Three Binarisms

In/On

My reckoning with the prepositions—which is also to say, propositions—*in* and *on*, both for television studies and for television as such, began in my mode as a grumpy grammarian. The grumpiness resulted from the staggering number of occasions and ways that I encountered all sorts of subjects using the word *on*—for instance, what happens “on” an episode of a series, or what happens “on” the series across episodes, or what happens more generally “on” television—when it would be much more apt and appropriate to speak or write of what happens *in* an installment, *in* a program, *in* the medium or field of television. The abiding force and hold of the set of “on” solcisms, while irritating, also became upon more sustained reflection an eminently fascinating phenomenon to me. (Flattering myself for my perceived cleverness, I thought for a while one could write an essay about the phenomenon called, “On ‘On’”—yet that thought gave way to the recognition, as we shall see, that to theorize *on* without also theorizing *in* would render a less complete and compelling picture of their televisual uses and abuses.) In the span of that reflection, I considered the eminently plausible possibility that *on*’s movement across televisual discourse is an inheritance from radio, a medium whose
signature phrases, such as, “On the air,” move facilely and with suppleness into television’s terrain. I also considered the closely connected, likewise plausible possibility that a much more suitable suite of uses of on than those I was cataloguing — namely, iterations or variations of the ubiquitous clause, “The television is on,” to describe the very ubiquity of turning on, or leaving on, a television receiver — might centrally star, as it were, in a partial constellation: a star radiating influentially outward to touch, indeed to encourage the coming into being of, all those other, more annoying instances of on’s usage.

Yet even if radio sets the stage, as it were, for television’s on habit, and even if agreeable uses of on in either radio or television or both provide a tacit alibi and justification for on’s more disagreeable uses, those explanatory frameworks do not explain, in a wholly saturating and satisfying way, the on problematic. After all, the word in is just as ready to hand as on, so why should a wide variety of subjects, even or especially when made aware of the possibility of tuning in to in and thus moving on from on (say, to take one very modest set of occasions, when I comment “on” my students’ on-laden papers), persist in, default to, and incurably groove on on? I would submit that the fixture of, bordering on a fixation with, on in televisual discourse has become as lodged and stayed as sedimented as it is because it indexes, however inelegantly, some ongoing, unresolved trouble in our comprehension of television’s ontology (recall that provocative element of Newcomb’s opening salvo, “No one seems to know just what the medium is”). The trouble is also indexed — humorously and delightfully — in a sequence from a memorable episode of I Love Lucy, “Lucy Makes a TV Commercial,” which, like the clause in the previous paragraph, I will nominate to take a role as the central star in the partial constellation of this chapter’s section, In/On; the sequence is described in a keen and vivid way by Lori Landay, worth quoting at length, in her pocket monograph, I Love Lucy:

Advertising, magazines, and television itself made the placement, style, and attitude toward the television set a topic of
Three Binarisms
discourse [in the 1950s]. It must have been profoundly strange to purchase a television set and suddenly have strange and distant places “in” your living room. For example, in a wonderful sequence from one of the best *I Love Lucy* episodes, “Lucy Makes a TV Commercial” (May 5, 1952, which culminates in her Vitameatavegamin drunken act), Lucy physically inserts herself into the television chassis to demonstrate to Ricky that she would be great on [sic] tv. The levels of television narratives and frames are multiple: Lucille Ball, star and spokesperson for Philip Morris cigarettes, acting the part of Lucy Ricardo, acting the part of a Philip Morris spokesperson inside a television in the Ricardo living room, which is on [sic] the television in the spectator’s living room. Ball calls attention to the permeability of these boundaries between home and television when Lucy leans out of the television frame to pick up the cigarettes she has dropped. When Ricky enters and tries to “turn the channel,” Lucy pushes his hand away from the knob. In this scene, Ricky and Lucy enact the myth, the fantasy, of the immediacy of television and make comedy out of the intersections of home and television.¹

Wonderful an interpretation as Landay offers of this sequence, and agree as I do that two of the concepts explored therein are “the myth, the fantasy, of the immediacy of television” and “the permeability of the boundaries between home and television,” I do nonetheless find that some of the sheer strangeness of the sequence—which retains its strange frisson all these decades later, as well as its freshness, even for viewers like me who have seen it countless times—slips from Landay’s account. (Indeed, conspicuously missing from the account is one of the most curious and striking elements of the sequence: to toy with Lucy and stop her antics, Ricky re-plugs the receiver into the wall outlet; then the receiver begins sparking and emitting smoke, and Lucy jumps up and out of her posture inside the chassis

in order to avoid, in her deliciously evocative phrasing, getting “barbecue[d]” [Figure 3]). To put further pressure both on the weird sequence and on Landay’s gloss of it, I wonder what remains to be unpacked about the relationships — the partial connections — among

