"No Show Dissed Quite Like This One"
Invective at the Borderlands of Narrative and Spectacle in *Veep*

Katja Kanzler (Leipzig University)

> At the end of the day, this is why we ended the show. The stupidest, dumbest, craziest things we could think of to make a president and his staff say and do … I bow to my betters. We're being outdone regularly.
> —*David Mandel, Executive Producer and Showrunner of Veep (qtd. in Andrews)*

Abstract:
This essay draws on the concept of narrative liminality to theorize performances of insult and vituperation in HBO's Veep (2012-19)—a signature element of the show and part of its satiric portrayal of political Washington as a world governed by narcissism, incompetence, and opportunism. The essay's analysis proceeds in two steps: First, it argues that Veep's invective performances rely on symbolic logics that are best understood as spectacular. Second, it outlines how the show's invective spectacles interact with narratives in complex and culturally potent ways—both with narrative strands manifest in the show's storytelling and with metanarratives that are invoked yet remain tacit. In unfolding this analysis, the essay, on the one hand, aims to highlight how Veep offers valuable reflections on the kind of contemporary, mediatized, and politicized invective culture that found its epitome in the Trump presidency. On the other hand, it pursues a theoretical project whose main concern is to move beyond simplistically binaristic conceptions of the relationship between narrative and spectacle.

When HBO's *Veep* was cancelled in 2019, there was much talk about how the show had been no longer working in the age of Trump: how its hyperbolic portrayal of narcissism, incompetence, and venomousness in the nation's highest political offices had lost its satiric drive in the face of a real-world White House that rivaled

the show's supposed exaggerations on so many counts. One of these counts was the energetic use of insult and vituperation by holders of political office—a signature element of the show, which it stages as a clandestine, latently outrageous habit that contrasts with the kind of hyper-polite speech that its fictional politicians practice in public. With a real-world president Trump, who had made invective a key tactic of his public presidential performance, the show's presupposition of standards of civility for presidents was as much out of date as the invective it staged was quickly, if outrageously, becoming normalized.

While many obituaries for *Veep* thus focused on the erosion of its satiric premise and its consequent anachronism in the age of Trump,[1] I want to suggest a different perspective on the show, one that, to the contrary, highlights its timeliness and the ways in which it can help process the distinct culture of invective that sustained Trump. My point of departure is to approach the invective staged in the show as observations of and reflections on real-world dynamics of insult and vituperation in the political realm and the media ecosystems to which it is tied. In this engagement with cultures of invective, I see the show tease out two key dynamics that I want to discuss in the following. First, *Veep* throws into relief how a good deal of invective does not rely on the symbolic form of narrative but rather generates its cultural power out of symbolic logics that, I argue, are best understood as spectacular.[2] The show regularly stages invective spectacularity at work, offering a rich platform to study the distinct dynamics by which it operates—its unique affective potentials, for instance, or its ability to accumulate attention. Second, *Veep* demonstrates how invective spectacles—while symbolically different from the narrative elements that putatively govern a show like this—regularly and powerfully interact with narratives. *Veep*'s invective spectacles interact both with narrative strands that are unfolded in the show and with metanarratives that are evoked yet remain tacit. The show highlights how a contemporary, mediatized, and politicized invective culture draws its cultural potency from these interactions between the spectacular and the narrative: It is in the interlacing of the distinct affordances of spectacular affectivity and narrative worldmaking, of presentist affect and a narrative causation that can remain tacit, where *Veep* locates the power of mediatized invective and which it allows its audience to observe from different perspectives. This is what makes the show a complex and timely reflection on symbolic abuse in politics and the poli-

1 This sentiment is very explicit, e.g., in D'Addario and in Desta.

2 I have explored the spectacular implications of invective performances in previous publications, most notably in "*Veep*, Invective Spectacle, and the Figure of the Comedic Antiheroine," which also deals with the HBO show, yet with a primary interest in the antiheroic construction of its protagonist Selina Meyer. My essay here builds on and expands the thinking that went into such previous publications.

tics of symbolic abuse. At the same time, it offers a rich case study for theoretical reflections on the nature of spectacle and on its relationship to narrative.

