activity, *The Sopranos* redirects that urge back to the television.

In season three, Meadow calls Carmela out on her cynical arrangement with her dad, what she smugly calls an “accommodation pretense” (“Second Opinion”). And this emphasis as a containment device in “bad faith” is how the show maneuvers through a series of fantasy objects. The initial pretense? Totally normal guy hitting forty, two kids, mom is a pain in the ass, cash flow is a never-ending problem, and anxiety attacks. And what deflates this fantasy of yet another man experiencing a middle age crisis? He’s the don of New Jersey. *The Sopranos* initially sets up Tony’s mafia-status as “the tickle,” the show’s impossible thing (Edgerton 13). And as episodes pass, an inversion unfolds in which this impossible thing proves to be another functional “accommodational pretense.” In other words, Dad’s mafia-thing is not “the” problem. It is also not a fetishized solution. Actually, the mafia is not really *anything* in particular. It is a problem of some

resistance relative to some other intractability as is identity, therapy, and any sentiment that one can hysterically discard after perversely fetishizing.

Let's back up. Part of the appeal of Don Draper is that he is permitted to live two lives, bifurcated by the past and the present and by two identities, that, over time, and then suddenly, dishearteningly, become one. And while the process for Tony Soprano - dad and don - is not quite the same, though certain distinctions erode as season pass, there exists a similar appeal of that subject that deliberately practices a kind of artifice. In part, we may attribute this to the cinematic genre of leading men from which transitional era TV pulls, but I suspect it articulates a rather pathetic collective wish, the permission to lie. *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White – who finds his groove by adopting another version of his life, until he doesn't – tells a story of that same appeal, as it might captivate less the “banality” of a life lived singularly, but that which is not allowed to do or think otherwise until pushed to the edge of the real (terminal illness).⁶⁵ The double life is practically a thing of nostalgia as we pay homage to lying in an era where transparency is the most discernible lie around. And of course, this “dilemma” is the site for multiple inversions that explore a melancholia for nuanced secret keeping, while also revealing our continued fetishization of that which is both transparent and immediately accessible.

All three shows eventually tackle this difference, some less psychotically and some less morally, but *The Sopranos*' treatment of this difference is particularly complex, as not only is the difference quickly “flipped” but somewhat minimized in order to hone in on those fantasies of Tony Soprano that hardly appreciate artifice. Because part of *The Sopranos* initial charm is its invitation to get intimate: He's Italian! He's Authentic! He shoots from the hip! *Truth Bullets!* You add Gandolfini's insane levels of talent and this reactionary is ready to go down with the ship. Because most of Tony's discomforts are complaints about perceived lost privileges, a narcissism which fuels both my generation lusting, my favourite fetish objects, and all of my other privileged hysteria. So I'm sort of into the brazenness of Tony's position –*You know what, convenience is inconvenient! The real problem now is that X has too much Y because of X* – which is obviously symptomatic, but is clownishly endearing and acts as a false intimacy generated by that

⁶⁵ See *Breaking Bad* in “Works Cited.” This AMC show is currently available on Netflix, where all enjoyment is now processed and distributed. It's the story of a man with an unfortunate diagnosis, a long-standing professional failure, and an opportunity to compensate via his drug addicted student.

fantasy of stolen enjoyment that lights up a zillion familiar tri-state fantasy objects already discussed (baby boomers, mobs, men, whiteness, tricyclic anti-depressants etc.).

The promise of therapy is another point of access. From the outset, Dr. Jennifer Melfi, Tony's psychiatrist, is *The Sopranos* most relatable character, or at least she is positioned as a trusted site of value-management, as the first few seasons of the series are most invested in establishing an emotional and psychological rigour that might calm me down: who are these people? Where do they live? And, most important, how is everyone *feeling*? Yes, Melfi is overtly coming up against her own master signifiers (Italian-American, Psychiatry, Mother) but at no point in the first three seasons do we *really* care about her participation within a larger nefarious and cynical complex, because she's a pretty good lady. She pays attention and she agreed to counsel a depressed routine-murderer. In the first season finale, after a *Godfather*-styled hit on Tony intervened temporarily to chase away his blues, and we've all been put through the wringer, and Jen tells Tony she is glad he is still alive, we all feel pretty warm inside. Because that's kind of the fantasy operating around Melfi: she is there; she receives you; and she will be the last one there when everything is gone. She's kind of like television.

In the way that fantasy alluding to a working-through is "traversed" (insofar as you believe because you have originally signed on) implies you can wrap your subjectivity around this beginning "point" of desire, *The Sopranos* and its revelations should not ever feel like a new thing, like a sudden revelation: because, in a way, you are warned. "You" are always at every point in this process. So on one hand, if you view the work of the show as a kind of "working-through," the machine that over-turns signifiers turn out to be "fake" because your doing of the work implies it was already done, as this Möbius strip is the temporality of transference and the unconscious. But if the thing is more fetish than fantasy, "revelation" has less to do with locating your desire to be there, and more to do with playing out your cynical knowing better to spite your desire – because, yeah, you were warned. So, neurotically speaking, you already know the worth of a fantasy because you agreed to believe it and/or traverse it. But perversely speaking, you also know the worth of a *Soprano* fantasy and/or fetish object because the show apparently told you and you insisted despite your knowing. So *The Sopranos* might congratulate you on the former so long as it can contain you to behold the latter.

For *The Sopranos*, psychotherapy is a vertiginous offender, as it has to work through “therapy.”⁶⁶ And while that recursion is always probably the case, it is more starkly worked through in that therapy as a fetish item (the therapeutic) and a subject’s relation to the other (establishing a discourse) are distinguished from each other. Because, in terms of our cynical belief in a cure or a resolution, we are warned. In the first season, and in the first episode. After a shady agreement to “technically” take Tony on as a patient, Melfi does not take long to get to the matter of “water birds” and “family.” And despite Tony’s Omertà-based reservations about therapy, he is rather amenable to admission (“The Sopranos”). The ease of Tony’s first “breakthrough” means mob law folds and therapy is kind of a cynical venture for anyone. He can’t breathe; he’s a sad clown; he’s afraid to lose his family. We get all of this information in the first session, which is a nod to the reveal’s “worth” relative to any duration of truth seeking. And while the voice of guilt never dies, hunting it down and killing it does. When Olivia, Tony’s infanticidal mother, actually dies, quite un-dramatically - in her sleep - instead of being memorialized as the great origin story of her inconsolable son/failed hit, she is, according to Tony, no longer his “problem.” *The Sopranos* uses up content of the Tony’s past as a site for therapeutic fodder is used up by season three, while simultaneously emptying out the exaltation of the psychotherapeutic, even if it takes us a few seasons to know that we know, and to know that the show is both somehow waiting and watching our coming-back around to our knowing as perverse symptom.

That Tony uses and misuses Melfi’s insights/platitudes for one gory activity after another by begging the question around the “sociopathic” “weaponization” of therapy operates as a dark comic narrative mechanism, as it increasingly figures therapy as a methodological accomplice. But the relationship figures them as both cynically attached and quite genuinely tearing through it. By the time Tony has quit therapy a few times, survived the threat of divorce, encountered the impossibility of consummating his relationship with Melfi, Melfi’s own deficiency is repeatedly figured along with the nadir of Tony’s nonsense therapy. He continually screws around, but she explicitly and automatically uses words like CBT, Abilify, and “recommendation.” Her culpability – as

⁶⁶ See the series *UnREAL* for a scripted response to the seeming alliance between drama disorders and television-gushing.

it intersects with the crime at the beginning of any transference – is her own staged revelation, which, again, is the recursive and repetitive nature of working-through her own counter-transference *as well* as a kind of bad faith that is more indicative of the industry from which she will seek final authority.

The Sopranos isn't particularly hopeful regarding the subject of therapy. And this is a reasonable sentiment. But, again, if we distinguish between therapy as an engagement and what I have defined as therapeutic, it is most reasonable to assume the show is referring to the latter - unless, of course the show is referring to its "waste" (which it does but only in a dream-like episode "The Test Dream"), the by-product of desire-proper. Therapy is "bullshit," especially so. So the typical Chaseian glib dismissal of a perceived shell game may or may not apply to the portrayal of Tony and Melfi's relationship, but I'm inclined to believe it doesn't; otherwise, the penultimate episode reads as an amateur punishment.

But we are being schooled on our disavowal, and the time we all spent pursuing restoration and resolution, the impossibility of which we were always certain, as "The Blue Comet" takes up the hilarious stupidity of how to terminate therapy that was only ever an agreement to bond over a compulsively performed impasse through a series of fake epiphanies (experienced mostly by Melfi). Elliot Kupferberg (Melfi's therapist)⁶⁷ "incidentally" informs Jen about a Yochelson and Samenow study circulating around the psychiatric community that provides more evidence that sociopaths are not cured by talk therapy, but simply exploit it to refine the very skills that qualify their original diagnosis.⁶⁸ The subsequent events that occur as a result of this finding happen quickly: Jen goes to a party with her colleagues where everyone talks how interesting it is that the study iterates everything they witnessed in medical school; Jen reads the study in private,

⁶⁷ At this point, the character of Elliot, who is crafted as boss of a problematic and an idiotic/ accidental thorn in Melfi's side, hits his stride in these final scenes as maniacally gratified. He is the perverse complement to Carmela's single-session with a psychiatrist who specifically warned her she was paying for his services with "blood money" ("Second Opinion").

⁶⁸ The Yochelson study to which the show refers is a famous study published in the seventies. So even if *The Sopranos* need not correspond with "reality," inter-textually speaking, Yochelson and Samenow's study is extra-diegetic old news. See Samuel Yochelson and Stanton E. Samenow's *The Criminal Personality*, originally published in 1976. The book establishes the premise that a more phenomenological approach to criminal behaviour is more effective than psychodynamic approaches, and thus the show's depiction of the psychiatric community's off-loading of the criminal patient X to behaviourists.

in bed; Tony shows up for therapy in that yellow suit and Jen is particularly intolerant to any bullshit, including her own, after which she stands up, calls his bluff and tells him to “Go Ahead [Leave]!” Everything moves so quickly such that the effect is a textured and exhausted grief, which is sad, hilarious, and stupid. The viewer, then, doubles back on her own relief, which not only accounts for another fake epiphany but squares the three of us, Melfi, Tony, the viewer, as bull-shitters waiting out respective insistences they only cynically believe.

The viewer scrapes along the drama of revelation, learning something she already knows, exasperated not only by the object of revelation, but an exhaustion of the operation. Meanwhile our level of culpability resides somewhere in a mix of grief and feeling deceived by our own practice, a deception which is split by a non-pathological variant as we move through the transference and looping back on knowing something we can only know “twice:” so we have the deception of cynical revelation, the disenchantment in the wake of working-through and then the strange grief permitted to us to sincerely regard our own disavowal. It is that latter item that speaks to an established space in which to regard my own perversion – the duration of my insistence.

Upon being asked to leave, Tony’s last words to Melfi, while a combination of fair question, dumb sentimentalism, and the “moral” imperative used to cloak the action that follows the impasse, are spoken in a peculiar order, which, on the surface, passes for “bad grammar,” syntactically position Melfi as the patient she’s been all along: “You’re telling me that after all this time, after everything we’ve been through, you’re gonna cut me loose (...). You know, I’m gonna be fuckin’ honest. As a doctor, I think what you’re doing is immoral” (Tony Soprano “Blue Comet”). But more accurately, the scene itself is halved by a kind of tsk-ing at my disavowal and the “thump” of traversal-proper such that I am split by an image of Tony Soprano as a shit-heel in a bad suit and Dr. Melfi as a charlatan who is just learning about CBT, *and* a Tony Soprano as yet another guy who throws a tantrum in the face of leaving therapy, and a Dr. Melfi whose final cry, as a human person, is mere exhaustion.

But have I just been Weinered? The termination of Tony’s therapy is hardly a therapeutic moment (not even a back-handed psychotic one). But if disenchantment has simply caught up with itself, then why am I still so sad? Melfi’s back is to the viewer.

We cannot see her face. So she's not "empowered" and she isn't crumbling over the sadness of it all. If the cynicism of the whole therapeutic venture is culpable and in shitty faith, does it necessarily preclude the viewer's working-through against a subject supposed to know? And if both are sort of true, does this goodbye to therapy actually prepare its audience for a different kind of goodbye, even as it facilitates our ability to "watch it"? And this is perhaps why Dr. Melfi and Tony's therapy concludes in the penultimate episode instead of the finale.