(1) Landay’s pointed scare-quoting when she names the phenomenon of “suddenly hav[ing] strange and distant places” — as well, we might crucially add, as strange and distant, yet also familiarly near, people — “‘in’ your living room”;

(2) her casual, two-time use of *on* in the way that I have marked with *sics*; and

(3) Lucy’s theatrical demonstration of performing, literally, *in* the television receiver in order to prove her worthiness to circulate over the air, in the ether: that is, “on” television.

Fig. 3. Lucy is nearly barbecued in the television chassis. Source: Screen capture from *I Love Lucy.*
In the process of wondering in this tripartite way, I also propose emplotting the sequence, and the scholarship that it chases, as the first entry in a likewise tripartite, partial constellation, of which the other two, similarly complex items are the following:

(2) Users of Wikipedia have produced a partial — which, in this case, is to say errantly incomplete — list of Anglophone television series, past and present, whose titles begin either with the word *In* or with the word *On*.\(^2\) Though some of the omissions are not surprising because they are television efforts more rarely seen and collectively recalled (for instance, PBS’s queer documentary series *In the Life*, or HBO’s early experiment in televising stand-up, *On Location*) than series like *In the Heat of the Night* and *In Treatment*, the list, whose non-marking as partial may misleadingly suggest that its picture is not so incomplete, does nonetheless have heuristic value in its indexing both of the greater likelihood of television personnel to think with and through, and therefore mark their products with, *in-* rather than *on-*oriented phrases, and of the greater likelihood of those *in-*marked products to live in collective memory and by extension “on” sites like and including Wikipedia.

(3) *Iron Chef: The Official Book*, which chronicles the global popularity and success of the Fuji Television-made, cooking-competition series *Iron Chef* through descriptions of dishes, recipes, and interviews with cast members, is also highly, winkingly attuned to the staggering scale of the series’s abundance (“Some 893 foie gras, 54 sea breams, 827 Ise shrimp, 964 matsutake mushrooms, 4,593 eggs, 1,489 truffles, 4,651 grams of caviar, and 84 pieces of shark’s fin were eaten, to mention just a few statistics”).\(^3\) The book is simultaneously

---

reflexive about the various ways, crossing scales, that spatiotemporal orientations of in-ness and on-ness may bevaluably deployed to convey a sense of the series’s often eccentric maneuvers: “All chefs are equal in the eyes of an ingredient”; “You’ll get insight from the first person to say, ‘Hey, wouldn’t it be interesting if, let’s say, a cabbage was placed on an elevator-like platform and brought up on stage?’”; “What I had in mind when I advised the production staff was that we should use utensils and ingredients that could be found in every household”; “I said, ‘Let’s create a culinary program where the menu isn’t decided on in advance.’ The concept behind the program was to ‘create a culinary program where the menu hasn’t been decided on in an atmosphere like the Harrod’s food emporium’”; “There were usually four judges on the Iron Chef. On the battlefield, you cook according to your style and belief. But there were times when you adjusted your dishes according to the judges”; “[S]ince the Iron Chef, I understand that there is more involved in a dish. […] So even if I am stuffed, I finish everything on my plate. I have gained much weight” — and so forth.4

***

Taken together, the elements of this partial constellation indicate that, in both production and reception, television may provoke the disorientations and reorientations — threatening sometimes to become the non-orientations, or, obversely, the overdetermined orientations — of the embodied subject in time and space. It does so in part, but only in part — and perhaps more strongly at its inception but all the same in an ongoing way as methods and mechanisms of transmission evolve — because a highly plural we, including some of television’s makers alongside their audiences, do not understand precisely how those methods and mechanisms work. In part, as well, and superseding the challenges of our fuzzy or faulty cognition of tele-tech-

---

nologies, television keeps “on” producing occasions for ambiva-

lence, shading into anxiety, about fleshy, fleshly subjectivity as
such, which sticks us to (or unsticks us from) times and spaces, and through whose embodying any cognition, fuzzy, faulty, and otherwise, is inseparable. Moreover, this ambivalence is one for which a number of vital in-formations for understanding tele-
technologies have been activated and circulated: will television’s in-corporation or in-stallation of subjects constitute their thriving presence, their foundering dislocation…neither…both? And versions of this question acquire yet another potent dimension or flavor when in and on are uncertainly entangled with one another. Whether recording I Love Lucy or Iron Chef, are television’s personnel on a soundstage or in a stadium? Is food on a plate or in a dish, on the tongue or in the mouth? Is it true that we are what we eat on, or in how we are eaten; and are we eaten, beaten—or, more sanguinely, sweetened—when we are rendered by pixels in two dimensions? (Lucy’s joke about becoming barbecue doubles morbidly down on Ricky’s prior quip that her chassis routine is “third-dimension” television.)