Veep and Its Invective Signature

Veep—one of the most highly awarded TV comedies of the early 2000s[3]—is a somewhat loose adaptation of the British comedy *The Thick of It*, and, like the British show, it was created by acclaimed political satirist Armando Iannucci. It focuses on the character of Selina Meyer, initially Vice President, later for a short period of time also President of the United States, and her team. The show's satiric premise is to depict political Washington as a world of grotesque opportunism and failure. Its plots revolve around things going wrong, consistently and often cringe-worthily so, ranging from the small and quotidian—like the fundraiser that is at the center of the show's pilot ("Fundraiser")—to the big—like policy initiatives or electoral campaigns. The show's protagonists are imaged in an equally grotesque light: self-centered and opportunistic, governed by desires for power and glory, and showing not the least bit of interest in political, let alone moral, principles. The show makes a point in depicting all political players as selfish and opportunistic; its storyworld is systematically free from any heroic characters or actions.[4]

In this caricaturistic portrayal, one of the character traits that marks the protagonists—political office holders and aides alike—is their extensive use of invective: While their public speaking tends to be so spin-doctored and controlled that it often ends up saying nothing, they routinely indulge in profanity-laced and wholesale uncivil speech whenever they feel to be in private. Insults are a key element of this performance of incivility. Characters regularly hurl invectives at present or absent others—in fact, doing so is the major mode of interpersonal relations in the show's storyworld. On the one hand, it is this consistency and sheer quantity of abusive language that is remarkable. On the other hand, it is the quality of these invectives that stands out: their excessiveness, their sometimes crude and crass, sometimes colorful and creative flavors. To illustrate, here are a few examples, randomly picked from the first minutes of the first episode:

> [Meyer on her way to a reception, asking her Chief of Staff about various people who might attend]

3 Among other things, Julia Louis-Dreyfus won the Emmy for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy for a record-breaking six times. For a complete list of awards, see www.imdb.com/title/tt1759761/awards.

4 The character of Gary—Selina Meyer's personal assistant and 'body man'—might count as an exception: He primarily figures as the butt of jokes and insults, but he is also the protagonist who is furthest removed from any form of political power.

> "What about Senator Reeves? Is he dead yet?"
> [Chief of Staff:] "Not yet. He's mostly intravenous. He has so many tubes in him, he looks like a set of bagpipes."
> [...]
> [Meyer's Chief of Staff doing small talk with a Senator's aid]
> "So, Dan, are you enjoying working for [Senator] Hallows?"
> [Senator's aid:] "Not really. She's middle of the road. She's mediocre, really. Of all the 'ocres,' she's the 'mediest.'"
> [...]
> [Meyer asking her Chief of Staff about the Senator's aid]
> [Chief of Staff:] "Dan is a shit."
> [Meyer:] "You want to expand on that?"
> [Chief of Staff:] "Sure. He's a massive and total shit. When you first meet him, you think surely, to God, this man can't be as big a shit as he seems, but he is—"
> [Meyer:] "See, I—"
> [Chief of Staff:] "—because like if there were a book with covers made of shit, you'd think: 'That's intriguing. I wonder what's in this book that they saw fit to give it covers made of pure shit.' And then you open it and: shit." ("Fundraiser")

To some extent, these moments of invective help build the pilot's narrative. For one, they contribute to the larger, episode-spanning narrative arc which, as is to be expected of a pilot, focuses on establishing characters and their relationships: Meyer's grappling with the relative insignificance of the Vice Presidency and her desperate desire to get political Washington's attention; her Chief of Staff's seemingly infinite knowledge of political Washington and her complicated relationship to Dan, the Senator's aid, who would soon join Meyer's team; Dan's careerist opportunism. In addition, the invective moments help build the episode's own contained narrative that revolves around Meyer's appearance at a fundraiser, where she wants to promote an environmentalist policy initiative that she hopes would boost her political profile, and around the many ways in which this plan goes wrong. The invective that characters perform clearly helps advance and flesh out these different levels of narrative in the episode; it has a narrative function.