Exhausting

There's a beautiful and heart-wrenching scene between Tony Soprano and a dream-moon ("Join the Club"). Having survived a seemingly impossible gunshot wound and fighting a subsequent infection, Tony's induced coma makes for almost three episodes worth of his dream-self doing somebody else's dream job with somebody else's Anglo-Saxon name and bad marriage. *Soprano* dreams are a common means for the show to bend in surreal ways that its waking format only tempts. Unsurprisingly, dreams are a regular site for a more embodied Soprano, another place to live twice, while the body is regularly featured as the best clock available (where you live once, deeply and mercilessly). Part of the season six dream features a transition point that suggests a necessary renunciation, one that Tony cannot cede and all to the tune of Meadows siren child voice coming from trees ("Join the Club"). And the night before he ultimately refuses to die, Tony hangs out with a moon that bobs below a synthetic horizon because *something* wants to be recognized as dying to the lyrics "I don't want to swim forever/ When it's cold I'd like to die"⁶⁹

Throughout the coma-dream, awake-Tony is "breathing" on a ventilator. *The Sopranos* features Tony's body as increasingly older, fatter, laboured, *always* breathing and "for what?" Well, as Olivia would say, "nothing" ("D-Girl"). Because some of this bitching and moaning over fantasy objects that can't indefinitely sustain themselves is a hysterical refusal of just meaningless suffering, which I suppose isn't the worst thing. It's not, actually. It makes sense that Olivia directs this sentiment to A.J. in particular, who as the final "teenager" of the series will hysterically "talk back" to Tony over the bullshit of

⁶⁹ "When It's Cold I'd Like To Die," (Moby, see "Works Cited")

it all so that we answer back: “Yeah, exactly, kiddo, it’s for nothing other than to give you permission to ask this very question, which is a kind of ‘nothing’” (“The Second Coming”). Of course the last time, the finale, we see A.J. he has some sort of job on the set of movie that will never see the light of day about porn-cops hunting down their reflections or some object, certain in the knowledge that A.J. will do nothing with his precious nothing. And if we get weird about that – which I do – it’s because only one thing rivals my irritation at a pervert who starts a fight and runs away on my watch, and it’s a hysteric who throws a tantrum on the watch of whatever daddy for whom I currently and perversely feel sorry. And if it’s not clear why, I’ll tell you again: it’s because misunderstood masculinized immediacies that can’t deal with mortality, but are associated with some sort of body DYING are my favourite thing to watch until we all die. Also, I’m a hysteric who gets mad at other hysterics.

Suffering is where?

But again, I think that *The Sopranos* successfully mourns a feature of my perversion, or at least posits the remnants of disavowal and cultivates the neurotic conditions from which to sustain this grief. Again, this perverse feature positions the endlessness of my access to the fetish object against the total end of a potential intervention, playing types of others off each other, which articulates paradox at work in the duration of enjoyment. In part, the perverse structure of enjoyment and all of its superegoic limitations rely on an investment on that which will never die: I can do this forever. If the neurotic asks “For what do I suffer?” it is in part because the neurotic does not know and his desire is wrapped up in the indefinite potential of the question (any question) geared to a big Other. *That* endlessness operates in *The Sopranos*, as a kind of haunting presence of things that have passed and constitutes a peculiar form of survival rather than acting as an emotional stake in endlessness.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ The “elsewhere” of enjoyment assumed without cost, somewhat spatialized or corporealized, speak to those exhaustible “resources,” the very exhaustion of which are both disavowed and, when figured, to that disavowal. *The Sopranos* cosmos is constantly negotiating with this peripheral nagging body. Of course, within the suburban setting there exists a constant anxiety that the island with which one identifies is always under siege, which is the condition of being there in the first place. The suburbs must always engage in a bad faith battling away of an outside.

We have argued that perversion insists on access. And it does this to tempt an impotent intervention on this access with one eye on a more fundamental halt that would nullify this whole game. In a sense, the pervert's cluster of others suggests an ecologically-driven fantasy, which pits up Nature as both pillaged, serially "regulated," and, yet, somehow avenging.⁷¹ In this chapter, we have posited a witness to perversion that occupies the same position as the assumed Sadean body of immortality – that is, she who is mythically posited as the body that *endures* your enjoyment. In other words, while subjectivity is, in part, situated in the impossibility of assimilating death, the pervert can't even tolerate a discourse that assumes it at any distance. What exists between failed stops and total nullification is the only "end" the pervert can allow, which means, potentially, that the pervert "chooses" annihilation over any articulation of mortality.

The signification (or witness) to my presumed access, my enjoyment without end, is whatever brings me back to my entitled enjoying, back to those "things" which I exhaust unthinkingly, are the persistence of remainders (more accurately, that which I displace, compartmentalize, exclude) that potentially mark my perverse practice - what I have called a meta-superegoic cipher, that body of disavowed and displaced exhaustion, which is perhaps *also* legible as a cry of suffering. While "who really suffers" is a chronic *Sopranos* question, I would argue that the show is indifferent to who "deserved" what, and thus poor Adriana and horrible Olivia mark the same "elsewhere," the same estranged cry, perhaps as they may be divided between the tragic and comic. If Olivia's response to a hypothetical neurotic is "nothing," her response to the pervert is, from a comical position of omnipotence, that Lady of perpetual-disappointment whose suffering paradoxically marks your enjoyment: *Just keep on enjoying. No problem. I'll just be here*

⁷¹ Throughout *The Sopranos*, the "outside" becomes more profound, more immense, more all-encompassing, particularly as it piles up "natural world" signifiers. We are situated relative to that world in the series' first episode, where Tony gets weepy about ducks and "ground floors." Among many examples are "Pine Barrens" (what would happen if you lost a shoe in the snow and ketchup were the only available food source), the pastoral fantasies of Italy and motherhood featured in "Isabella," and the grizzly bear of "The Two Tonys," *The Sopranos* is not shy about its landscape and uses its contradictions to reflect on those contradictions best ignored.

*dying forever. What economy of enjoyment? Don't worry, it's nothing. Carry on, I'll just be here suffering.*⁷²

FINALES and more things that survive

So let's get to the site of compulsive return, HBO event, and seventeen billion reddit threads: *The Sopranos* finale! Set in a New Jersey diner, Tony awaits, presumably, his daughter Meadow, who is the last of his family to arrive. Tony looks up and the scene cuts to black. Chase stages anxiety so literally, it rings as false, an inside-joke meant to alienate the audience who lusted after justice. Between the rhythmic dinging of the entrance bell, Tony's choice of song (Journey's "Don't Stop Believing" literalizing audience investment⁷³), the ominous strangers that mill about, the ordinary conversation acting as a screen ripe for projection and, of course, Meadow's anxiety-inducing failure to parallel park with only two minutes left of the entire series. Viewer desire, by this point, had been ratcheted up to such an intense degree, that the abrupt cut-to a final ten-second long black screen left millions of viewers with an opportunity to make-up an anecdote about physically hitting their television sets.

Did the show step in? Well, yes. Did it enjoy it? Probably not as much as we did. Chase claims to be grossed out by the audience's thirst for blood, but this is television – it's mostly thirst and blood (Harnick par. 14). Is Chase being sanctimonious here, as if what actually survives among the wreckage of my fantasies and fetishes, and whatever duration of my enjoyment they occupy, is the auteur's "outrage" that I enjoyed them? And so maybe I was asking for it and the cut-to-black is the middle finger to my imperative, but no more than my imperative is an effect of that middle finger. I loved *The Sopranos*, in part, because it was mad at me for loving it this much. It's like rationalizing or punctuating the raw deal that is superegoic punishment (Enjoy!) for obedience (I am!!) with some fantasy of auteur unavailability, Chasing Chase, etc., that looks less like the

⁷² SPOILER: Adriana's post-hit "elsewhereness" persists as an external creaturely object - as a cry or howl of nature (for example, the shot of the treetops that punctuate her ride with Silvio and reappear before showing us the spec house Carmela plans to build in "Long Term Parking" and "Cold Stones"). In the latter episode, there is a suggestion that Carmela builds the spec house not to hide the memory of Adriana but to compartmentalize (disavow) what might have happened to her.

⁷³ "It goes on and on and on and on" (See "Don't Stop Believin'" in "Works Cited")

vanishing point of the big Other's desire and more like an object that suffers the more I enjoy it (and thus Chase as pained author is correlative to Saint Olivia – they both suffer for me).

So if *The Sopranos* knows I'm a pervert who loves gross shit, and it also knows it can be the very material through which I can proliferate this enjoyment, did it call the pervert's bluff and intervene? Maybe we were just so excited that we overshot it. In this scenario, the intensity of viewer investment (and perverse access) is instantiated by a contracted duration relative to that episode's traditional stretch, resulting in a ten second remainder of not-viewing – insofar as viewer duration is staged relative to the established therapeutic hour length of an ordinary episode, the silent black screen making up the difference. We desire so intensely and so "fast," only to land hard on the screen we were courting all along. Perhaps *The Sopranos* stages viewer intensity relative to an episode, in the manner of Wile. E. Coyote, so that as a viewer, I am spinning my eyeballs over a black screen?

The addendum to Alenka Zupančič's *Shortest Shadow*, "Love as Comedy," identifies a subjectivizing difference between two "appearances." Here we note that the logic of comedy is the inversion of desire's distances to love's tight spaces (175). It is this inversion of distance that Zupančič describes as a comic move, which we can rewrite as tragedy's indefinite closure and comedy's door that slams in your face (179). This inversion – from cut to overshoot - of the viewer's relationship to a particular duration is actually the same perverse fantasy of release, except it reflectively and explicitly links "the cut" to the fervour of my enjoyment. If I love TV enough, I can love a hole right through it! If we read the staging of the perverse big Other's *No* according to Zupančič's inversion then perhaps we might explain, despite the enormous fanfare, why the mood of the "cut-off" is not particularly somber. Outrunning the duration of an episode versus the "interruption" of that duration actually strikes me as a comedic choice, at least in tone. And *The Sopranos* is funnier than this Very Pressed viewer tends to remember. Maybe comedy is the only real law available to this pervert, or at least articulates the exhaustion of its serial temptation, a kind of *Nope!*

The Moon Belongs to Everyone - You're welcome!

Regardless, this final moment pushes back against any measure in which TV scenes, episodes, content can Happen All of the Time Forever. Taking us back to old-school television practices in which a palpable TV community exists, the re-assertion of the television set is not just a nostalgic gesture. By the airing of the finale (“Made in America”), television was already digitized, on-line, on-demand, so the fantasy of hitting the box itself implicates a device that no longer has much to do with the reception of its content. Banging on the television set or banging any appliance is a GIF that belongs to a particular era, an era where an object that produced virtual effects had an active role in their production, or so we imagined, an era that *The Sopranos* considers haunting in its obsolescence. So that we are brought back to an old “home” that’s not quite home, back to the cathode rays, to the signals that once could be traced along an outdoor wire, back to the mother ship, the box. Years later, *The Sopranos* finale reads as a container, a warm-ish gesture that is lovely if not a bit loving: lovely, in that it doesn’t hate you and it wants stuff to be better, and because it won’t *totally* destroy you before you get a glimpse of your culpability; and by loving, I mean, it isn’t going anywhere. It will always suffer your enjoyment, even if it is largely implicated in your enjoyment, *especially* so.

The source of enjoyment, that perceived point of access, as it is dyadically and superegoically mirrored by the insatiable (m)other, makes television’s own reception of itself a dark matter – and so I am disoriented, not sure how to read this reception. Again, the television that contains television is a clumsy home run, and it should be. Because television is only ever always *there*, which is a terrible, but real extimacy. It is television that finds Tony Soprano in the living room after a “really long day,” always meeting him halfway, as TV does, as the only thing TV *can* do. Television as mere punctuation for sponsored time is Don Draper’s second favourite place in the universe.⁷⁴ When solace cannot be sought from the pure ad alone, TV is where broken Don goes (sometimes he goes outside on a porch, when it rains) to cry, care, sleep, work, and drink. In *Mad Men* and *The Sopranos*, the television object is both the eye that sees, the content, and duration of suffering, and the alien glow that receives. Television is both shelter and reason in which you take refuge. At every point you may enjoy, there is television, to be loved, to hate you for loving it, to possibly even love you, as if burrowed deep inside its glow were

⁷⁴ A lady’s bosom is at least an equivalent.

just *you*, or an index that you do, in fact, desire. And like an offender whose only employability left is to work with other offenders, or a recovering alcoholic who stays sober by helping those who need him, it is for TV to do a job this wretched.

Um, I love you, too?

Chapter Three

Television's Television: Middles, Mores and Other Flickering Objects

MASS

Wondering about your own fantasy-regard, your loving, your fandom, means that you are repeatedly stuck in that “loop” between wishing plainly for something real and shitting on that very wish. I tend to defend middles, or at least I try to defer their dismissal. This impulse means I am always fiddling with the problem of immediacy (or intimacy), sometimes thoughtfully, often perversely. Because I actually want my lunch with Howard Stern and the cast of *Transparent* to end in a series of pseudo-therapeutic “I hear you say...” statements. But really the best I can and should ever do is say all of those amazing words very quickly or to a melody. So, to escape the suffocating critical space of reactionary North American pop-culture, a person may go looking “elsewhere” for the weird and the anxious, and find a more forgiving game -- one that doesn’t hate you as much. Maybe. Or maybe, from the get-go you have a sharper-object choice than I do. Most people do. I eat most things, partly from a sense of pleasure, partly from a love of challenge, but particularly if it’s set up to be consumed without discretion – quick and lazy, please, no trace of investment preferred. My favorite suburb is the one in the open mall with a soundtrack of everyone crying to a commercial. The garbage buffet invitation reads like it has been puffy-painted accidentally for me by everyone in Oz who isn’t The Wizard. Even *that* is too sexy. Because over-estimating the awesomeness of my consumption means also disavowing the 700 instants where I proclaim that “*X (who is a terrible person) is really Great and Just What We need*” to *Y (who is, in fact, the Worst person you can think of)*. So this is the danger of people like me in a culture of limited critical allowance: the swing from a cynical liberal wish-object to a Courtney Love-object means that engagement with the latter energizes the undead-end of the former. In the end, I have stuff I wish I believed in and a bunch of collectibles, a tangle of humiliating fetishes, at once a private language and superegoic meta-language -- a collection that makes up middles of yore.