Perhaps the abundant proliferation of In titles takes some measure of the ambivalence attending modern and contempo-
rary subjects’ in-evitable engagements with television: for better and worse, we are “in” it, if by in it we mean everything from in a fix and in a mess to in the pink, in hog heaven, and beyond. Less reliable is the possibility that television’s subjects will be consistently, stably “on”: not in the solecistic sense that I have been charting (though probably conjured, implicitly or suggestively, thereby) but in the colloquial register in which we speak and write of athletes—or chefs, or comics—being “on” their game, “on” top of their performance, “on” it, just on. Even the most iron of the iron chefs is not always “on.” By contrast, a major part of Lucille Ball’s appeal in her role as Lucy Ricardo—another fantasy, alongside the one of immediacy, that her performance occasions—comes from our assurance that Ball will indeed always be “on,” even and especially when Ricardo is off, under, or down. In the majority of episodes of I Love Lucy, physical comedy results from Ricardo’s failure to execute a “straight” role
successfully; thus a tension develops between Ricardo’s incapacity to perform dramatically and Ball’s genius for comic performance, as she plays Ricardo’s “failures” so incredibly well. This tension, which ignites a spark of difference between the series’s diegetic and non-diegetic registers, has a magnetic quality, generates charm, and stirs pleasure.

Of course, charm and pleasure are just one part of the composite picture in which we dwell, and on which we dwell, as we live (with) television. We abide *In the Dark* — but also *In Living Color*. We are *In Search of*…something whose discernibility is just beyond us — even as it can be taken as hiding *In Plain Sight*. Chasing it in the blue light of the thickening prime time, we think that thing grows as if *In the Night Garden*, yet we may find ourselves far from the garden’s fecundity, caught in the arid heat, catching our breath *On the Rocks*. Living (with) television, we are in *The InBetween*. We are *The Inbetweeners*.

**Flip/Flop**

It would be willfully perverse *not* to invoke the HGTV series *Flip or Flop* (and the relentless tabloid coverage of the marital implosion and divorce of its stars) in the context of considering television’s flip/flop binarism — but in order not to flop in the making salient of that invocation, let me first flip to four other items that, taken together with *Flip or Flop*, will form (and deform, and reform) this chapter section’s partial constellation:

1. Imagine tracing television animation’s simultaneously genealogical, remediated, and remediating relationship to the flipbook — a set of partial connections that could flip historically from, say, 1956’s *Felix on Television: A “Flip-It” Book* to today’s *Naruto* flipbook videos, posted by fans online. Indeed, imagine, in the manner and mode of a Borgesian meta-storyteller, rendering the history in flipbook form, then making a video thereof. The imagining is this item.
To constitute the next item, let’s flip between two biographical anecdotes:

(A) In *Flip: The Inside Story of TV’s First Black Superstar*, Kevin Cook tells the story of how, performing a *Julius Caesar* parody for military colleagues in the 1950s, comedian Flip — born Clerow — Wilson acquires his nickname, a story that Cook associates with Wilson’s eventual television stardom:

Dressed in a parachute toga, popping the wide, expressive eyes that would help make him a TV star, he joked about “chowing-eth downeth” and “goingeth to hecketh,” finally working his way from “lend me your rears” to a proclamation about an ancient Roman fruit cup. “I come not to bury Caesar,” he declared, “but to seize your wife’s berry!”

More cheers. […] He bowed. He did a sidestep in his toga. An airman in the hooting crowd shouted, “He flippeth his lid!”

And the nickname stuck. *Flip* Wilson.

(B) Then, in a later part of the book, Cook titles a chapter, “Flip Flops,” to convey in shorthand a sense of Wilson’s early 1960s-era vacillations back and forth from clean to blue material; a flip-flopping between oppositional comedic strategies whose opposition is arguably deconstructed by the introduction of a third term — *black* material:

Long ago an uncle had given young Clerow a joke book full of what Flip later called “old slave humor — *dis, dat, dem.* Terrible stuff.” Thinking back to the book’s tall tales of “darkies” and “tar babies” outsmarting tigers, white masters, lynch mobs, and “God Hisself,” Flip now began seeing himself as part of a tradition that led from Reconstruction-era minstrel shows through vaudeville, the Chitlin’ Circuit, and Amateur
Night at the Apollo. He set out to retool his act, cutting anything too blue to play on TV, writing material that had less to do with what he thought was hip and more to do with what he thought was funny. In those weeks, he said, “I found my blackness.”