While this kind of narrative integration is important in ways I will discuss in a moment, what I want to highlight here is how these performances of insult notably go beyond any measure of narrative necessity. They are, in many ways, too much for mere narrative functionability—too frequent in the episode's temporal unfolding, too extensive, too flamboyant. This conspicuousness turns invective performances into a key thematic signal of the show: *Veep* thereby describes itself as being 'about' such moments of flamboyant insult, at least to a considerable extent. Discourses and practices around the show illustrate how such signals of 'aboutness' have gained traction. There is, for instance, a plethora of online articles, blog

posts, and videos, both by professional and fan authors, that feature and discuss the show's 'best insults' (see, e.g., Fitz-Gerald, "Greatest Insults"; Rankin; "Swearing-In"). Such practices not only engage with *Veep* through an exclusive focus on its invective performances, they also approach these performances as detachable from the episodes in which they were originally featured—as something that can be enjoyed and circulated independent of their narrative contexts. The same applies to the comparable plethora of memes that *Veep* has inspired, many of which are dedicated to the show's insults (see, e.g., Rackham). And many review articles on the show—especially those written in the wake of its cancellation—expressly reflect on the distinct, possibly even rivaling appeals of its narrative and of its "baroque, obscene insults" (Alter). As one reviewer puts it:

> One of the constant joys of tuning into *Veep* every week was sitting on the edge of your seat, waiting to see how one character would torch another. Of course, that's not all the HBO show will be remembered for—it'll go down as one of the sharpest political satires to grace the small screen—but it's hard not to look back on all the wonderful jabs, comebacks, and self-owns that emerged from Selina Meyer's kooky version of D.C., and lament, 'No show dissed quite like this one.' (Fitz-Gerald, "Anatomy")

Media practices tied to the show thus suggest that *Veep*'s performances of invective extend an appeal of their own, one that seems largely independent of the appeal of its satiric narrative.

Invective Spectacle

My first major argument in this paper is that this perceived distinctness of the show's invective moments can be fruitfully conceptualized as spectacularity. Approaching performances of invective as spectacles may seem counterintuitive: Spectacles are commonly assumed to revolve around visual display and engagement, which is also what the word's etymological roots in the Latin *spectare*—to watch—emphasizes. By contrast, *Veep*'s invective performances, albeit mediated by moving images, are primarily about words, about verbal display. When Film Studies scholarship applies the notion of spectacle to movies,[5] its point of reference is typically also the visuality of its objects of study. For example, Laura Mulvey,

5 The branch of scholarship that is most relevant to my project overwhelmingly focuses on cinematic spectacle. With the remarks that follow, I suggest that the insights of this scholarship can be extended to other filmic media, such as television. Of course, such extensions always have to take into consideration the specificities of different filmic media—the big screen visuals and Dolby Surround systems of movie theaters do have particular affordances for spectacularity, and the type of spectacles they enable has been foregrounded in the ex-

whose work on the male gaze arguably laid the groundwork for much of this line of inquiry, conceptualizes spectacle as tied to the "visual pleasure" that film has to offer. The particular visual pleasure she focuses on concerns how classical Hollywood cinema stages the female body in a way that "connote[s] *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (11; emphasis in the original). Another example is Tom Gunning, working on a different set of films, who theorizes early cinema as a "cinema of attractions" that revolves around film's "ability to *show* something" (382; emphasis in the original), around "inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle" (384). And also work on the most recent formation of cinema that is commonly associated with spectacle—the special effects blockbuster—emphasizes the visual allure of CGI and related technologies in delineating the spectacular quality of such films (Lavik 175-81).

The visuality that such scholarship highlights is clearly tied to how film operates as a medium: Throughout cinematic history, film has appealed to its audiences through its "ability to *show* something" and its continuously evolving technologies to do so. Yet even the most canonical constellations of cinematic spectacle are not just about visuality but about a particular way in which the medium's visual affordances are performed. It is this distinct performative mode of spectacle which, I want to suggest, also marks moments of invective in *Veep* and elsewhere. Scott Bukatman is one of the film scholars who make a case for conceiving spectacle as a mode of performance rather than as a type of image (76). He theorizes spectacle as one of the elements of cinematic form through which film appeals to its viewers—more precisely, he conceptualizes it as an element next to and emphatically different from the narrative element that scholarship tends to foreground. Spectacle, he writes, offers a type of "experiential" pleasure that is distinct from narrational pleasure (78); it follows a "presentational" logic, foregrounding itself as an on-screen event. Making a similar argument, Erlend Lavik adds that this eventful quality of spectacle's performativity implies a temporality that is different from that of narrative: Narrational pleasure "is related to our emotional and intellectual involvement with a *sequence* of events"—with the past, present, and future of a plot—whereas "[o]ur fascination with spectacle […] is instant, here and now" (172; my emphasis). Spectacle tends to acquire this eventfulness, Lavik suggests, through strategies of excess—by presenting more than is necessary for the unfolding of a film's narrative, by lingering and loading up, "overwhelm[ing] viewers" (176) with its 'too-much-ness.' Accordingly, the experiential pleasure of spectacle is typically described in terms of an affective intensity (that is often framed as dangerous), a visceral stimulation or heightened emotional impact, which is again