Roused to assembly? Probably not.⁷⁵

Nots, Mores and Soss

How did TV's latest taste system establish itself? Against a lot of other television. As covered in this thesis' introduction, VP-TV's self-branding is a coalescence of a few key events, but HBO's revised programming according to my "choice" and demand, as it overlaps with increased overall production, is a crucial dimension of its success. Run on a subscription basis, HBO's appeal is to its viewers. Not only could "better" programming be produced but also the veneer of exclusivity would, no doubt, sustain and increase viewership. In 1989, the company's slogan ran as "Simply the Best," which is also the title of a 1989 Tina Turner song and was the score of a Coke commercial (Santo 31). Hardly their best effort, but HBO was clearly symbolizing a territory that had been previously marked by the very nature of subscription-based television (what was once known as "pay TV"). Over the next decade, HBO set itself apart by offering unique productions⁷⁶ under the banner of a handful of slogans. For those of us religiously familiar with the slow rise of "HBO" from analogue snow against a chorus of relief, HBO's self-referential branding has had varying dramatic effects. And while critics lose their minds over the "not" in "It's Not TV," HBO's more recent branding, "Get More," strikes me as essential to understanding this fetish object that is not-TV, especially as it comes to fruition in 2011's "So Original."⁷⁷

Today's television output is obviously better than the Darren Star era. Subscription cable and the network television that followed suit have resulted in some impressive works of serial drama, comedy, and documentary that qualify for more than kitsch curiosities on Media Studies syllabi. Part of this shift is a numbers game.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ A reference to Walter Benjamin's "The Collector" in *The Arcades Project*: "We construct here an alarm clock that rouses the kitsch of the previous century to 'assembly' " (205).

⁷⁶ Between 1996 and 2001, HBO original programming went from 25% to 40%. HBO made the move from a first-run movie service to a "premium" network "that produce[d] and present[ed] the most innovative original lineup of contemporaneous feature films" (Edgerton, 10).

⁷⁷ Between 1996 – 2009, HBO used "It's Not TV. It's HBO." HBO switched over to "Get More" as it also overlapped with the slogan for the HBO website and ended up with "So Original" in 2011.

Production of TV-content has increased to match an increase in platforms, availability of access and the new quality of demand.⁷⁹ Proliferation is partly responsible for the emergence of more sophisticated, as well as bizarre and periodically amazing, productions. And so it is not a surprise that proliferation is served back to me as the TV ethos of Netflix and Amazon binge-seasons: eleven-hour movies in fifty-minute clumps. In part, unpacking television's "more" means calling out the television as an effect of its distribution, so that the object may be aligned with its proliferative technologies of access. And perhaps as a means of evading television's amorphous place, more is overshadowed by, and played against, television's Not. The bulk of television is reproduced in tandem with an exclusive product that defines itself as being other to the medium's "spirit," which means for the subject of television, "television" is elided, its bulk disavowed. Not-TV "happens" against an exploding mass it never assimilates.

Pink Champagne on Ice⁸⁰

Not that long ago, the opening credits of prime time television dramas were a minute and a half long. This title sequence featured wooden shots from previous episodes to rev up viewer zeal and fidelity, ostensibly producing a sense of appointment taking place between parent(s), household, members, box, and peer. The opening credits presented the main actors in order of importance with their names inscribed below stilted images of characters-in-motion. Closing credits were once a series of stills from the aired episode scored by a variation of the opening theme song. Single episodes clocked almost 45 minutes and seasons consisted of at least 25 episodes. Once upon a time, stock

⁷⁸ See Lotz's *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, in particular, "Making Television," which discusses production opportunities relative to shifting economic models.

⁷⁹ This includes an increase in genre variations, which are often production's response to its own objects and their reception. Entire networks that once shifted content type (such as MTV and VH1) to devote their attention to reality content now feature scripted shows that reflect the demand for reality content context: for example, Bravo's *Girlfriend's Guide to Divorce* and VH1's *Hindsight* (both coma-inducingly terrible) are productions that respond to a demand for the setting or features of popular genres without the genres themselves.

⁸⁰ See "Hotel California" in "Works Cited." When the shame is both real and so not, this Eagles classic is never too far away. It's like magic.

footage was acceptable and B-storylines were a thing. Most scores sounded like Steely Dan writing Muzak for Wal-Mart. And we were totally cool with that.⁸¹

We still are.

As television worth watching supposedly proliferates, its recent examples dog-paddle among the ripple effects of what is always-already a nostalgic object. No matter. While this insecurity and maximization of “what works now” makes for wobbly writing, we forgive its slips. Mediocre critical successes like *Orange is the New Black* and *House of Cards* are renewed and revered.⁸² So whether it was the “garbage” airing from the eighties to mid-nineties, the aftermath of the event-like status of HBO, or the rapidly aging genius-apparatus of just last night, critical filters have not irreversibly shifted; we should take television’s commodity status and our endorsement of this status for granted. By the spring of 2015, *Grey’s Anatomy* will have aired for eleven seasons and I will have watched all of it. Twice. *Orange is the New Black* is okay – but at five second intervals and randomly. And so are a zillion other “middlebrow” shows, in particular those invisible copies of procedurals, for which we enjoy failing to locate an audience, especially aloud: “Who watches x?,” we ask. *Everyone*.

As we explored in chapter one, the middle is also where we notoriously unabashedly generate fantasy, finding its groove in “free-market” instability, insecurity, and proliferation. Critical fantasy and fantasy of critique typically bifurcate in this groove, such that “stand-offs” between memes are endlessly reproduced. Subsequently, the isotopic and the prolific combined effect a sense of mass opportunity to speak with what is in actuality a severe limitation on what can be said – the latter not belonging to a schema of prohibition but a fundamental lack of discourse or subject position that belongs to the obligation of permission (as discussed). Whatever your television loves, most of television belongs in the two degrees of what *can* be said. Most of television, even if artful, cannot sustain itself or even artfully *fail* to sustain itself. But, really, most television doesn’t try. Most television doesn’t care. Most television is deeply reactionary. Most television is cynical. Most television still hates you. Because the condition of

⁸¹ Right Now, they all sound like BBC’s *Broadchurch*.

⁸² But at least Laura Prepon has regular work and Regina Spektor wrote a song. If you must, see “Works Cited.”

good television is not terrible television, but more television. For every *Sopranos* there are 14,000 *Castles*, *SVUs* and Netflix. For every Andy Cohen-derived symptom that deserves its own oil painting, there is a huge “portion “of internet activity that *is* our thoughts and feelings about whether Shonda Rhimes truly understands diversity (read: she doesn’t care and neither do you). A zillion people fall asleep every night to the sweet sounds of “overruled” and “sustained” against a courtroom echo. David E. Kelley, Chuck Lorre, Dennis Leary are happening all of the time. Your primetime line-up averages about fifteen rape admissions per evening. This is television. And if television is ever “good” it’s because television is gross.

Setting aside its structural function, should we presume an indicator of genre, format and content on the dial, the “middle” of television can be found roughly on networks (still operating) during primetime (also) – it *is* what we are supposed to be “post.” It’s where you find the procedurals, the medical dramas, the murder porn, the celebration of tech surveillance, identity, family and the *normalization* of every cynical permission/reactionary prohibition you can imagine. It’s where you find *The Good Wife* (not a judgment – I get it).⁸³ If one smoothes out the accordion of this middle, the television of television, as it were, you find a rippling between TV maneuvers and their regurgitation of increasingly, at best, “kitschy” gestures and genres, which are never entirely exhausted. This frequency is the C-list, and its movement is fairly familiar insofar as you can always find critics, theorists, authors, and entire schools of philosophy getting bent out of shape about it. Sentiment-wise, the middle follows the law of all mediocrity: expectations are lowered not only to excuse the good-enough, but also to laud it as a fucking superstar. The “problem” of the middle is a requisite anxiety and a totally reasonable target for anyone who cares about new and old forms of reproducibility, the onslaught of horde-like practices implicated in new *techne*, and their social and political significance, as well as those individuals who take a certain pride in their own self-curation (which, whatever, I mostly call this buying stuff and what that looks like to somebody else). While the middle’s brow is always being penciled in, its shape is always the same: acceptance, immediacy, permission, and its reactionary

⁸³ Surprise! *The Good Wife* is the middle of the middle of the... where the three faces of network primetime, Julianna Margulies, Chris Noth, and Christine Baranski, chew forever.

scattering. Even if we find the odd pleasing and accidental symptom in the persistent fantasy of access we are currently peddling, like when teeth turn a blue-white or an unfinished *Homeland* episode slips past the guards and we are treated to a bomb site in the form of a green screen,⁸⁴ “the rest” of television is both its “true” and weirdly disavowed provision.

The middle is not a static lump at the centre of television content. Targeting an emotional register, the middle, no matter how clunky, speaks to you – even from a show that can’t possibly be saying anything. For example, the ideological tic for me, the identification hiccup, occurs when a *Real Housewife* Lady Person Seems Normal or when the *Bachelorette* features Amy Schumer.⁸⁵ So against the symptom is that Greek Chorus (even in television’s “trash”): NYC’s Bethenny Frankel and Carole Kennedy, BH’s Kyle Richards, NJ’s Caroline Manzo, and so many cast members of *Big Brother*.⁸⁶ I mean, it’s the moment where I think this is all a real thing and everyone understands each other and if I met one of these ladies under normal circumstances (because outside the show these women solely do normal things) we’d just click over hilarious cultural clichés and universal lady-truths like lunchtime-only bulimia and vaginoplasticity. At the moment I think I care (I! do!), I also think that Bethennycarolkyle are just like 400 girls I grew up with, as the quilting-point ladies are also those ladies who have both economically and socially sold themselves to me as Woman as a fantasy of the *familiar*. But I am always torn between my fantasy and its symptom: Between “X” - who would never talk to me, even as I automatically love her (fantasy) and “Y” - whom I will eventually sign up to defend till my last breath (symptom). Here, in this economy, is the difference between fantasy and symptom: it is a case in which “X” is that woman who is buying a house paid for by her boobs and “Y” is that woman selling a house to pay for her boobs.

⁸⁴ *Homeland*, season two, episode one, as streamed prior to airing when a copy was leaked in 2012. There is no current access of which I am aware.

⁸⁵ Season 11, episode 3.

⁸⁶ Bethenny Frankel and Carole Radziwill of *The Real Housewives of New York City*, Kyle Richards and Eileen Davidson of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* and Caroline Manzo of *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*.

Ultimately, facing television means establishing a relationship to the middle object, itself very slippery, and a prompting to think about the ways in which the middle-object not only organizes fantasy and, thusly, seems to escape it. Besides being the site of proliferated reactive fantasy, television's own middle is that middle of a conventionally middlebrow object. So that if television's middle does almost-nothing, it still, if not by quantity alone, reminds us that the girth and fever of very pressing television's fandom (as it supposedly points to a "superior" medium) does not automatically justify itself, and subsequently delineates "the middle" as an insistent "difficult" object that either recasts the medium's latest pretense or provides an opportunity to explore the vortex of middles. And so I am defining the problem of the middle as that object whose familiarity we either take for granted or unproblematically presume a fantasy of our own exception relative to this object. When it comes to middles, we are either guilty of a deadly embrace of immediacy that speaks to those fetishized deadlocked law objects or a fantasy of critical exception (of a kind of fantasy-abstinence as a "discernment"): the sloth mouth to the hypocritic's eye.⁸⁷ In terms of perversion, we are either the cynic who has access (an empath!) or the cynic whose distance from their access is a disavowal of their participation.