(3) In the 1980s Showtime series *Brothers*, notable both as a relatively early example of original premium-cable programming and for its relative earliness in television history as a sitcom featuring gay characters, a first-season episode that figures newly out Cliff as ambivalent, bordering on forlorn, about outness also enfolds a reference to *Family Feud*. Partially connecting this episode to the series’s pilot (which pivots on the coming out) to constitute this item, I could describe the narrative, imagistic, and conceptual trajectory as one in which Cliff flips out of the closet — and his much older, conservative brothers flip out. Then he flops on the couch with *Family Feud* as his family tries not to feud and as he flips and flops about how to navigate his gayness and what to do with it (how, in a partial sense, to *televise* it).

(4) The next item — my essay, “Early Late Style in *Roseanne’s Nuts*” — will be a partially phantom or closeted object. I drafted a full version of the essay in spring 2016, then revised its conclusion after the American presidential election in fall 2016, then did not know how to revise it further after the green-lighting, production, and broadcast of the *Roseanne* revival in 2017, then abandoned it altogether after Roseanne Barr’s firing by ABC executives in spring 2018. Unable to flip, or to wish to flip, the essay into a publishable form now that sustained attention to Barr’s 2010s career feels ethically wrong to me, I am nonetheless interested in what I take to be ABC’s cynical flip-flopping regarding Barr’s tendency to make

---

6 Ibid., 81.
offensive public pronouncements (activity that preceded the racist tweet that occasioned her firing, though whose level of offensiveness did not, in my view, rise to the level of her deserving banishment from critical engagement prior to 2017). I also wish to flip from that network “scene” to a scene in *Roseanne* spinoff *The Conners*’s pilot, in which Dan Conner flips around uncomfortably in the bed now ghosted by Roseanne Conner — a scene that makes yet more complex a performance genealogy to which I drew attention in my now ghostly essay:

Hauntings abound in *Roseanne’s Nuts* — as, for instance, when in the episode, “Life’s a Snore,” Barr, having undergone treatment for the intransigent sleep apnea that makes her snoring raucously unbearable and undoes boyfriend Johnny Argent’s rest, comes to bed wearing a baroque mask hooked up to a CPAP machine and mock-performs bedtime sexiness with hand cocked on hip. The gesture, as well as the scenario of which it forms a key part, moves in untimely rhythm with the much-repeated figuring in *Roseanne* of the Conners at bedtime, engaged in playful conversation and robust touch that intertwine the romantic and erotic. In the leaner, more autumnal repurposing of this figuration for *Roseanne’s Nuts*, eros and romance give way to a different, early-late performance of intimacy; here, affect swirls gently through a quiet, minimal hug and attaches to the simple, spare fact of Argent and Barr each having a side in a shared bed — and humor resides not in jokes attached to sexy physical antics but in a cut from the tenderly sketched bedtime scene to an installment-ending, confessional-couch clip in which Argent lets loose an “Exorcist sneeze.”

And now, at last, to flip back to my first item: The highly mediatized breakup of Christina and Tarek El Moussa could have

---

8 Sean Travis, “Life’s a Snore,” *Roseanne’s Nuts*, Lifetime (original air date: July 20, 2011).
made a flop of the home-renovation series, *Flip or Flop*, that chronicles their efforts flipping houses in the Southern California real estate market. Instead, they and their collaborators have endeavored to flip a narrative of failure, and thus to sustain the ongoing profitability of the intertwined real estate and television businesses. That endeavor is framed, partially, as concession-cum-affirmation in the series’s new opening-credit sequence: there we are told that the El Moussas may not have worked on or worked out their marriage, but they — and their series — will still work.⁹

* * *

Beginning with and including Felix the Cat, a number of the animated creatures bouncing and shuffling their way across the pages of my imaginary flipbook perform expressive behaviors that emerge in the American minstrel tradition and then evolve into and through both vaudeville theater and early film and television. Whether or not Wilson is mindful of the affiliation between his own expressive performances and those of Krazy Kat and Mickey Mouse, he is, as Cook makes clear, mindful of and deliberate about his borrowings from minstrelsy and vaudeville — borrowings that would, as Meghan Sutherland argues, enable Wilson and his collaborators on the enormously successful *Flip Wilson Show* to establish “a calculated ambivalence,” flipping “between putting on a race-show and showing up racial-political injustice” as the project that “defines the program’s aesthetic […] fundamentally.”¹⁰ Yet just as Wilson is looking backward to performers like Bert Williams as he crafts his persona and techniques, so, too, is he a pioneering force in the world of standup comedy, which, in the post-WWII period, distinguishes itself from vaudeville formally and spatially (paradigmatically, in the comedy club that recognizes itself as