isting scholarship. One of the points I want to make is that spectacle in other filmic media, with their slightly different affordances, might look differently than in cinemas.

contrasted with the type of engagement that narrative affords—allegedly involving more thinking than just feeling, ideas rather than somatics.[6] Thus delineated as a mode of performance, spectacle can help conceptualize many of the aspects of *Veep*'s invective moments that I have outlined above: their conspicuous excessiveness, their self-presentational eventfulness, their orientation toward affective stimulation. *Veep* demonstrates that verbal display can also operate as spectacle and that the transgressive use of language that is involved in invective has a unique potential for such verbal spectacle.

In a second step, I now want to use this conceptualization of invective spectacle as a platform to critically revisit the binaristic framing of spectacle and narrative on which theorizations of spectacle tend to rest. As my discussion of the scholarship indicates, spectacle is often theorized as that which is not narrative, relying on narrative as a negative foil to advance conceptualizations of spectacle as a distinct element of filmic media. The binaristic frame of this conceptual work also informs perspectives on the relationship between spectacle and narrative in cultural materials, which are typically conceived as symbolic forms that "work against" each other. Mulvey, in her pioneering article, uses exactly these words to describe spectacle and narrative as fundamentally antagonistic, with spectacle "freez[ing] the flow of action" and narrative working to contain the disruption that spectacle provides (11).

More recently, scholars have begun to question whether spectacle and narrative "are in some way antithetical" (Lewis 215; cf. also Lavik 173) and necessarily evolve an antagonistic relationship. Bukatman, going one step further, contends that Mulvey's influential reading of spectacle and narrative as antagonistic is predicated on the debatable assumption that film is first and foremost a narrative medium, faulting her for "exaggerat[ing] both the centrality and efficacy of narrative *telos*" in the disruption-containment dynamic she diagnoses (76). Without getting into a discussion whether or not film is primarily narrative, I want to make a case for approaching filmic media not from the vantage point of the presumed 'heartlands' of their narrative operations but of the 'contact zones' where narrative meets the symbolic form of spectacle (see the introduction to this volume). Such a shift in focus promises to advance our understanding of both symbolic forms beyond the insights that are possible within a strictly binaristic framework, while also promising to throw into relief the multitude of ways in which narrative and spectacle come together in cultural materials. *Veep* provides a productive case study to probe into these borderlands, for one because the somewhat defamiliarized (because verbal)

6 This is a more than debatable binarization of spectacle as revolving around affect and emotion versus narrative as revolving around cognition. The scholarship I discuss never goes so far as to spell out this kind of binary, but it is implied in much of its argumentation. My somewhat polemical reductionism here is meant to highlight how approaching spectacle as binaristically related to narrative leads to frustratingly reductive insights.

spectacularity of its invective moments might help in breaking free from established patterns of thinking about spectacle's relationship to narrative;[7] and, for another, because media practices around the show indicate that much of what makes *Veep* pleasurable and meaningful for audiences comes, in fact, from its interlacing of narrative and extranarrative.