We are all Tiffany-Twisted

Marked differentiations such as those of A and B films, or of stories in magazines in different price ranges, depend not so much on subject matter as on classifying, organizing, and labeling consumers. Something is provided for all so that none may escape; the distinctions are emphasized and extended. (Adorno, Horkheimer, "Culture Industry" 123)

What does taste do for television? This thesis does not provide a thorough consideration of taste and its histories. Mostly, the reason is the sheer vastness of the discourses surrounding taste, but partly it is that my thinking about television only engages specific fantasies around how one affects taste as a symptom of a problematic

⁸⁷ This sloth mouth is the real of the pervert's access as it is also reflected in the ferocity of superegoic enjoyment. The hypocritic's eye is "cynical" and thus perverse insofar as he is exempt vis-à-vis knowing better.

relation to fantasy (detailed in previous chapters). The taste “system” of TV is hyperbolic in nature, and while it is always being engaged, with its recaps and A.V clubs,⁸⁸ it is also strangely alienating in its blandly emphatic “liking of things,” as if my one-note adoration of a thing not only substitutes my interpretation of this object, but also qualifies it. And, as suggested in the previous section, we can determine that where proliferation is concerned, a taste-system pumps a lot of shit through the pipes by calling-out a middle or an object that should be evacuated, while at the same time entirely disavowing that the middle is more rule than exception. In fact, while television is busy organizing its superlatives, TV says almost nothing about its C-list. What is there to say? TV does not think TV exists. To a degree, this is probably true. It is somewhat unthinkable that anyone watches *The Big Bang Theory* and yet, here we are.

When TV accounts for its taste, it also obliquely accounts for its middle, even if all it talks about are its bests, and worsts, as if the unconscious of taste were those materials that don’t even register. But “discourses” of taste tend to orient themselves around an acknowledged middle, calling out the middle explicitly (The middle is x), usually raging against it. After all, calling out the middle is itself a sure sign of the middle at the helm. The only people I know who consider themselves cultured are bound to a rather banal conversation. And while I’d rather leave the room, I am not entirely comfortable dismissing it. From time to time, I need to be schooled. Perhaps according to some transcendental metrics of taste, there is a quantifiable difference between someone who likes shitty things and someone who *knows* how to like them. If I am admitting to this tier, I am inclined to think that there is some rite of passage, along with some “study,” such that in order to love dumb shit, you are required to pass through good-taste, like a bat mitzvah (speaking of taste), which ideally ends in your obliquely adopted critique-without-resentment. But I am torn between embracing a middle and the suspicious “solution” of perpetuating a taste system, knowing better than to dismiss the logistics of taste and other conventions I do not understand – not wanting to adopt either position too seriously. And this is why Virginia Woolf both annoys and satiates me.

⁸⁸ See popular sites *The A.V. Club*, *Previously.tv*, *TrashTalkTV* (details in “Works Cited”). In addition, most online forums dealing with television content will also offer episode recaps.

In a letter to a reviewer and as a part of a bid for BBC audiences, Virginia Woolf declares herself a proud highbrow among the “Betwixt and Between” middles.⁸⁹ Clarifying the highbrow position, Woolf draws an alliance between high and lowbrow, which are, respectively, desiring at the expense of mind and body, as the high “ride across country in pursuit of ideas” and the low “who ride [their] body in living and at a gallop across life.” Regardless of its exclusivity, Woolf’s snobbery is inflected with self-awareness, and her rant maintains a sense of humour regarding her own imaginary relative to her privilege, as she refers to her own puttering and “rambling” about in a suburban garden. She makes up the details of her fantasy of middlebrow indulgence as she so desires, as she so clearly enjoys, and then ends her letter with a vow to stab whoever dare call her middlebrow with her pen.

While Woolf’s snobbery chips away at her moral superiority, her point is hardly one of fairness. She is clear: the middle is less an aesthetic deficiency and more an ethical failure. And so the middle is exactly what you imagine a manic depressive account of the middle to be, devoid of passion, risk, fidelity, and a willingness to die or kill. Still, despite professing the love affair between high and low, Woolf’s letter and its vacillation from fevered pitch to self-mockery reminds the reader that the conversation about brows itself is more middle than it can outright own (repetitive, easy to proliferate, potentially deluded) – even as it excuses Woolf from a conspicuous over-insistence of ultimate middlebrow exclusivity. Thus the anxiety of middlebrows is also a middle anxiety, drawing our eye back to the tastemaker as he who worries most about his own tastelessness. The status of television’s brow is similarly self-reflexive, such that its insistence on its own overt critical value is another reminder that television is hardly this at all. Television’s fevered class designation is less about how to define an art object and more about how to enjoy the hyperbole of its discourse and reproduce the conversation.

Middle as “objet a”

When we generate middles, we don’t talk about them. When we talk taste, however, we do talk *about* those middles, as if to apprehend them means only to hysterically tear them apart or cynically disavow our proximity to the object. But upon

⁸⁹ See “Woolf” in “Works Cited” for on-line source.

talking about *taste*, I likely take on the middle as that object I can ride, calling myself a defender, as if all clever and charming people didn't consider this critical position unique, especially with respect to their very pressing engagement with television. Okay, so I defend the problem of the middles, which is in part not being swayed by the "critical" subject positions available to me as they are situated relative to taste and a middle object. But what does this entail? In part, it means thinking about the object not restricted to a definition by negation.

In order to argue the ideological function of a discourse of taste, Pierre Bourdieu (like Woolf) locates a consistent thread within objects in "poor taste" to tag those objects that might not register with an aesthetic. To be clear, Bourdieu is not talking about a middle, and Woolf's middle deems "low" and "high" as equally exalted so that "poor taste" can be located precisely in that middle. And among those oppositions of high/low, culture/barbarism, restriction/emancipation, their inversion, their deconstruction, their reassertion, the taste-less is mostly an instance of the facile, the sincere, and immediacy of the "vulgar." Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* revisits Schopenhauer and Kant to consider the vulgar object relative to the pure critique in order to argue for the class constant, in which "distinction" maintains human domination over nature and whatever social relations are necessary to sustain this notion:

[I]t could be shown that the whole language of aesthetics is contained in a fundamental refusal of the facile, in all the meanings which bourgeois ethics and aesthetics give to the word; that 'pure taste', purely negative in its essence, is based on the disgust that is often called '*visceral*' (it 'makes one sick' or 'makes one vomit') for everything that is '*facile*'-facile music, or a facile stylistic effect, but also '*easy virtue*' or an '*easy lay*.' The refusal of what is easy in the sense of simple, and therefore shallow, and 'cheap', because it is easily decoded and culturally 'undemanding', naturally leads to the refusal of what is facile in the ethical or aesthetic sense, of everything which offers pleasures that are too *immediately accessible* and so discredited as '*childish*' or 'primitive' (as opposed to the deferred pleasures of legitimate art). Thus people speak of 'facile effects' to characterize the obtrusive elegance of a certain style of journalistic writing

or the too insistent, too *predictable charm* of what is called '*light*'
(Bourdieu, my emphases, 487)

Bourdieu's post-script zeros in on "the facile," which is followed by other synonyms not listed above (e.g. schmaltsy, cloying, flashy). Unlike Woolf, certainly, Bourdieu is explicitly and quite seriously looking to take on taste as a commodity, which means that, to a degree, those taste-less objects doing the heavy lifting are imbued with potential redemption, particularly as Bourdieu defines the apprehension of these objects through a critical mechanism of disgust, working as another dimension of horror. Again, as a defender of middles, I can get on board. So what does Bourdieu have to offer us in terms of a consistent phenomenology of middles that Woolf couldn't provide directly? Let's note the long strand running through Bourdieu's *long* list of low-objects – symptomatic of an object that can't be pinned down and more indicative of a feature of the subject - which is not that which is sensual, but that which is immediate, near, within uncomfortable proximity. And the object of immediacy is that middle-object – the tasteless thing – that is both a problem, in so far as assumed immediacy is part of an ideological and pathological set of complexes as described above, but the spatializing of this object such that it corresponds with problematic intimacy is worth our attention in so far as watching and loving TV is concerned. What can be done with distance?

Redemption spotting and kitsch middles

Obviously, the fantasy machine of masscult is not unique to television. Any critique of media taking place in the last century-plus can justly make this observation. In addition, it can claim that such objects do more than generate and reproduce cultural desire and anxieties. According to Walter Benjamin's "On Some Motifs of Baudelaire" and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility," Benjamin's aura, the object's "magic of distance" and the work of art's "unique existence at the place where it happens to be" is not a bid for restoration, although the aura is a "symptomatic process" that indicts a mass-cult mode of production (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 221). This lands Benjamin in between two figurations of Bad Stuff. On one hand, you have the degradation of labour and all of its nostalgias with respect to a kitsch object that has lost

an almost mystical-material significance (although, the glint of this significance is only legible in its disappearance- that is, the aura requires an aura), and yet it is the demotion of the object that requests a follow-through to a kind of bareness, a nudity, a “decrepitness,” an indecency.⁹⁰

Kitsch is that object “worn through by habit” and patched up “with cheap maxims,” broken but stubborn and lingering somewhere between the nefarious and the viscerally telling, as the body of kitsch does not entirely distinguish itself from the body of the receiver – kitsch “advances” (Menninghaus 41). To measure the motion of kitsch is to catch the object’s move from invisibility (ideology) to a luscious *problem*. And this very enjoyable thing is also alluding to a valence of indecency, as the “desire to bring things closer spatially and humanly” (what we have deemed also implicated in perverse and ultimately cynical access) is somehow overturned to reveal the ways in which nudity is constructed and immediacy is performed (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 223). This is not an effect of disenchantment; it is re-enchantment; it is why if you can swing it, you will love the “phony spell of the cult of personality” and you will hit the middle where it hurts, and learn how to *do kitsch* (Benjamin 231).

All of that sounds like magic. Let’s back up.

An object’s state of indignity is, according to Benjamin, the object’s potentially redemptive condition. For Benjamin, the mass-cult object is deceptively hate-able, if guilty, and part of an irreversible process of commodification that should be seen to its end, such that after a commodity’s trajectory is always, at best, further desecration, so it can achieve trash status in order to melancholically reveal the fantasy at hand. At this point, the object becomes the work of collectors, artists, imitators, slackers and the finders of stuff that potentially reinvent the place of that stuff.

The middle of television is generated in the space between more and narrow. And it doesn’t ride high against feverish perversion of morale, or even at an excitable pitch until it screws up or somebody records their girlfriend crying at it and then posts

⁹⁰ In “Motifs,” Benjamin uses Baudelaire as an example of the poet and poetry’s body as it lives at the expense of modern fantasy.

that recording on YouTube.⁹¹ No. Middle television proper isn't trash; it's *just* stuff. And stuff is invisible. But the internet, whatever *that* object is, has its own means of turning stuff into something "else," even if that media cannot specialize in melancholic decay. Less overtly temporal, the speed of proliferated talk against the strain on discourse variation, of more versus narrow, makes the viralization of mid-cult television content, while not particularly emancipatory, obvious enough that its fantasies warrant my critical attention.⁹²

Kitsch is the wish of the middle when it's too exposed, when it's no longer simply doing its job. Like a magic eye book that just requires my persistence, a middle has that something to show you that it isn't showing you *yet*. The middle's is a sad, dumb cry but you can hear it. While it moves you, and it does, the middle wants to be moved. Any defamiliarizing device will do. Internet access of television content -- streaming, in particular -- spins the mass block of TV-stuff into a bizarre and often hilarious cloud of affect. Pace, iteration, access, and response-activity make up the critical register necessary to reconsume fantasy. And so the middle is further degenerated to its rightful position as indecent when 400 memes of a very-special-sentence fragment are rewired as a sickness, and discourses of identity, health, truth, and entitlement look more like a duty than a desire. Hyperbole, emphasis, significance, the ten eight things That Definitely Make You X, all of this excitation about copies of what are clearly one object of insane demand: *one massive object*. Not terrible for a zillion re-tweets and tumbblings.

More on more (analysis)

But is this it to "more"? How is "more" related to "closer"? And what does it mean for locating the middle-object as it is relevant to television? How is the middle not

⁹¹ Look up "McDreamy" and "girlfriend crying" on youtube. Try a few. They are all unique. Or see "Girlfriend's reaction to death if [sic] Mc Dreamy" in this thesis' "Works Cited."

⁹² Another kitsch component, or that which can be magically retuned, the commercial! Whatever you want to say about middle television, its occasional strength is that it might contain television's most crystalline middle, its most banal idiocy and weird dignity: the advertisement according to a restricted format, which is basically finding an in-use nineteenth century print ad for heroin, as if the ad is a strangely current-nostalgic object. The fake class system of television is somewhat organized by where it puts its ads and in what way it does or does not disrupt my nostalgic fantasy where ads are implicated.

just another dumb reflex of a stressed out imaginary that is more habit than practice, more flash than illumination? As discussed, “more” indicates the transgression that organizes desire, a deadlock reflected in the superego as that agent of compulsory enjoyment. Throughout Lacan’s figuration of *jouissance* according to different registers, a negotiation occurs in which, as Chiesa illustrates, desire, bound to its deadlock, can only reproduce those terms that implicate a primordial real, a beyond that is One. Already implicated in Seminars VII, XI and Chiesa’s account of the former, the perverse “subject” can be read as an outgrowth of the deadlock, even if the relationship is not entirely stable. In any case, the promise of a massive *jouissance* and its short distances conjure up a subject, terrified of anxiety and shut out and/or refusing desire, that stages a stand-off with enjoyment by absorbing it symbolically (a realization), and disavowing a transcendental signifier/law, and always positing a body that can indefinitely endure this set-up. Thus “more” can be read according to both phallic *jouissance* (desire) and its less-than-one count, and the pervert that positions himself as the terms of the count disavowing the structuration of desire.