⁹ “Season 8 Premiere,” *Flip or Flop*, HGTV (original air date: May 31, 2018).
Three Binarisms

an entity different from if adjacent to jazz clubs and nightclubs). That world, in which numerous comedians, like Wilson, clock their time and pay their dues with the hope of flipping from the landscape of the clubs to the remunerative terrain of mass media — and in which effort most of those would-be stars flop — has occasioned the rises (and sometimes falls) of television figures as variously celebrated and disgraced in the twenty-first century as Bill Cosby, Louis C.K., John Leguizamo, Jerry Seinfeld, and — yes — Roseanne Barr.

To achieve and sustain mainstream success is a delicate, eminently disruptable act. Flipping the switch between “putting on a race-show and showing up racial-political injustice” — a maneuver for which “flippeth” performance, colliding racy timeliness and lightly fashioned erudition, forms a precursor and grounding — may enable one to address a major, multiracial audience, at least some of whose members are racist. By contrast, “flipping one’s lid” (as a rougher part of our discourse might describe Barr’s mental illness) in the wee hours of the morning, with a tweet whollyunalloyed and unfunny in its racism, is likelier, at least in 2018, to cause network executives to flip out. And of course, at the other end of the political spectrum, comedy that is more aggressively antiracist and left-oriented than Wilson’s has been just as likely, historically, to flop rather than to flip the consciousness of mainstream audiences (cf. The Richard Pryor Show), though recent successes like Atlanta may give us measured hope for such comedy’s flourishing, even as we may be nervous about the precise nature of its reception among some white audiences.

Using the remote control to flip from ABC or FX to HGTV, we encounter acts like the El Moussas’ in reality television that, if eminently disruptable, are much less delicately subject to such disruption. For a genre that feeds directly on shame, embarrassment, and their intrication, almost no amount of mordant humiliation cannot become grist for the reality mill — and this fact is just as true in the context of series premised on the execution of a craft, skill, or professional set of tasks, as it is in the franchises guided by soap operatic flourishes less tethered to the
world of work or even to intimate domesticity (monikers like *Housewives* notwithstanding). Perhaps *Roseanne’s Nuts* would not have flopped had it made good on its punning title and, however cruelly, mined emotional and cognitive instability for whatever “entertainment value” it is supposed to have, rather than approximating effects modeled in a more fully scripted way in *Roseanne*. Bizarreness enough, Barr’s life with Argent and her children appeared too normal and normative to motor a reality sensation.

With the notion of norms in mind, we might profitably flip to subjects’ capacity (or incapacity) for mind-melding with “America’s” norm-affirming opinions and judgments, as captured in responses to survey questions: the feat that contestants are asked to perform in *Family Feud*. It is a series that, since the hiring of former standup comedian and sitcom star Steve Harvey as its latter-day host, joins, perhaps surprisingly, the genealogy of performance sites that also encompasses *The Flip Wilson Show, Roseanne*, et al. (With Harvey at the helm, and driven by his pointed and reflexively political banter with guests, the series, perhaps likewise surprising, says more in the 2010s about race — and more smartly — than we may expect the game show format to conduce.) It is also a series, however much predicated on what I have just dubbed, “norm-affirming,” that holds the potential to do another, even obverse, form of cultural work. What effect might obtain when, in response to Dawson’s or Combs’s or Harvey’s prompting, a rotating panel on *Family Feud*’s master board flips up and open — and the language it contains upends a norm? Or, to flip to another not-wholly-predictable element of the game’s construction, what might happen when an unruly guest, perhaps visibly or audibly announcing oneself as non-normative, refuses to play along with the mind-melding imperative and says something shocking, audacious, or just plain weird? The homonormativity and tele-chromonormativity of *Family Feud* sometimes, slyly opens on and up to the queer, or at least perverse, short-circuiting of the status quo; and, as in the case of *Brothers*, reflexively enclosing *Family Feud* in a sitcom scene with perversely intricate, norm-disrupting dialogue may
signal as much for the viewer attuned—flipped, as it were—to this possibility.