Borderlands Between Spectacle and Narrative in *Veep*

I want to probe into *Veep*'s interlacing of narrative and invective spectacle by focusing on one particularly prominent type of invective moment, along with its contexts: the Jonah insult—i.e., the insulting of Jonah in which virtually all characters participate.[8] Jonah is a minor character who goes through various job positions in the course of the show's seven seasons: He starts out as a low-rank staffer, later works as a political consultant, then as a pundit who runs a populist political blog, and finally goes into politics himself, getting himself elected first to the House of Representatives and then to the office of Vice President. Jonah might well be the most despicable and despised among *Veep*'s characters. He shows not even traces of empathy nor moral conscience and is willing to do anything for his own advancement, from kissing up to his superiors to courting the NRA or right-wing voters. He also unhesitatingly sells out anybody he does not deem useful and relies on derision—often of a confidently misogynistic type—to boost his ego. This narcissism and ruthless opportunism in his character is paired with a blatant incompetence and stupidity: Jonah is regularly staged to botch even the most basic tasks. Yet despite his utter lack of skill and interest in politics and his equal lack of even rudimentary integrity, he climbs the career ladder in Washington, with various setbacks, but as a quite striking success in the longer run.

One thing that the show establishes early on about Jonah is that he is hated wherever he works, and this certainly applies to all the constellations in which he interacts with *Veep*'s other characters. They express their disdain for Jonah through

7 Of course, utilizing such an extraordinary formation of spectacle makes my reading vulnerable to charges that it says nothing about 'real' spectacle. I very much agree that my findings about the complex interactivity of spectacle and narrative have to be tested with other formations of the spectacular.

8 The corpus of Jonah insults is much too large and too diverse to give a sense of in the space that is available here. It encompasses name-calling (twenty-one of those compiled in the "Jonad Files" that are addressed in the episode "Testimony," including e.g. "Spewbacca," "Scrotum Pole," and "Cloud Botherer"), more elaborately set-up invectives (such as: "You're not even a man. You're like an early draft of a man, where they just sketched out a giant mangled skeleton, but they didn't have time to add details, like pigment or self-respect." ["Andrew"]), and endlessly creative variations of the injunction to f*** off.

energetic, often creative insults, which are performed with such regularity that media practices around the show treat them as a distinct genre of *Veep*-invective.[9] The excessiveness and 'staginess' of Jonah insults, the way in which media practices circulate them independent of the narratives of the episodes in which they occur, the intense affective responses to which viewers testify—typically encompassing various shades of laughter, from schadenfreude-type mirthful, over admiring, embarrassed, to shocked—all indicate how these scenes operate as spectacles. However, as much as their symbolic operations and their appeal to the audience are thus distinct from those of the show's narrative elements, I argue that these operations and appeals emphatically relate to and draw from narrative elements. And it is this interaction between spectacle and narrative that, in many ways, makes the Jonah insult interesting and complex.

First of all, the invectives directed at Jonah, as spectacular performances, are tied to the accumulated narratives about Jonah's character: narratives, for instance, about how he rubs it in everyone's faces that he goes in and out of the White House (during his employment there in seasons one and two) while the Vice President and her team not only lack this access but are hardly noted to exist by the President; or about how he uses and sensationalizes any kind of information he can get—from the most private to the clearly fake—to garner attention for his blog "Ryantology";[10] or about the nativist and racist platform on which he runs as a Presidential candidate in season seven. These narratives establish Jonah as a despicable character who, at least to some extent, seems to deserve the abuse that is hauled at him. They could be argued to create a space for the experiential pleasures that the spectacle of the Jonah insult has to offer—a space where this spectacle can be experienced guilt-free, where the hurtfulness and aggression of the invectives are sanctioned as forms of emotional hygiene that are legitimate, even necessary, given that such a despicable character is rewarded with fame and power in the storyworld.

Yet there are other narrative strands that complicate this in interesting ways. For one, while virtually every character in the storyworld claims that Jonah is the most loathsome person ever, the ways in which we see characters act challenge this claim of exceptionalism. Jonah's opportunism and narcissism are not fundamentally different from those of a Selina Meyer; the vile and vulgar way in which he speaks is rivaled by a whole league of other characters; and more often than not, his despicable actions are manipulated or otherwise used by Meyer or members

9 Cf., e.g., the Reddit thread "Top 5 Jonah Insults."

10 E.g., one episode has him spread clearly made-up claims that an army veteran who currently competes in a presidential election, Governor Chung, tortured prisoners in Iraq ("Clovis"). Or, in "Alicia," he humiliates one of Meyer's aides who begs him not to use a gaffe Meyer made, only to end up using both the gaffe and the aide's self-deprecation (Jonah has him go down on his knees and sing a Civil War song).