In both cases, “more” is, well, more, or at least high-frequency. But as previously discussed, the thanatic results differ between neurotic and perverse organizations of enjoyment relative to the law. Further defining the subject’s desire (neurotic), in *Seminar XX*, Lacan zeros in on phallic *jouissance* as that organization of the signifier that is desire driven. Thus desire’s movement is based on, and driven by, a structurally necessary failure of signification. But *Seminar XX* explicitly designates the condition of this failure as a fantasy of an “Other” *jouissance* that is all of *jouissance* (Lacan, XX 98). Thus “[j]ouissance never fails and that never fails to diminish still further the latter jouissance we have” (Fink, *Reading Seminar XX* 36). Paltry enjoyment against enjoyment’s whole means that desire is somewhere between not-enough and a “more,” relative to an imagined entirety. *Seminar XX* goes on to elaborate the significance of this Other that “ex-ists relative to the signifier of the one” as an “order” that is not-one.

Thus, at this stage, Lacan takes up an “enjoying substance” that resides with drive objects, which ultimately indicate less a being-that-enjoys and, instead, a point that indicates desire’s movement or insistence (Barnard 114). And this point or other order – that which is not of a better, bigger, fuller, truer, measurable *jouissance* – is also “the

feminine order.” The Lacanian feminine is a fantasized and real order of enjoyment (fantasized as one and real as in not one – so “not”). According to her location as a phallic object such that the positioning of the real as a fantasy of an enjoying-other is correlative to a maternal superego that eats you for breakfast, and whatever fantasy of ladies you have that enjoy differently, or to whom your enjoyment cannot possibly measure up. There are two ways of fantasizing the real related to the feminine: the *Seminar XI Enjoy!* of that punishing psychical agent overlaps with the feminine tease that you can only enjoy up to a point—that is, enjoy her. So “more” is both a command and a horizon, something coming at you and something always pulling away.

Is television’s proliferation or disavowed “glut” feminine? And since that which is more in the sense of “common” is where I locate the middle, is the middle feminine? I guess that makes her the heights, depths, and the remainder – basically anything that I can turn into a problematic object that generates fantasy (the “bulk” of which I disavow), which includes the middle-as-slippery object. So now we have three figurations of a kind of object-cause (or *objet a*): infinitely demanding, the infinite, and ubiquitous. The third is tricky. It’s something like vulgar minus the sex appeal, or maybe sex appeal minus the appeal, or what Alenka Zupančič calls a feature of the “transcendent-accessible” that which, spatially, is conceived as a kind of negative-space, an immensity that is not defined by its impossibility, crowned queen precisely for this feature (Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow* 165).

And what about our fan relative to our pervert? If TV’s middles and mores are fantasies of femininity, how is perversion implicated? The pervert is in a unique position as an instantiation, refusal and reproducer of the deadlock (pure desire defined as transgression) and strikes me as the asymptotic hand of that other hand responsible for shitty fantasies of the feminine. This does not deem the pervert female or female by way of infantilization – although he is infantilized – but rather the child-partner of the maternal – that which denies the challenge to fantasy that the feminine brings to the table because he can’t even allow himself the anxiety that would get Mom off his back.

Y' just can't kill the be-e-east! Obscene victory

The thing about television is that it always wins in the end. Television always wins. If we didn't kill [these shows], they would kill us.⁹³

Chapter two explored the perverse against the fantasies and realities of exhaustion, the way in which “quality” television positions itself as that which outlasts (and counts) the enjoyment it, in part, produces and so is also that object that remains. Chapter three considers television’s “more” as that which also does not “count” and so the middle is the flickering TV mass, which means that in this case, television’s libidinal victory is less a matter of time and a matter of stuff. By this I mean that the inexhaustibility, however true or fantasized, surrounding my enjoyment of mass-cult is less about a duration of punishment, or an accounting for the duration of my enjoyment, and more about the simultaneous girth and non-existence of the television object. As an immanent substance that cries eternal war, both in the manner of the above Seinfeld quote and the definition of kitsch as “visceral” or an embodied force that can be mobilized, the middle’s “genre” of encroachment is closer to horror and camp; like all blob fantasies, television is always coming.

Because the middle is obscene; and yes, its obscenity implicates a violation of sorts, a violation of an aesthetic or psychical regulation. But is this violation the “cringe” at the centre of somebody else’s “binge”? Have the middle-aversive taste-meters gone off because *Dawson’s Creek* tried too hard or Grandma Rose was a stereotype?⁹⁴ Is taste the real object here? If today’s television is only a crass staging of viewer discernment that, however accidentally, turns the tables on taste, it is also an opportunity to consider the middle’s “threat” as less a matter of symbolizing my enjoyment according to a taste fantasy, and the necessary recoiling that informs the encounter with the enjoyment-object.⁹⁵

⁹³ This is a quote of Jerry Seinfeld as himself in “Flip” *The Larry Sanders Show*. See this thesis’ “Works Cited” for more details.

⁹⁴ I am referring to THE Grandma Rose of *Beverly Hills 90210*, specifically that episode where Andrea compares using a fake school district to hiding from the Nazis (“Down and Out [of District] In Beverly Hills”). Oh whatever! It was the 90’s and all TV was like this except for *Twin Peaks*. In fact, if you watched *Twin Peaks*, you also watched *90210* even if you didn’t. *90210* makes frequent *Twin Peaks* references and we all know that Kelly Taylor and Laura Palmer are the same person.

Refusing middle objects on the grounds of taste, either *The Very Best* or *Very Worst*, reveals a gag reflex that speaks to shameless objects and the shame-filled subjects that *Cannot Love Them*. Consumers I know who will shoot only high or low, avoiding the middle, will sometimes drop the discourse of taste to describe an aversion to the intimacy that the middle assumes, which quite fairly seems like a violation. So if you can't handle prime time television, are you just afraid of your feelings? Yes, YES, but only indirectly, and yet NO. The middle-avoidant audience type cannot stand the nudity of kitsch, but it seems less about what is exposed and more about a disavowal of what might be involved in exposure. If the middle object were just a precocious kid in a terrible choir murdering a song at the top of her lungs, we have to distinguish between the kid and whatever shame is absent from her performance. Do I cringe because of this kid? No, that kid is amazing and I am probably a bit concerned about how this will play out in high school or how it played out in my own – so that's about me. And it is an obvious joy to be embarrassed for that which is not about me. But the cringe trigger for the middle's brand of exposure is its distance from an acknowledged gaze, a distance it also does not acknowledge. So according to the middle, who is watching this? NobodyEverybody.

As I have discussed, television is partly energized by its status as second-best and the ways in which that unsettles us and unsettles itself. As much as this "placement" is a recipe for discomfort, television, like many second bests, is comfortable enough with its status often because of the tautology of the status itself. In other words, even within its hyperbole, television behaves second-best relative to its second-bestness. And the dynamic of the gaze relative to "mediocrity" probably drives people battier than the mediocre object. Because what is then exposed? What happens to exposure if the object has an audience, but neither the audience nor the object seems to be part of the scene? Where is the enjoyment? Is *television* at the very least enjoying this? The Middle-avoidant constitutes a horrified third party to a scene between a not-great thing and its

⁹⁵ Yes, this gross-out of the middle has a pre-objectal quality, despite, or perhaps because of, the alienation implicated by mass-reproducibility. So problematizing television as a kind of mass or advancing body (that object which preexists and will outlast) positions both TV and its middle in primary or early development (pre abjection and pre-object) - as if an encounter with the TV object from most directions tickles the psychic arena that is technically responsible for early fantasizing, rather than those symbolic mechanisms required to give this encounter any significance.

not-that great audience, where neither party acknowledge the watching or the being watched. And *this* is obscene, certainly more obscene than the “shamelessness” of the exhibitionist on Bravowhatever, who obviously assumes she is watched, overshooting whatever embarrassment I could ever, ever, ever feel for her. So what of the symptomatic recoil? The obscenity of the disavowed properties of looking then falls on the shoulders of those who walked in on the dullest primal scene imaginable, the middle-scene. It is thus the perceived responsibility of the middle-averse to be ashamed for all of us, as if this were their calling, as if middle-*participants* had assumed this all along (they do and they do not). An ob-scene.

The bingeing and the cringing of television are, both of them, gross and stupid. Made of hard stuff, television bounces back always as a kind of awe-less mythic-ness. More deflective than reflective, television does not absorb whatever weird shit you do to it. I am not even sure it can repeat it back to you. Television is all the brazenness without the courage, so it should be hard to look at, for it has no shame. Is the television’s middle, including the medium itself, shameless in psychoanalytic terms? How is shame relevant to the notion of middle as a scene without a gaze?

“You have enough shame to open a shop,” replies Lacan in his *Seminar XVII* (182) because our shamelessness is also a deep shame, and surrounding a perceived presence of shame is a kind of constant shamelessness. This means that shame is up there with high stakes psychical objects, and in determining what constitutes its “non” useless-ness (Lacan is a bit elliptical with the double negative) “the dimension” that is “shame is hard to speak about” (Lacan 189). So we can assume that shame belongs to early object-relations, developmentally speaking as shame is related to an other that is prior to an Other that judges. And while painting that picture is in itself a fantasy, it can be asserted that a disturbance of shame is a disturbance marked by its all or nothing, a disruption that rocks the subject deeply. When one plays to a gaze, denying its existence and pulling it back, this performance is the neurotic territory of a hysteric who is at least in the game, who is more guilty of repression and deferral as enjoyment than disavowal of that enjoyment and whatever agent has the job to account for it. The brash “shamelessness/shamefulness” that disturbs is that subject that plays-as-if he were watched, but deflects any notion of being watched, while those that watch don’t seem to

be watching. There exists, then, an unaccounted for variable relative to shame – that which shames or is shamed – as if shame happens “elsewhere,” a point that is embarrassed for all of us, holding all of the shame always, a point I repeatedly relocate at the television object as a middle stand-in.

Conclusion

At a Loss for Words? Das-Ding-ing and a Sinthome

LIKE IS A STRONG WORD

Whose like is this? Absolute organizations of enjoyment are not a real Thing, but they are obviously real: there are persons and industries that concretely and measurably benefit from my enjoyment of screens.⁹⁶ I'm pretty sure I just watched a twenty-three episode-long advertisement for a cancer drug that ended with a screaming match at a poolside baptism and I'm not sure what I should do with this.⁹⁷ Without denying industry forces of mass media and the economic structures by which they are determined and determine,⁹⁸ while being unable to consider them in detail, I sought to read television according to the psychical experience of a consumer who feels more guilt than pleasure. In part, I am asking what it means to be a fan? Is to be a fan to be without fantasy? As a TV viewer, I am part of a network of immense enthusiasm, feverishly arguing for levels of personal discernment. And as if this investment needed to be topped, my own fandom longs to brand *itself*, to sear itself into the muck of it all in order to name my fantasy-handling relative to the gross emergency that is my buying and watching stuff, and maybe that's not the worst of it. Or maybe it is. I remain ambivalent about the fan as agent. I remain equally ambivalent to the aesthetic it presents: sometimes I am totally on board with the ways in which your discourse seems transformed by adoration alone and other times your "like" looks the way your Gen X

⁹⁶ The term for this is "content branding," referring to the shaping of television content according to advertised product: "the advertising industry responded to the challenges of an increasingly fragmented and polarized audience empowered with control devices that enabled them to avoid commercial messages" (Lotz 155).

⁹⁷ It was a Bravo show. That's all I'm telling you. You just have to trust me or binge-watch the whole network because I refuse to create any opportunity for a search engine.

⁹⁸ Not synonymous to reading those realities, adopting a "paranoid" critique of media (a centralized, all-knowing eye) does not reflect the complex feedback loops between "regulation" and centralization, nor its adjacent psychical experience of media consumption. Systems of desire move, adapt, resist, and do not live outside of the subject nor do they live deeply within it, and from an ideological standpoint, so that even if I could identify a particular plan or hard kernel, one I can cleanly extract or sustainably "call out," I'd be suspicious of my own enjoyment in calling-it-out.

parents feel about the assortment of Halloween costumes found at the local whatever-mart.

Let's recap. As we have already discussed, the enjoyment-imperative and its perverse release-valves limit our relationship to fantasy. The larger landscape of superegoic enjoyment distills desire according to subjectivity as dependent on prohibition or deadlock – that is, desire is obscene. Thus I desire either obediently or in opposition such that the enjoyment imperative escalates, as does my non-nuanced relationship to my enjoyment. In essence, the over-delineation of the real as a Thing – which I have identified along with Chiesa along a spectrum of fantasy pathology - provides an object to be tantrumed against or cynically fetishized, as we keep one eye on the thrust of annihilation, indicating a refusal to take up fantasy altogether, even if transference is attainable. Should we regard the real as a prohibited “thing,” in keeping with the structure of desire-proper (as outlined in Lacan's *Seminar VII*) then the terms of subjectivity are transgression-based and desire and law present as deadlocked. And our means of real-world object investments, particularly those means of presumed access, follow suit.