Whether in _Brothers, Roseanne, Roseanne’s Nuts, The Conners_, and many other cases besides, television is relentless in its meta-imaging of people watching television. And that project offers us just one sliver of the trans-medial and trans-scalar pre-occupation with representing people—sometimes even nonhuman people—watching television (on the second page of _Felix on Television_, the cat, poised before the family set on which a vaudevillian magician is imaged, declares to his child companion, “I wish I could do tricks like that and be on television!”11). It is as though television, supported in the effort by the allied media in its orbit, and obsessed with tricks in general, is obsessively fixated in particular on displaying the consumption of its avatars—as if to reassure us through a comforting trick and treat that those avatars, so evidently phantasms shading into phantoms, are all the same and nonetheless real: another “calculated ambivalence.”

**Binge/Purge**

Lest this chapter cause an unfortunate sense of queasiness, often induced by (the idea, the reality, or the conjunction of the idea and the reality of) bingeing on television—and typically associated with the putatively staggering volume of material consumed on a putatively foreshortened temporal scale—I flip back from _Flip/Flop’s_ use of a five-part constellation to _In/On’s_ use of a tripartite one. In this case, and in a development of the relationship of volume to scale conjured in the previous sentence, the three elements of the constellation will, in their respective forms, each test assumptions about volume and scale as (1) a note longer than we tend to imagine when we think of and with the idea of a “note”; (2) a durationally short television special that could nonetheless be construed as epic; and (3) a

---

compact set of statistics deployed to describe an enormous television phenomenon.

(1) It is altogether too easy, with just a tap or two, to purge notes from our smartphones, so I was pleasantly surprised to discover, in the course of this book’s writing, that I had retained one from several years ago, in which I recorded reflections right on the heels of bingeing the first season of *American Horror Story*, which offers a take on the classic trope of the haunted house where the living and dead coexist. Here is a very modestly redacted version of the note:

Binge viewing may be understood as an effort, at the level of reception, to thwart the feeling of seasonally rhythmic and regularized, temporal sociality that has long been identified with serialized narrative television. And that “thwarting” may now be a more or less weak, minor response to the larger, neoliberal ways in which such temporal sociality has itself been thwarted: attenuated or, more troubling, made unavailable for many contemporary subjects, even those to whom we attribute privilege, choice, and flexibility (the flexibility to be flexible is itself a kind of trap or cul-de-sac). As for what is happening at the level of production — where television’s makers are increasingly, keenly aware of binge viewing as a phenomenon, and as one whose lineaments are differently marked at this historical moment than at earlier ones — those producers may do the old thing and hope it keeps working, either for bingers or for more “traditional” viewers (the former of whom are likely to find that the old dog does not do tricks that work anymore); create with a double vision and actively generate material that splits the difference and offers one way in for bingers and another, parallel, simultaneous one for punctual viewers; or risk zooming past the “traditional,” punctual viewers by designing fare that more aggressively targets, confers recognition on, and indeed *values* the bingers as bingers. And those socialized temporality-thwarting (and thwarted) bingers? They may not be as done
with old dogs as they wish, both because those dogs are still trotting before them (and messing with the bingers’ speed) and because their very binges, quite apart from what they’re bingeing on, are a measure of and testament to an impartial grieving, an imperfect mourning, for a version of being in time that, however phantasmatic or etiolated some of its earlier incarnations may have been, is now strongly taken to be cancelled even in its hallucinative and withered varieties.

Binge viewing the first season of *American Horror Story*, we may be more apt to notice narrative inconsistencies and narrative elements that are un(der)accounted for. (Why can Tate and Hayden roam to a park and bar, respectively, while all the other ghosts are confined to the house except on Halloween? Why is Maura the only ghost who ages, at least in the eyes of the women [dead and alive] who see her? Why, when Tate finally remembers his crimes, is the effect not more devastating for him?)