of her team.[11] In many ways, he is not worse than the others. Furthermore, it is quite noteworthy that Jonah insults serve a much needed social function in the storyworld: While Meyer and her team are at each others' throats most of the time, the one thing through which they come together is their dissing of Jonah. Jonah insults are veritable team-building work, filling a need in the storyworld by providing a type of social glue that would otherwise be missing.[12] What these narrative strands suggest, then, is that the Jonah insult also signifies on the other characters by establishing how they need it for their own social functionability and how they need it to mark that Jonah is fundamentally different from themselves. In other words, on this intersection of spectacle and narrative, the spectacular Jonah insult, serially performed, contributes to characterization. In addition, I would argue, this particular intersection also affects the eventful affordances of the Jonah insult, recalibrating the experiential pleasures to which it invites: If the stings do not so much, or not only, serve as a critique of Jonah but also as a critique of the characters who perform them, then the endorsement that is implied in laughing along becomes more complicated. These narrative strands thus ambiguate the pleasure that is offered by the invective spectacle, destabilizing the potential mirth of schadenfreude or the admiration of invective skill and bringing in the possibility of laughter slipping into self-consciousness.

This potential of a reflexivity that is generated at the borderlands of spectacle and narrative is advanced even further by a final layer of interaction between the spectacular and the narrative in *Veep*'s Jonah insults that I want to discuss. The invectives directed at Jonah—as is typical for insults—are tied to broadly circulating, often very enduring metanarratives of marginalization or abjection: metanarratives (of ableism, homophobia, etc.) that effect the othering of certain subjects, constructing them as different from and inferior to an in-group of the socially privileged, whose trappings are simultaneously framed as normative and 'normal.' Jonah insults conspicuously tap into metanarratives on nonnormative bodies and sexualities: They regularly invoke his tallness, along with other ways in which his body allegedly does not fit social norms,[13] and they just as regularly allege sexual

11 The rumors that Jonah spreads about Governor Chung participating in torture are a case in point: Planted by Meyer's aides, they are part of their efforts to weaken Chung as Meyer's competitor in the race to the White House.

12 This kind of social function can be observed in many instances of invective performance: Ellerbrock et al. argue that "invectivity" has unique potentials in catalyzing processes of group formation, and that these potentials account for the key role that invective practices play in so many social constellations.

13 See, e.g., among the epithets listed in the "Jonad Files" ("Testimony"): "60 Foot Virgin," "Pointless Giant," or "Guyscraper." There are also more elaborate insults that invoke bodily nonnormativity, for instance when an uncle, meaning to say something about Jonah's (lack of) politi-

preferences that range from excessive masturbation to incest.[14] As, too, is typical for insults, the invectives directed at Jonah do not have to spell out the metanarratives that construct certain bodies and practices as deviant, abject, other—these are inscribed in the insults as latent narratives, reiterated while remaining tacit each time such insults are used. The tacitness of ableist or homophobic metanarratives in Jonah insults not only boosts their mobility—shorthands travel more easily—but it also, crucially, allows for their piggybacking with spectacle: The spectacular performance of witty, excessive, crass invectives against Jonah lends such latent metanarratives an affective punch, laminating them with an intensity of visceral, emotional experience that comes with a distinct promise of pleasure. Thus, they extend a strong pull toward audiences to indulge in the performance of strength and humiliation that acts of insult always aspire to be.

Veep directly addresses this mobilizing potential of invective spectacle, fittingly, through the character of Jonah: While most of the other protagonists try to keep their habits of insult and incivility private, Jonah also uses them strategically, first in his blog "Ryantology" and later in his electoral campaigns. Jonah's strategic use of invective's spectacularity to win attention and to sell himself as a strongman politician is satirically (over)drawn and clearly framed as a commentary on Donald Trump's invective practices. Take, for instance, this snapshot from a campaign rally in the seventh-season episode "South Carolina," in which Jonah says:

> [M]ath was invented by Muslims. Yeah. [dramatic pause] And we teach this Islamic math to children. Math teachers are terrorists. Algebra? More like Al Jazeera. Under a Ryan presidency, I will ban this Sharia math from being taught to American children. [...] [Starting to chant and prompting his audience to join in:] No more math! No more math!