As I warned in the introduction of this thesis, I do not examine the existing literature specific to today's instances of “fandom.”⁹⁹ I consider the term to indicate the incessant “liking” of things, as this intersects with fantasy (as it etymologically contains “fanatic” and “fancy”),¹⁰⁰ and as a means of engaging them, which however problematic and destructive, and however we wish to distance ourselves, is implicated in our critique of new media. While fandom relative to fantasy and fancy conjures up associations, such as whims, wishes, dreams and ornamentation, there is something remarkably clean, however fractal, about our fandom, making up a network of alienated and peculiar camaraderie that position the sterile against the obscene. Our engagement of pop objects provide endless examples of fetishizing and “accessing” that strike the observer as perverse as any other cynical insistence. And this fandom does not discriminate: what

⁹⁹ Please see this thesis' introduction for references.

¹⁰⁰ According to *The Online Etymology Dictionary*, the etymology of “fan” used in American English to refer to devotee as it overlaps with the shortening of fanatic and influenced by 15th century “fancy” (inclination, liking, and the contraction of fantasy).

separates me from a person that jerks off to *My Little Pony Friendship Is Magic*? Not much, I am thinking.

This chapter, which also serves as a conclusion, moves toward a more general theory of fandom, or “stuff-handling,” as it may be relevant to the current climate of enjoyment, its suffocating terms, and ends at a broader consideration of the *sinthome* as a kind of desiring “better” - the looming question is whether there is some sort of passage between imperative and desire or whether this short-cut is more wish/symptom than psychical reality. And while television is not my sole object, it will also feature here in its Bravoian form (my totally predictable obsession with a bunch of shameless “housewives” and the Andy that presides over them). More generally, I ask: what are the options for the pervert who constructs her fantasy as a means of evading desire and refusing anxiety? How do perversion’s resemblances to other subjects or discourses resituate (or simply reemphasize) the problem of proximity (short distances) relative to enjoyment? My intent is not to shit on fandom, nor to argue for its virtue, but rather to explore how my “like” as a form of engagement is related to our imaginary-based dilemmas, and how we may re-shuffle the terms if only to generate more scenes of imperative. And if fandom is more edifying than emancipatory then maybe we need to take a less symptomatic line with the subject suffering from deadlock and leave all of this *like* where we found it.

The occasion of post-TV has been the site of numerous responses: recaps, fan-fiction, critique, satire, long-form articles, podcasts, forum activities - basically any instance of prolific misapplication you can imagine. These instances are not remarkable for their focus on television but are animated by the very absorption by the screen and *vice versa*, thus implicating the imperative of fandom such that the peculiar effort that marks my like is a palpable affect. But most remarkably these engagements of current media conditions (screens, virality) indicate a slippery passage that exists between having to love a thing and potentially elaborating a superegoic language or a language that is marked by fighting with the superego. Imperative and perversion are repeatedly figured as adjacent to a number of Lacanian concepts (and their interpretation) that are hallmarks of subversion-proper. I am not arguing for the pervert, but I am arguing that its associated features and its enjoyment-conditions – whether it is a deficient paternal, a

proximity to the maternal, or a shared discursive location – lay out the terms of a problem that seeks to link some of the depressing attributes of the modern subject with some of the more hopeful.

The pervert/analyst handles your thing

We've talked about this-es, but let's shift our attention over to the more theoretically obvious "thing," which is in the same ballpark. There are so many "things," we seem to say, lately, as if the Internet is talking: "This is a thing; this is not a thing; look at the things!" *Das Ding* (the thing) is an early formulation of the *objet a* elaborated in *Seminar VII* as that object which is the beyond of the signified" (46). *Das Ding* situates the movement of phallic desire, acting as a kind of vanishing point reflecting the subject's repositioning of maternal origin: "the desire for the mother cannot be satisfied because it is the end, the terminal point" (58).¹⁰¹ This thesis considered my-things in response to Chiesa's critique of the desire-deadlock as that which relies partially on a real-as-one that lends itself to massive and short satisfactions (analogous to a perverse access) that position the maternal origin as (m)other and with particular emphasis on perversion. Let's consider other features associated with perversion's short distances and strange positions. How does this inform our fantasy handling? Can rethinking my objects and my things be an adequate response to the imperative of my enjoyment? If enjoyment is not my duty then what is it and how do I practice *that*?

Suppose I am too sick for the world. Wah. But, fine. I spent all of this time cheek-to-cheek against the television telling you what was wrong, which I enjoy believing qualifies my position relative to a greater couch. *It had better...* (It doesn't). Here's the thing: perhaps it's a shorter distance to being an authority on *your* fantasy rather than being in the grip of my own. This is also how I imagine Andy Cohen thinks of himself,

¹⁰¹ The Thing is characterized by a kind of impossible position – and so of somewhat somber importance that is also simultaneously "dumb" (56). As the Thing morphs into the "a," post *Seminar VII*, it is less a "topological emphasis on [phallic] distance" and more an encounter with the real. Thus, to an extent, I have a plurality of things with both lure and void properties, also instantiated by the gaze in *Seminar XI*, which, from the standpoint of desire (as opposed to perversion), most resembles my collecting. By Lacan's *Seminar XX*, phallic desire has been reconsidered relative to the feminine, of which *jouissance* does not exist, which paves the way for rereading enjoyment as *sinthome* – the subject who enjoys the "a" but develops "his own" symbolic from that lack (Chiesa 197).

but with reunion-couches. We'll get to that. According to *Seminar XVII*, and superficially gleaned, the pervert's place is closest to the analyst's discourse, and so in proximity to a handler of the neurotic's fantasy. Not mine; I have none; I refuse anxiety and the prospect of traversal is not a structural possibility. Lacking a feasible social link of her own (in fact, she shits all over it), does the pervert, like the analyst, at least have a shot at re-enchanting your desire by giving your swerve, your ideological investment, a run for its money? Basically, the wish is that I have a magic wand that can touch your fantasy in lieu of a neurotically inclined fantasy function.

Let's back-track: In *The Parallax View*, Žižek discusses both Lacan's four discourses (*Seminar XVII*) along with Jacques-Alain Miller's claim that the social link is technically perverse, as it follows the fantasy formula of perversion in which $a \rightarrow \$$:

[T]he upper level of Lacan's formula of the discourse of the Analyst is the same as his formula of perversion opens up a possibility of reading the entire formula of the discourse of the Analyst also as a formula of the perverse social link [...] When, exactly, does the objet petit a function as the superego injunction to enjoy? When it occupies the place of the Master-Signifier—that is to say, as Lacan formulated it in the last pages of Seminar XI, when the short-circuit between S^1 and a occurs. (303)

If “the key move to be accomplished in order to break the vicious cycle of the superego injunction” is “to enact the separation between S^1 and a ,” thereby re-jigging the dominance of a fantasy, we need to consider “the modus operandi of objet petit a” as that piece of the real that is not “the agent of the superego injunction” (303). At stake in this separation, as in analysis-proper, is the activity of the “swerve.” Žižek's *Parallax View* defines its activity as the requisite surplus-enjoyment that 1) grounds and sustains fantasy in “reality” and 2) divvies out the enjoyment. The Lacanian swerve is the piece of enjoyment that is the intersection between my fantasy and my knowledge. And dislodging this piece - essentially the analytic traversal - is to apprehend that difference between my attachment and its discourse, which thus shifts the state of my discourse (master-signifier). For the neurotic who traverses his fantasy, that stake may be revealed by that which problematizes the reach of the neurotic's fantasy - whatever trips up the

machine. In terms of positioning one's self-as-toy, this can be potentially induced when the analyst-as-other reduces himself to nothing, that which is the "void" feature of the little a's fantasy sustaining "lure-void" dialectic.

Žižek seems to suggest that the critique of the compromised social link, as it is characterized as perverse, need not look far for a "solution" since both pervert and analyst share a discourse position, but his emphasis is on the analytic function itself, rather than the significance of her proximity to the pervert, using the comparison as an opportunity to insist on activating the void dimension of the "a." The comparison leaves one wondering if it is feasible for the pervert to take up fantasy from the analyst-end as that which both demonstrably enjoys and "provokes the subject into confronting the truth of his desire" (302)? Is it in fact a shorter trip for a pervert to "act like" an analyst than to behave like a neurotic-proper, and if so how does the pervert manipulate the *a* mechanism to break the superegoic cycle?

He doesn't, at least not by "proximity." The superficial structural comparison between the analyst and the pervert based on their relation to the other's fantasy neglects a perspectival distinction and only takes into account the "upper half" of their discourses – that is the relation between the "a" as agent relative to the subject as Other (and from the perspective of the analysand), and doesn't account for the "under side" of unconscious activity of the analyst's discourse, such that the truth of the analysand's knowledge is the unconscious of his relation to the analyst, that labour that also accounts for a feasible social link. In his article "A Voice in the Alethosphere," Allan Pero makes the distinction:

On a conscious level, the discourse of the analyst looks troublingly like that of perverse fantasy: a $\langle \rangle$ \$ that is, the pervert imagining himself without desire of being a mere instrument of the law, of sadistically making the other feel like the split in his subjectivity in the name of being the Other's enjoyment. (156)¹⁰²

¹⁰² Pero argues that the university and capitalist discourses obscure a more distilled discourse of perversion that reflects and reproduces an erosion of the social bond. He identifies a discourse of economics in which the unconscious "activity" between the reversed positions of S1 and S2 so that S2 occupies production and S1 is truth.

Perversion or that discourse invested in that “link,” which Pero identifies as “anti-social” (160), structurally resembles the analytic formula but the “a” of the analytic discourse is from the perspective of the analysand. If we crudely adopt its structure, we “agents” of enjoyment behave, speak, and interpret our enjoyment, *from* our enjoyment-as-position. Entirely devoid of “the ethical problem of assuming the position of a,” enjoyment is objectified, hunted down, perhaps structurally adopted but disconnected from a social process of desire and its unconscious Other (159). The analyst self-positions as an instrument by way of knowing nothing, necessarily and constantly self-minimizing. My perverse role as your enjoyment has no investment in incitement, but rather a reproduction of the enjoyment object that I am as alienated and pre-determined.

What does the pervert bring to the table? Can the pervert reflect the subject’s own relation to a deadlock while at the same time loosening the relation between S¹ and a? Maybe by accident. It seems when it comes to perversion’s resemblance to the analyst, assuming the structural “proximity” to fantasy is tempting, but a problem. Perhaps the upper half of the analytic formula as it compares to the perverse relation to fantasy is only legible insofar as the pervert’s relation to fantasy (including, or especially, our will to read it against the analyst) acts as a kind of simulation of the analyst, or a “grotesque parody of the analyst’s discourse” (159) that is less a nostalgic gesture to a social and more a crudely repeated refusal as it employs and insists on this figure as it is removed from its discursive labour. But, really, at what site does reflecting or receiving this figure occur, if we can’t affect a social link position – if the analyst’s labour, her position to enjoyment, is read by way of the perspective of the analysand, and the pervert simply IS that position?

Let’s assume that the pervert can’t contribute except as only a repetition of my imperative. I’m not sure if I want a pervert for an analyst but I do think I consume as if I enjoy the staging of a warped therapeutic Other that simply mirrors back my own bad faith, forever asking *How’z dat workin’ fer ya?* by any number of TV ringmasters.¹⁰³ Perhaps it is less those questions of how the analyst can step in for the compromised social link that is symptomatic of perversion or how, conversely, a pervert can fulfill the analytic function, but rather also a matter of how we reproduce this organization of

¹⁰³ I am referring to Dr. Phil’s infamous: “how’s that working for you?” See details in “Works Cited.”

enjoyment that features the pervert that looks back at us. Does Andy hystericize? We wish. Probably a step-up from Dr. Phil, Drew and whatever block of assholes is responsible for “supervising” *Marriage Boot Camp*, Andy is still like most pervert cut-outs, weirdly palatable, totally collectible himself, and made entirely by us. Because his is a job we give him, (as is the reverse relationship between the privileged gal and her gay-toy) and for which he cannot garner sympathy. We aren’t that invested in anyone pressing on our fantasy, making swerves manifest, or repairing a social link. So the pervert on the screen can be thought of as a wish-object who echoes the analyst as nostalgic figure of generalized reception and redirection, a ring-master that reveals and contains our disinterest in this interaction, as well as the sado-masochistic reflection of our own enjoyment-imperative, as it best known in terms of a televised couch session against a wall of glitter and collagen.

Which reminds me...