But, arguably more important, we may question bigger narrative shapes, structures, and stakes that we may likewise see differently when bingeing. (This series suggests, at least initially, that the account of evil as it dominates the house and its denizens will be epic in sweep and will say something, supra-psychic and beyond individuality, about the relationship of this epic evil to motherhood’s mediations, especially of birth, death, and the porosity between the two. But then it falters on this promise and serves up instead discrete mothers with smaller wants and needs and finally more particularized relationships to evil. Disappointingly, it’s not that the birth of a new child or children will have a seismic effect on the house and its energy — for all the inhabitants — but, much more simply, that some women demand some children. And where the backstory for one of those demands — Rose’s — is concerned, its motivating impact on Tate is wholly underdeveloped. We would need to see more of these two characters together, and possibly more of them together sooner, to treat as plausible his murdering and raping on her behalf. And since she is a colossally bad mother, why, on the basis
of one slender scene of their intimacy, should we suppose that he would, for years, invest in her as a good substitute for his own bad mother? Likewise — and to pivot back to the bigger picture — why should we let go of the expectation, which early episodes encouraged, that we could expect an ampler disquisition on evil and maternity [the birth of evil as such?] just because a psychic medium gets a late, badly written speech in which she tells us, in effect, “Pay no further attention to the real evil behind the devilish curtain”? It’s not that these questions wouldn’t or don’t obtain for viewers who are not bingeing, but rather that our sense of how badly handled these issues are may become clearer, because intensified, when bingeing.

In short, what we’re seeing is a lack of a careful game plan, experimentation, and decision-making on the fly. Phenomenally, this in-fact routine combination of television qualities is one that we may accept better, or at least attend to differently, when our viewing experience isn’t pressurized through temporal condensation or truncation — when its stretches and lapses and lags mirror (or, more precisely, feel more like they’re mirroring) those to which the producers of such series are themselves subject. But alongside this phenomenal consideration, there’s also a generic and historical one. The recent rise of the thirteen-episode season — and the concurrent, rising use of this season shape to tell more “closed” stories — poises us to want and even to expect different things from television (like premeditated beginnings, middles, and ends — and not necessarily so-called “novelistic” ones, just legible ones).

Certain other, specifically televisual effects, as noted by other critics, may seep out of the programming when subject to binge viewing. (We may not, for instance, feel the conjugation of the seasons so strongly when *American Horror Story*’s Halloween episode is not hitched to late October, or the season finale to Christmastime — or at least when the viewing of these episodes is not spaced out by several weeks, as Halloween and Christmas are.)
Three Binarisms

(2) This constellation’s next item is the eleven-minute video, “Too Many Cooks,” which Adult Swim originally aired at 4:00am during their insomniac bloc of fake infomercials and which has since enjoyed a vibrant and fecund, beyond-viral online afterlife. Described as “a parody of the musical introductions for family shows like ‘Eight Is Enough’ or ‘Just the Ten of Us’ — with a repetitive theme song that plays on the aphorism that too many cooks can spoil the broth — before turning into a scene of bloody, murderous, cross-genre mayhem,” or alternately as a “regurgitation of the viewing diet of a 12-year-old with a huge cable package in 1992 […] that […] turns into an ultra-grim rumination on the rotten core of most nostalgia,” the video smashes through its own scale-smashing premise of parodic hyper-accretion (of actors with captioned names, of television references, of visual gags) to pose dark questions about the inescapable ubiquity of television.

(3) Finally, consider the Wikipedia page for the internationalization of The Biggest Loser as a franchise. Despite once featuring a now-scrubbed, surprisingly and weirdly worded opening gambit (even for Wikipedia), which linked the weight-loss competition errantly to fantasy football, the page did then, and does now, proceed to enable a mostly accurate (say, weighed against the encyclopedizing of In and On titles) counting and accounting of the nearly three-dozen global adaptations of the series, the numbers of seasons of and win-

12 Casper Kelly, “Too Many Cooks,” Adult Swim (original air date: October 28, 2014).
ning contestants performing in those adaptations, and cross-
serial records ("Heaviest contestant," "Biggest weight loss").

* * *

Technically, it would be possible, if agonizingly boring (in both
senses), to count all the pounds cumulatively purged across
all *The Biggest Losers*. Is a connected, volumetric impossibil-
ity — measuring all the tears extracted from both Loser par-
ticipants and *Loser* viewers — a beautiful impossibility…or a
cheap one? A harder question: are (any of) those millions upon
millions of tears cathartic, and would *catharsis*, in this context,
mean purgation, purification, a combination of purgation and
purification, or something else besides? On the one hand, I have
never believed — quite — that the kind of studied and storied
melodrama manufactured again and again and again in *The
Biggest Losers* has afforded cathartic experiences to the subjects
hailed by its melodramatic calls. On the other hand, the releases
set in motion by sentimental identifications, however predi-
cated on misrecognition, projection, narcissism, and the ruses
of empathy, might somehow yield more slender value, more
lean and angular meaning, than its weightiest detractors would
concede. And of course the metaphorizing use of modifiers like
*slender, lean, angular, and weightiest* are, to say the least, fraught
on the occasion of their deployment to consider the literalized
shedding of weight in *The Biggest Loser* and, as an array of jour-
nalistic exposés has indicated, the cruel tactics and strategies,
serving an even crueler optimism, that animate those shedding
processes and procedures.