The scene—while conspicuously invoking dynamics at real-world 'MAGA' rallies—offers a poignant observation on the discursive power that resides at the intersection of the spectacular and the narrative in invective practices: Insults performed in a presentational mode of verbal display mobilize a diegetic audience to affirmative, endorsing acts of chanting, while tapping into and invoking anti-Muslim metanarratives. The invocations—slipping from Arabic to Muslim to Islamism to terrorism to Sharia—of course, do not make any sense, and spelling them out in a narrative mode would have probably exposed how they do not add

---

cal talent, ends up commenting on his body, figuring it as "this mangled abortion coat hanger you should be ashamed to call your body" ("A Woman First").

14 See, again, among the epithets enumerated in the episode "Testimony": "12 Years a Slave to Jerking Off," "Gaylian," "Benedict Cum-in-His-Own-Hand." Incest does not only appear as a disparaging insinuation but as an actual plot line in season seven, when it is revealed that Jonah's wife is his half-sister and that he himself is also the result of an incestuous relationship.

up. But anti-Muslim metanarratives are merely conjured up as a tacit backdrop, manifesting only as a vague, but no less intense, sensation or feeling (of Muslims as evil, a threat, etc.). And it is precisely this sense of 'feeling' in which the spectacular performance of the insults invests, which it heats up all the way to a communal acting on that feeling—the chanting—that has the potential of escalating the felt hatred or fear even more. Faces in Jonah's audience indicate that some of the people there are puzzled and grapple with the chain of logic that supposedly stands behind the chanting against math, but, indicatively, they still join the chant.

Jonah's use of invective in scenes like this is clearly set up to encourage a critical distance in the televisual audience: Its ideological work of fanning anti-Muslim sentiments is all too obvious, and it also lacks in invective finesse. Yet, as I suggested above, the interplay between invocations of metanarratives and spectacular performance that is critically observed here also marks the Jonah insult, in which the TV audience is arguably addressed like the intradiegetic audience in the scene of Jonah's campaign rally, to share and endorse the bashing. *Veep*'s invective moments—in thus rotating their mode of address toward the audience, variously positioning them as targets of these performances' affective pull and as critical observers of such affective dynamics—encourage reflections on the power that resides at the intersection of invective spectacle and ideological metanarratives, a power so destructively yielded by a Trumpian brand of populism. Crucially, the reflexivity to which *Veep* invites there does not stop at observing from a distance, but it rather includes a moment of self-observation, of using one's own visceral experience of invective spectacularity as a platform for critical reflection.

Conclusion

In a skit for *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* on 9 May 2019, just a few days before *Veep*'s final episode aired on HBO, Colbert—in a kind of metaleptic conceit—crosses from the 'real world' in which his show operates to the fictional world of *Veep*. There, he implores Selina Meyer and her team:

> Stop! I beg you, stop! [...] The things you are doing on this earth then happen in my world—over and over again. [...] Foulmouthed president who tweets like a child, blaming everything on the Chinese, election interference, a completely moronic press secretary. [...] You are killing my world.

Colbert's plea is, of course, not taken seriously; he ends up getting brutally mocked when he reveals that he is the current host of CBS's *Late Show* ("you look like Letterman took the least funny dump of his life into a child's suit").

In terms of cultural history, the skit's suggestion that the cultural efficacy of a format like *Veep* had been eroded by the political realities of the Trump presi-

dency—a sentiment shared by many of the show's obituaries that I mentioned at the beginning—is, of course, intriguing. And along these lines, more inquiries are necessary into how this presidency and the social climate that made it happen have changed the cultural work that popular culture has to do. My concern here, however, has been to outline how *Veep*, though created in and for a different moment in cultural history, does offer valuable impulses for thinking through some of the conditions and consequences of MAGA culture. This value of the show becomes visible when attending to the ways in which it interlaces the spectacular and the narrative in its staging of invective. It provides a lab-like environment to examine how some invective performances—certainly the type current in MAGA culture—draw on the symbolic logics of spectacle to deliver their affective punch and how interlacing such spectacles with narratives, be they present or implied, marries that punch to ideologically potent scripts of worldmaking. At the same time, *Veep* offers a rich case study to critically revisit theorizations of the relationship between narrative and spectacle, helping to move them beyond simplistically binaristic conceptions, and drawing attention to the complex and powerful work that can happen at the borderlands between them.