Too Close: Benjamin, Zupančič, and therealladygob

In the real housewives hemisphere, early-attachment based offenses are considered especially heinous. In every city, the dedicated ladies who generate these delicious melodies are members of an elite squad that self-sustains by trashing one woman per city, who then flips out or disappears into the Berkshires

*...These are their stories.*¹⁰⁴

Before moving ahead to the implications for enjoyment relative to the problem of the deadlock and the possible affinity between fandom and a different kind of symptom, I want to take a moment to consider my favorite television instance of trash, the men and women who can’t get enough, and the staged event of the pre-oedipal (or the maternal superego), and then move into how manipulating short distances repositions the Thing suitable for inducing a disruption of the fantasy. If we are going to look at proximities,

¹⁰⁴ See the *Law and Order: SVU* intro to every episode: “In the criminal justice system, sexually based offenses are considered especially heinous. In New York City, the dedicated detectives who investigate these vicious felonies are members of an elite squad known as the Special Victims Unit. These are their stories.”

we will have to put down the fetish object and maybe reconsider desire proper (or imagining its pre-objectal-ness), which means reconsidering how I might use the same materials to take a different road to achieve the same desired end – getting out of here with a language!

Television is traditionally a lady-object and it is currently a ladies' game,¹⁰⁵ its demographic accounting for the recent ballooning of roles for ladies smashing ceilings and, most importantly, the growth of the reality television genre, which is basically the cafeteria meat of “feminine” psychic space adapted for the screen. I prefer the housewife format, which means my imaginary is endlessly coming to terms with, again, Andy Cohen. Bravo, *The Real Housewives'* network, runs about two or three franchises of the show per TV season, which means I am up to my eyeballs in rich ladies.¹⁰⁶ This example of trash-television stages an infantile state (pre-objectal, sensuous, grotesque) that is developmentally speaking a pre-objectal state in which the Thing is more a “movement” or rhythm for establishing an ego ideal. Does staging this scene simply trigger my senses to abandon all civility or does it actually mimic the anxiety to which the gob-factor of television continuously points, but largely evades?

I want to eat Bravo. Like just put it in my mouth. And the oral instinct is mutual: suburban-TV-America's body is a set of enormous lips against neon blue teeth. Other than mouths, it's the urgency of skins: Brandi G's Voluma face is stretched tightly over all of my screens, and Kim's neck wrinkle wants you to know it is totally sober. *Go on, I say out loud to all of the parts, don't stop. The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* swells, lures, opens up. And I am in deep. This staging of too-much, sometimes more access than anxious, also includes a void dimension that is an other-worldly intimacy – a kind of invasion that follows my attempts to orient: when I watch these ladies talk-eat-cry-

¹⁰⁵ “Broadcast networks put all kinds of strategies into play when it comes to attracting audiences to new shows, from social media to streaming to webisode tie-ins. Yet execs seem to get that the foundation for any such success strategy always begins with two simple words: Ladies First.” (Consoli “Women Viewers Continue to Rule Primetime”)

¹⁰⁶ *The Real Housewives* premiered in 2005, sometime around the third season of *Desperate Housewives*. *DH* was the brainchild of Marc Cherry, who devoted the series to his mom and the Broadway musical *Into the Woods*. The show could only pull off its whole Paradise for Hypomania vibe for so long before it fell to pieces sometime around season four (I'm being generous because I do not remember anything about 2009) leaving an “opening” to be filled in the signifying fabric of “stupid bitches” with disposable incomes. So, *RH* appeared to emerge as part of an existing fictionalized network.

mouth, I'm pretty sure I know stuff I shouldn't, like how they smell and what the luminous shell that protects their tiny hip bones is made of (celery, by the way). And their eyes: sure, they are the eyes of a late nineties premature facelift and then a millennial Botox brow thing-y topped off by some 2012 filler that orgasms every time it's rebranded until the prodigal face returns to be lifted finally. But I know those eyes. The permanently opened, practically beating, once eye-shaped now globular, just spinning alarm. Hi *Mom*.

The enjoyment factor of the housewives is less car wreck and more molestation, a fantasy-secretion. The atmosphere is not of this planet; it is as heavy with screen-stuff as a gob of women talkcry on-loop through a zillion flecks of pumpkin spice and infinite instants of not psychotically having one's back, as if Bravo was serving me the picture of a Kristevan imaginary on-demand, a staged occasion for the pre-oedipal. The excruciating poly-intimacies, the micro-differences between every betrayal, the pocket turned inside out, the culminating towards Tamra Vicki,¹⁰⁷ and whatever else happens when things are too-close. Same state of what is logically prior to desire – but the option to just live there in a rented mansion until the class war Bravo intimates finally erupts.

As discussed in the previous chapter, I am specifically concerned with the effects of nearness as they intersect with a given spatializing of the psychoanalytic subject. The Thing establishes the subject as at a distance from an object such that, conventionally speaking, desire traverses a span relative to a fantasy. Thus the Thing refers to a subject that generates fantasy and generating fantasy implicates the positionality of the Thing as “beyond the signifier.” So when we speak of closeness, for the time being, we are implicating a lack of fantasy (for example, perverse access) or a site at which the mechanisms for fantasy building are located. Möbius strips aside,¹⁰⁸ or if we simply accept the Kristevan imaginary as imagined, we are provided with a generative fantasy-scape in which “distance” is not only necessarily absent but is swapped for movement or

¹⁰⁷ I am referring to *Real Housewives of Orange County*'s Tamra Judge and Vicki Gunvalson, whose friendship qua suicide-pact qua show's desire, is continually elided as a consequence of increasingly alarming moral affairs. Every season presents a new opportunity to refigure this friendship via new material and every season this, too, shall pass.

¹⁰⁸ As discussed in the first chapter, part of dealing with a Kristevan imaginary is the recursive element of imagining it, so that in theorizing this register is the nagging presence of the theorizing.

“gestura,” and the frequencies that exists between pre-separation and other pre-objectal coordinates.¹⁰⁹ At this time, I can’t give the give Kristeva’s developmental schema relative to “distance” the attention it warrants. As far as this section is concerned, proximity indicates the maternal presence pre-separation, its shared coordinates with the superego, and a spatial means of exploring anxiety and inciting desire. In short, part of my collecting housewives and the crazed cosmology of response “feels” like I’m building a maternal body to just spit me out.¹¹⁰

As discussed, Benjamin’s “Work of Art,” and “Motifs,” explore the anxieties and potential surrounding mass reproducibility, in particular those modern presumptions of access - to “bring things closer” (“Illuminations” 221), to “pry an object from its shell” (223) - with regard to the “aura” as a measurement of distance and reflection. While the “desire to bring things closer spatially and humanly,” ideologically, pathologically and technologically prevails (223), features of closeness are potentially critical. For Benjamin, this desire specifically refers to methods of “copying” “collecting”¹¹¹ and recontextualizing in order to re-jig a degraded object or an image and produce a new legibility, an appearance of something new that is almost squeezed from the immensity of the scene: “out of the sea of fog that envelops his sense rises to newly acquired pieces, like an island” (*Arcades Project* 205).

Whether it’s a question of surgical proximity, potential montage, or the collection, proximity itself is not simply a matter of distance but of size. What is that “point” at which immensity makes a new thing? How does that new thing reflect a negotiation of teeny-tiny spaces or creases? Benjamin also describes the conditions for locating desire, as if we have manufactured a pre-objectal situation that births its own

¹⁰⁹ I am again referring to *the* discussion of imaginary father as it is discussed in the introduction of *TOL*.

¹¹⁰ I have done it before with sticks and paint and whatever crap I could find at Michaels a hundred years ago in the suburbs. When someone congratulated me for the brilliance of my kitsch, I had no idea what they were talking about because that shit was dead serious.

¹¹¹ See Benjamin’s discussion of collectibles in *The Arcades Project* (“The Collector”) those objects which attain a “peculiar category of completeness” upon losing both their use and exchange value by simply belonging to a set or the collector’s fantasy: “What is decisive in collecting is that the object is detached from all of its original functions in order to enter into the closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind” (204). The collector’s “magic circle” [“] permits “the deepest enchantment of the collector to enclose the particular item [...] where at last a shudder runs through it [...] acquired, it turns to stone” (205).

“out” or the anxiety required for this event. But I think more, accurately, that this situation is my own fantasy. And so proximate to a realhousewifegob as it is a staged maternal sewage, is the *wish* for anxiety, the subjectivizing mechanism “initiated by the intervention of the imaginary father who deprives the real mother of the child as phallus” (Chiesa 78), such that, again, what is most “anxiety producing” is “when there is no possibility of lack, when his mother is constantly on his back” (Lacan trans. and qtd. In Fink, *Lacanian Subject* 53).¹¹²

And, so, I reproduce anxious conditions. My weird world of screens and its very important discourses provide frequent opportunity to trip up my enjoyment and produce something “else.” The speed and rhythms required of me to talk about this enjoyment repeatedly put me in the position of apprehending the immensity of my enjoyment. The pace at which my media approaches neck-and-neck with my duty is a race that also requires –if I am not to be crushed-- that my language must outgrow its immensity of occasion, that I perceive that immensity, and the constant shedding of a skin for the next hyperbole means my adoration and melancholia are always in over-drive. The sense that I have no room – not even to indulge *enjoying* my anxiety - or I will be crushed, disappear truly, I will die, pressed up against the fact that I cannot do anything forever – means I spit myself out, “overthrow,” create a thing, from what *should* be intolerable “fog.”

On the less anxious end of things – as far as the affect is concerned – is, also again, the comedy of the short distance, the conditions of the Thing’s dignity among its indignities. Alenka Zupančič argues that comedy (akin here to love) happens when “the real condescends to its appearance” (*Shortest Shadow* 169), which displaces the event of desire as that which insists as a minimal difference “between” two objects (appearances). By inverting desire’s spatial properties, Zupančič argues for a subject that, rather than being relative to impossibility (an “immanent inaccessible” relation), establishes itself relative to the production of the real in tiny spaces, where it does not exist but is created.

¹¹² Again, perversion indicates the mother’s demand in lieu of her desire (and that burgeoning desire of the subject), also correlative to a superegoic “situation” against which the pervert sees assumes both the toy-stance and cynical access. It would seem that perverse responses to the pre-separation conditions of desire, are a refusal of anxiety, particularly as “the process” is complicated by the overlap between maternal demand and the superego.

The comical then is identified among copies and small distances, and a real that is somehow continuously recreated and enjoyed because of its obvious artifice.

Jouissance is not a Thing. And The thing *without* dignity is thus among *many* less sublime things and according to Zupančič logic of comedy finds itself in the will to create the real, which is also the will to create “space” where none exists. And so much of the hilarity ensues between the tension of making space where this space is refused. The comic subject reflects an insistent degradation of a thing we compulsively elevate to sustain our desire (or insofar as one dimension of desire is at a distance). The same fight happens between me and every housewife (except Meghan, never Meghan),¹¹³ but with an “intersubjective” twist: she descends; I insist on her distance or exaltation; except her signature move is to push back, to refuse distance. But the comic move is *mine* – that is, the “push” for distance, not its refusal, is the “funnier” second step in Zupančič’s logic of comedy. That’s right, my fan labour as it is relevant to garbage television is to insist on an aura, that dignity of the indignantly undignified. I love her. I *do*. And it’s funny. Because if Betty Draper is the smoke-puff you mistook for a problem, or the problem you mistook for a smoke-puff, a Carmela Soprano thing made by television, to be hated and loved in the ways only television can, my Real Housewives are the ladies to whom I want to restore more dignity than they could ever puke up in open-secret! Like the intractability of the suburban, the *Real Housewives* “move” is to resist that dignity at all costs. Again, it is Mr. Cohen whom we pretend to put through the paces of establishing this difficulty with his non-questions and his boringness, which is more reproduction of that difficulty (We get it. He’s friends with everyone.). But it’s not his gig; it’s mine. Whether she’s the thing that won’t Thing or I’m going to lose her to that painstaking application of rhinestone on denim so you can have that cleft palate surgery (so her “thing”), she spits that aura right back at you. She says she’s not a thing. I say she is or that she should have one, which is hilarious.

Remote Control: All that and a *Sinthome*

¹¹³ Yes, that’s right, Ms. Meghan King Edmonds of *Real Housewives of Orange County*. BUT she will find your fake boyfriend’s fake cancer!

Up until now, we have determined that Very Pressing TV is part of a hyperbolic thrust that is mostly an ideological occasion with periodic critical maneuvering of my perverse fantasy relative to the enjoyment-imperative. I have loved television like a life's work. To some extent, this "work" is an ode to your fantasy and my evaded desire, and my intermittent this-es an ode to this problematic position. Above, I have considered different takes on television-fandom as negotiations of that neurotic and perverse terrain relative to a hostile and over active superegoic enjoyment, what I also consider to be dimensions of fandom. To a degree this same terrain explains some of the recent high stakes attributed to television by television and why it feels like my job to care. Part of reading my television watching means getting my head around the fan's narrow "critical" allowance determined by superegoic enjoyment, its pathologies of cynical permission, and the release valves sanctioned by negotiating psychological coordinates. Television-as-event proves to be mostly a critique of time spent watching or enjoying, which as far as circularity and retroactive interpretations go, the celebrated origin of which presents as a real fuck-you that mostly just kicks off a whole lot of watching. And television as the representation of all mass cult – as both taste object and phenomenology of middles – reminds us to keep television in its place (where it would stay anyway) and consider any smug aversion to the middle as more middling bullshit. So that we finally end here at television's "trash-heap" to reconsider Things positionally, from both sides of fantasy construction, to then sketch out some terms regarding short distances, and to consider fantasy and fandom affectively.