Who binges *The Biggest Loser* — and how may she answer the
foregoing questions and navigate the foregoing concerns differ-
ently from either the casual or punctually paced viewer of the
series? But maybe this line of inquiry is just too much. Maybe
we should (mostly…but all the same partially) purge *The Biggest
Loser* from contemplation. Its horrors, and they are legion, are
much more excruciating ones over which to linger than those
of “Too Many Cooks” and *American Horror Story*. Indeed, the
horror animating the latter two projects—just one dimension of a manifold and multipart excess in each effort—appears either in close proximity or even in the service of the sort of camp sensibility that never leavens *The Biggest Loser’s* melodrama. Yet the commingling of camp and horror does not quite unite the sensibilities driving *American Horror Story* and “Too Many Cooks,” which could be said to perform obverse versions of generic and tonal hybridity: the former deploys camp in a maneuver to make tolerable, to cushion, the horrors that it acquires and hoards (and the series signals, even in its first season, that its makers crave to keep accreting and hoarding such horrors in an ambitiously ongoing instance of anthology—or it might be more accurate to say *repertory*—television); whereas the latter slowly bleeds out its camp, as it also literally purges the “characters” killed by a *Shining*-inspired madman, in order to produce a more devastating impact. As the video comes to its bleak conclusion, neither murderous mayhem nor the interventions of well-meaning scientists nor the attempt of a robotic cat named **Smarf** to detonate a bomb can stop the relentless onslaught of more and more “Cook” (Figure 4). If camp is, as I have it, blood-let, then the bloodletting follows a logic—that of capital and its critique—in order to tell us something finally
less Wildean than Beckettian about television: *This can’t go on. It goes on.* And why, in the context of neoliberal global capitalism, should the lesson be otherwise? What force would halt the seemingly endless syndication of reruns, the proliferation of more and more and more DVD box sets, the repackaging of a successful brand for any and every national horizon?

Important as it is to train a critical eye on such futural prospects, looking critically backward forms a necessary complement to that work — and when we look thus, we will find that at least some of us have for quite some time been bingeing, albeit in different ways and registers and through different techniques from the ones now available. Indeed, why use the language of “regurgitation” and “viewing diet” to describe the “12-year-old with a huge cable package in 1992” except to cast him retrospectively as a binger, imagined as glued to the screen for hours and hours on end in order to watch new episodes of *Full House*, old episodes of *Family Ties*, and plenty of other banal fare besides? Perhaps along with his cable package, the tween had a VCR with which to record and save favorite programming that could also be binged for multiple hours at a stretch.

Whether we conceive of the binger then, now, or later, I do want to cleave from the rhetoric of bingeing the discourse of addiction that is altogether too likely, rather, to cleave to it. And I want to do so despite the brilliant ways in which, by contrast, Hunter Hargraves — quite aware of the ideological risks at stake — deploys addiction discourse to illuminate our understanding of contemporary reality television:

Models of the mass cultural consumer as addict have circulated since the rise of commodity culture, and these have typically figured the addict in quite problematic terms of gender, race, and class. Yet while such discourses demand a critique, this does not mean that the notion of *addictive spectatorship* should simply be flushed down the drain like a bad drug. Indeed, one might deploy this model precisely to open up questions about bad subjects and objects. […] First, I consider the representation of addiction on reality television through
a subgenre I call recovery television, in which the spectacular behavior of compulsive or addicted individuals must be diagnosed by experts and corrected through an intervention. [...] Second, I position the addicted spectator as a necessary counterpoint to the mechanisms of neoliberal citizenship inherent to reality television. Asking that scholars of television and popular culture take seriously television’s drug-like properties, I show how these properties have become a critical mechanism of neoliberal culture’s pathologizing of cultural affect. Taken together, these twinned assertions transform the once-iconographic figure of the television spectator — the (supposedly) sedentary, lethargic couch potato — into the hyperactive, amped-up TV junkie who gets high from multiple and often duplicated media platforms.16

Appreciative of the nuance and sophistication with which Hargraves constructs his model of addictive spectatorship, I wonder what “cultural affect” or affects — obtaining at what scales or their slippage — cannot be adequately described and interpreted either through the metaphorizing language of the junkie or the counterpoised language of the couch potato. If spectators are neither “amped-up” nor “lethargic,” but, eking a third way, performing calmly attentive and critically charged viewing for long periods of time, perhaps they are better nominated as cook-mates, and perhaps we will not deem their broth spoiled.