Works Cited

"Alicia." *Veep*, season 3, episode 3, HBO, 24 Sept. 2014.

Alter, Rebecca. "Brutally Mock *Veep*'s Jonah with Our Instant Insult Generator." *Vulture*, 10 May 2019, www.vulture.com/2019/05/veep-insult-generator-jonah-jonad.html.

"Andrew." *Veep*, season 2, episode 6, HBO, 9 Oct. 2013.

Andrews, Travis M. "Many Thought Trump's Axios Interview Felt Like *Veep*: The Showrunner Says 'We're Being Outdone Regularly.'" *Washington Post*, 4 Aug. 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2020/08/04/veep-trump-axios-interview-jonathan-swan-david-mandel.

Bukatman, Scott. "Spectacle, Attractions and Visual Pleasure." *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, edited by Wanda Strauven, Amsterdam UP, 2006, pp. 71-82.

"Clovis." *Veep*, season 3, episode 4, HBO, 1 Oct. 2014.

Colbert, Stephen. "The *Veep*/Colbert Crossover Episode." *YouTube*, uploaded by The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, 10 May 2019, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRgbsCV5kbQ.

D'Addario, Daniel. "How the Trump Era Wrecked *Veep*." *Variety*, 29 Apr. 2019, https://variety.com/2019/tv/news/trump-wrecked-veep-hbo-1203196732.

Desta, Yohanda. "*Veep* Will Come to a Bittersweet End in the Trump Era." *Vanity Fair*, 7 Sept. 2017, www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/09/veep-series-ending.

Ellerbrock, Dagmar, et al. "Invektivität: Perspektiven eines neuen Forschungsprogramms in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften." *Kulturwissenschaftliche Zeitschrift*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2017, pp. 2-24.

Fitz-Gerald, Sean. "The Anatomy of a *Veep* Insult." *Primetimer*, 18 May 2019, https://www.primetimer.com/features/veep-showrunner-david-mandel-explains-the-final-seasons-best-insults.

—. "The Greatest Insults from All Seven Seasons of *Veep*." *Thrillist*, 24 May 2019, http://www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/best-cast-of-veep-characters-insults-hbo.

"Fundraiser." *Veep*, season 1, episode 1, HBO, 22 Apr. 2012.

Gunning, Tom. "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde." *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, edited by Wanda Strauven, Amsterdam UP, 2006, pp. 381-88.

Kanzler, Katja. "*Veep*, Invective Spectacle, and the Figure of the Comedic Antiheroine." *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2019, pp. 147-62.

Lavik, Erlend. "The Battle for the Blockbuster: Discourses of Spectacle and Excess." *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2008, pp. 169-87.

Lewis, Simon. "What Is Spectacle?" *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2014, pp. 214-21.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6-18.

Rackham, Casey. "38 *Veep* Moments that Will Never Not Be Funny." *BuzzFeed*, 17 Nov. 2018, www.buzzfeed.com/caseyrackham/best-veep-quotes-funniest-veep-moments.

Rankin, JJ. "5 Best Insults from *Veep* to Add to Your Lexicon (& 5 That Are too Savage)." *Screenrant*, 5 May 2020, screenrant.com/hbo-veep-insults-best-savage.

"South Carolina." *Veep*, season 7, episode 4, HBO, 21 Apr. 2019.

"Swearing-In: 25 Great *Veep* Insults." *Rolling Stone*, 28 Mar. 2014, www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-lists/swearing-in-25-great-veep-insults-12907/25-the-book-of-st-227652.

"Testimony." *Veep*, season 4, episode 9, HBO, 7 June 2015.

"Top 5 Jonah Insults?" *Reddit*, https://www.reddit.com/r/Veep/comments/ba7r6v/top_5_jonah_insults. Accessed 9 June 2021.

Veep. Created by Armando Ianucci, HBO, 2012-19.

"A Woman First." *Veep*, season 6, episode 9, HBO, 18 June 2017.