Among all that is stupid becoming a solid mass, and the three instances of a banal medium getting-it-right, and barring my endless struggle against her intractable lowness - how do I account for the more-than-passive stimulation I get from watching a VH1 princess with Ugg-hair confront her newbestfriend for being-a-*Bachelor*-contestant "for the wrong reasons"? How come I want to write a sincere ballad of the reality-TV autoimmune disorder? How come I have written it already? Look, as soon as this document is complete, I am totally unreachable because Phaedra Parks (licensed attorney and mortician) miniature portraits are G-d's work and you know this.¹¹⁴ So these this-es, the things that take on a life of their own, are just my kind of awesome and the logical

¹¹⁴ Please see Ms. Parks' fine work in *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*.

“end” of a life lived and semi-critiqued against a screen and a sketchbook. Whatever this end is worth, it’s mine. That it is “mine,” insistent yet adequate, enjoyed but not a “problem,” is what makes it different from a symptom and we will get to that. So let’s be clear, I am in no way suggesting this “mine” is a contribution or a subversion. At best, it is a means of deflecting my own psychosis, which is not the worst thing.

Most of the time my adoration of this-es, my intent to capture and captivate, feel like I am setting the stage for a bullshit act, as if I can maneuver my perversion into subjective destitution, which of course reproduces all of the same high-stake terms that ensure that never happens. Becoming a pure neurotic is probably not a real prospect for this TV subject, and because of its psychical locale, insofar as perversion is “closer” to psychosis than traversing a fantasy, this pervert is better off considering the effects of desire’s deadlock relative to a *sinthome*, as opposed to an object-cause. And so there are times, amid the muck, that it feels like I am making something, as if there is not much distance between my crazed loving of dumb shit and creating some shit of my own. Is there proximity between imperative and creativity or does one periodically, however accidentally, tweak the perverse or Thing-ified real to some *things* that are more amenable to making something? Is the deficiency of the paternal signifier precisely that condition (but not itself a feasible agent) that leads to taking sublimation seriously so that superegoic enjoyment and its perverse fantasies are indicators of an opportunity to rejig thing-ified reals and deadlocks?

If negotiating the pervert’s proximity to the analyst is a superficial solution that can’t address the labour of the social link, and the shimmying we do with short distances is limited perhaps to a comic snark as it is motivated by a contrived anxiety, might we consider the quality of our Other? We have read Chiesa’s critique of a thing-ified real and the neurotic’s “real-as-beyond,” as those conditions that spawn perverse defenses that reproduce imperative. If perverse (m)others and annihilative “Others” implicate a subject whose desire is deadlocked, perhaps it is this Other that must be finessed as less a problem of the impossible and “beyond” and more “between.” Mari Ruti describes the *sinthome*-Other as the affective dimension of Other’s inconsistencies rather than non-existence. As we have loosely suggested above, part of this regard of the real reflects a post-Lacanian (Žižekian, but not solely) tendency to assume that a traversal of fantasy

(mine or the Other's) depends on a destabilizing loss-of-being that sets up the subject as having to overcome, or face-off against, this real – what Chiesa has argued is linked right back to the short distance and the massive enjoyment of desire's deadlock (and what we have argued is structurally related to superegoic imperatives and perverse defenses). In her book *The Singularity of Being*, Ruti argues that it is the assumption that subjective destitution is essential for traversal that obscures the move toward the goal of analysis. For Ruti, as she reads Lacan's later elaboration of the symptom, the high-stakes approach to a high stakes real should be countered by the sublimative activity of the *sinthome*, that subject's symptom "knowhow" as it is related to a never-ending flicker of the symptom's last word.

The "last" conceptualization of the Lacanian symptom, that bit of concretized nothing, is the *sinthome* (saint and homme), and largely inspired by Lacan's reading of Joyce. An example of existing outside of the phallus without being psychotic, Joyce is an example of that subject who is pervert-adjacent with a "solution:" "Joyce's paternal metaphor was defective: it had to be supplemented by the writer" (Chiesa 199). To date, Lacan's *Seminar XXIII* is not officially translated but the *sinthome* is taken up by a number of contemporary Lacanian scholars (e.g. Jacques-Alain Miller, Mari Ruti, Lorenzo Chiesa) who consider the *sinthome* a tenable response to the desire deadlock and its associated conditions. If Žižek stops short of any conception of a post-analysis subject such that "a valorization of the real as a site of subjective destitution" is the only act that can define that subject (Ruti 118), proponents of the *sinthome* attempt to take up enjoyment as, in part, a kind of movement (unknotting and knotting of the registers), a subjectifying encounter between the individual and the peculiarity of her permanent symptom, an example of positioning the real-as-lack as that "starting" point of a reenergized symbolic that reflects the subject's singularity (Chiesa 199).

Part of what distinguishes the *sinthome* from the symptom is a containment factor – that is, the fantasy is not absent as the subject identifies with her symptom, a turning-toward. And identification is in part the disturbed mechanism of the modern subject and all of her acting-out: the deficiency of paternal metaphor indicates a rattled imaginary father, the ego ideal and one's capacity to signify, which are linked to ferocious superego agents, deadlocked desire and the perverse defenses that reflect and reproduce these

conditions. Normally prescribed for the above items, according to post-Lacan, is “the act,” that event that refuses symbolic conditions at any cost, the ultimate refusal of any stabilizing measure, as if the problem were not an absence of containment or identification but precisely the opposite. Again, containment is a variable within a dialectic, in the same way that Eros relies on the thanatic, so it is less a question of whether we are guilty of too much ego or not enough (yes, both) and rather what the nuance of fantasy is once we get over that hump. Because the *sinthome* insists on a role of fantasy, to “overcome” “the distinction between fantasy and symptom” (Miller, “The Sinthome, a Mixture of Symptom and Fantasy” 70). In the *sinthome*, whatever symptom caused me to speak comes to terms with fantasy, in that I can identify with this symptom: “the objet a is, as impossible to swallow as it is might be in the order of the signifier – [...] stuck in the gullet [...] – can nonetheless super-impose itself in the same place as an essential signifying coordinate – big I” (63).

So what then is the relevance of the *sinthome* to imperative? If for the neurotic to enact separation, the Other must not exist, the *sinthome* partly argues that this not-existing, as it includes that Other’s enjoyment, arises from an Other that is more of a moving present than a profound absence, even if this indicates the same end. And so in a very everyday sense, those objects that manifest artifice are the objects that can also teach me to be a person. As a part of accounting for fantasy, the *sinthome* takes up artifice in a way that symptoms and suicidal reals do not. If the latter’s real can be accused of Others that have Others or positivized *jouissance*, the real of the *sinthome* indicates the Other that can be fantasized in Kristeva’s pre-objectal distances and/or located in Zupančič’s use of “minimal differences” (167). The symptom, as in the neurotic discussed above, indicates an endless deferral of a beyond, of desire in the negative, as that subject is pulled by an object-cause. But the *sinthome* is not delimited by the temporality of phallic desire because the *sinthome* is less located by the Other’s non-existence and the movement toward a vanishing point, but, rather, those “points” at which one can make “something” of this absent other, what are by nature ephemeral events of the subject (her artifice and however she positions it), unlike the hysteric’s back-and-forths, that position the subject as precisely “over it” regarding the other’s absence.

The *sinthome* emphasizes this quality of endurance and the *sinthome*'s proximity to the erotic rather than suicidal, something approaching Kristeva's conceptions of beauty as that which keeps going because that's the only thing it can do. Kristeva's *Black Sun* considers beauty as that thing which survives as much as it is sought, two affective polarities of the Thing at the beginning and end of desire, the thing that causes the melancholia and the thing that resolves it. Beauty is less an instance of the peculiar and more that subject's speaking until they cannot speak anymore, and in this way is a kind of ethos of mortality. In this way, beauty is linked to the *sinthome* and to making something: It "affirms the almightiness of temporary subjectivity – the one that knows enough to speak until death comes" (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 103). If I've ever had the good fortune to experience the *sinthome*'s effects, it's explicitly performance-based, what I think writers mean when they say a "voice" – something we are all pretty snide about – but a voice that came out of absolute necessity, if one is to not die: "Joyce could not find another solution [to the problem of the real] but to write *Finnegans Wake*" (Lacan, *XXIII*, 25, Ruti's translation, 116, my insertion). Tied to necessity if one decides to live, the *sinthome* is this move expressed in its particularity of enduring. But is this a solo venture? Is my voice mine, and if so, how does this take up the narcissism of imperatives?

Part of living against the television and all of its duties means a profound refusal of other human beings. In some sense, as a fan, I am part of a thing, a group with a shared love, made stranger that this love probably only comes together in the flesh at some sort of comic-con (which, no, sorry). When I eat all of *Secrets and Wives*, I know there are a zillion others also knitting a scarf all alone in the dark. So there is a strange tension between sharing an activity with a social under very private circumstances. And when I do have to bear the world (Facebook), my perverse nonsense radiates such that I am in a state of reaction and hyperbole, and, quite frankly a certain xenophobia that self-manages by disavowing my investments at every turn and acting out my weird shame shit that speaks to whatever deal I think I have going with the gaze. So let's consider the *sinthome*, a kind of answer to the deadlock and to perversion as that final object, that end of analysis that maybe leaves fandom for people, or at least tips that energy towards the social. I am obviously never giving up Bravo.

In part, the *sinthome* is compelling because it hones in on one's particularity of sublimation, which steers away from the way my desire is always bound to an imperative (the ways I either count myself out of fantasy to be a fan, impervious to desire), toward the less "intense" matter of exercising this desire in the reality of a social context, should one decide not to die. So it is important, I think, not to get stuck on the *sinthome* as "singularity." The *sinthome*, as distinct from the symptom, is a relationship to one's own uniqueness, which is of course a slippery concept. The discourse of individuality and uniqueness obviously refers to one of our favourite fantasies, an ideological dead-end that won't ever die, or the incessant pressure to brand one self. But the *sinthome* is a non-psychotic existence that is not the product of a shared fantasy, including the fantasy of "specialness." Chiesa's *Subjectivity and Otherness* also expresses a concern regarding how *sinthome* live together (198), as if it's not clear what the social link is for that subject's language that does not specify a "discourse."

I don't have an answer to this. Maybe it is better, at this juncture, to regard the *sinthome*'s "social" as it might resituate a gaze, which brings me back to others and the role of shame. The singularity of one's symptom suggests a *scene* in which the subject turns toward her symptom, without the anamorphic blowout or the shame-spiral that is also a refusal of the gaze, just a kind of loneliness defined by a remainder. Perhaps the *sinthome* or desire-proper is private in *this* way, in that it is yours alone, which indicates less a level-ten shame gaze and one that watches without enjoying. This scene, in which my loneliness acting as a kind of skin, one that protects but does not isolate me from the gaze, does not bar me from being in the world but actually facilitates it. The other does not know the scene between me and my symptom, the "just us," a kind of heartache that resists being "without" and "full" of shame. And it is my knowing the fragility of this scene that "causes" me to speak, that I have a place for this scene, a gaze that does not hate me, that is not obsessed with me, but ripples or affects the movement of the Other. I have a voice that is perhaps more lonely than it is unique, and it is precisely this loneliness that is less hostile to the social. In part, my favourite enjoyment imperative and its perversions are an assault on my symptom as that which is private, that which can be shamed and so an assault on the subject, and an assault on the social in which she

exists. As a pervert, I lay myself bare for you as if I am all you see and then behave as if nobody is watching.

But when turned toward *sinthome*, I consider the speedy function of embarrassment. It's also a thing. Yeah, you catch yourself. It is simply part of a dialectical maneuver that nuances your artifice, your subjectivity and its destitution. Embarrassment. It's *fine*. Don't double down on your enjoyment. You can *endure* it. Why is shame a Thing? When did it "become" an all or nothing game that basically counted out all of its subtleties? I think it happened around the time Ray Bradshaw told my therapist that shame ruined lives and I followed that protocol as if my death depended on it. Embarrassment, a blush, it's cool. You're good. The passage, not a short-circuit, between imperative and *sinthome* means cutting through a gaze that doesn't enjoy you, and vice versa.

As well as being our thing, Television has been my thing. I've been trying to give loving-television a voice (yes, I hear this) since I was drawing "episodes" of *Little House On the Prairie* characters with their back to the viewer. And Things can be weird; they can be anything. If the *sinthome* is a site I share with my symptom, just me and my dumb "thing," without deflecting a gaze that need not cut too deep, then I go back to the TV and the silliness of all of this. The muse is dumb.

So I guess, it's just me and you, *Vanderpump Rules*.

And whatever *this* is, between us, is not a Thing--but it's something.

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