9. Affect, the Popular, and Vogues of Feeling in Pop Culture (Studies)
On Robyn Warhol's *Having a Good Cry* (2003)

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I sit on my couch, after a long day, and use my computer to watch an episode of *Clean House* before going to bed.[1] It is not the first episode of this show that I watch. I am well familiar with this and other formats in the genre: makeover shows that are about the cleaning and decluttering of messy homes. My habit of watching makeover shows is not something I talk about much. I do not enjoy talking about my viewing experience of this genre as I do with other TV shows, which I often love to discuss with others, further intensifying the pleasure I take in watching these shows. Not so with *Clean House*. I do not want to revisit my viewing pleasure in this show by talking about it; I do not want to bond over it with others. I really do not enjoy writing about it right now.

Clearly, what makes me come back to *Clean House* has nothing to do with its narrative. The show's storytelling is minimal and utterly predictable: a team of experts come to a messy house, they find out why it is messy (usually because of some unacknowledged emotional issues on the part of its inhabitants), they fix this cause of the messiness, clean the house, and that's the happy end. What makes me come back to such shows are the equally formulaic images of messiness that they showcase—usually mediated by camera work with lots of lingering shots, sometimes featuring ominous music, always accompanied by responses of the expert-characters who hyperbolically enact the visceral responses I observe in myself (albeit in more subdued

and self-conscious fashion): widely opened eyes of excitement, various for-mations of sneering that perform contempt or disgust. *Clean House* works for me—in ways that *Hoarders*[2], for example, does not—because it showcases just the right amount of messiness: not too much; not a pathological messiness that could make me self-conscious about my own act of staring, exploding the tacit rationalizations that allow me to tolerate my staring. The messiness in *Hoarders* makes me feel compassion—a double compassion—for the people living in such environments: one for the medical and social conditions that contribute to their living situations, and an additional one for being exploited by the television show (tied, of course, to feelings of guilt on my part). When watching *Clean House*, I do not usually feel compassion for the contestants: the show's narrative tells me that they are fine, they just cannot get their act together for reasons that can be easily fixed. Their messiness is baroque and impressive, for sure, but it is still a "regular" messiness, like the one in my own home (which appears more orderly in comparison, making me feel smugly or-ganized). So I feel licensed to sneer, to maybe even shake my head a little, to enjoy a feeling of distance between me and the contestants who cannot get their act together.

The preceding paragraphs are inspired by the preface that opens Robyn Warhol's *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms*: a set of six testimonials in which readers talk about "what their bodies do when they are reading" popular genres, the final vignette being by Warhol herself and in the first person (ix).[3] The materials they discuss are quite different from the TV format I address; also the viewing experiences are different, less shameful than mine. Yet Warhol shares a shameful viewing experience later in the book. Warhol uses these testimonials in the preface to scaffold her book's inquiry into what it feels like to read popular narratives—setting the stage for the book's thematic focus on structures of feeling in popular culture, along with a somatic approach to such feelings, and for a method that combines body-conscious self-observation with both narratological analysis and an inquiry into the gender politics of popular culture.

Robyn Warhol is best known for her groundbreaking work in feminist narratology. *Having a Good Cry* certainly contributes to this line of her work.

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2   *Hoarders*, produced by Dave Severson et al. (A&E Networks, 2009–present).

3   All parenthetical citations in the text refer to Robyn Warhol, *Having a Good Cry: Effemi-nate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003).

However, in the following, I want to approach the book as the groundbreaking contribution to affect theory and popular culture studies that it also is. Warhol's study is a vanguard work in the much belabored "affective turn" that has been sweeping the humanities since the turn of the millennium, written at a time when the formation of affect studies as a recognizable school of inquiry was still very much under way. *Having a Good Cry* participated in these emerging conversations in ways that deserve more attention and that continue to be stimulating as the new millennium progresses, especially for someone who, like me, is interested in the structures of feeling that govern commercial popular culture. I thus want to read the book as an affect-attuned intervention in popular culture studies. In a reading that seeks to be receptive to the resonances and associations that *Having a Good Cry* evokes for me, I am interested in where and how it intervenes in scholarly conversations about affect and/in popular culture. Taking my cue from Warhol's emphatic and self-observant use of the first-person pronoun, I am also interested in where and how the book speaks to the affective dimensions of cultural inquiry. Finally, I am interested in using the book's impulses to think about structures of feeling in US popular culture at the time I am writing this, the end of the twenty-first century's second decade: are tears still such a central element in the matrix of popular affects? What other elements are coming to the fore, and what would it mean to think about them from the vantage point of Warhol's book? For this final question, I will come back to the uncomfortable viewing experience I just sketched.

A recent handbook article on "Affect and Narratology" is one of the few pieces I am aware of that acknowledges *Having a Good Cry*'s contribution to affect studies. Within it, Claudia Breger frames the book as a pioneering intervention that "forcefully connected narrative theory to the emerging paradigm of affect studies."[4] Breger notes how the book ventures beyond the psychoanalytic approaches that used to channel much of the engagement with affect in literary, cultural, and media studies, instead taking conceptual cues from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Silvan Tomkins who would become major theoretical touchstones in what Patricia Clough, a few years later, labels the "affective

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4   Claudia Breger, "Affect and Narratology," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Affect Studies and Textual Criticism*, ed. Donald R. Wehrs and Thomas Blake (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 237.

turn."[5] In vanguard fashion, Warhol focuses her attention on the body as the medium of feelings, approaching its somatic states as practices that performatively generate what we call emotions or feelings, rather than as expressions of feelings that exist prior to some bodily reflection. This move allows her to collapse the distinction between "real" and "fake" feelings that regularly animates the dismissal of popular culture's emotional effects. According to Warhol, the titular "good cry" that is ritually indulged in when one watches a soap opera is as "real" as any other instance of tears. Precisely because the emotional effects of popular culture tend to be tied to formulaic textual structures and to ritualistic media practices, they are of particular cultural import. Warhol describes popular narratives as key "technologies of affect" that "mark readers' bodies" (7) with somatic effects whose signatures accumulate over time: "Figuratively speaking, those patterns mold the body's plasticity, leaving the marks and shapes characteristic of the feelings their genres typically bring up" (8). As technologies of affect, popular narratives thus "work through readers' bodily feelings to produce and reproduce the physical fact of bourgeois subjectivity" (8). It is particularly the gendered dimension of this subjectivity which interests Warhol and which she explores in a set of affective configurations (sentimentalism, the marriage plot, seriality, soap operas).

In unfolding this argument, Warhol emphatically includes her own embodied self among the subjects molded by popular feelings: from her testimonial in the book's preface to the many moments when she addresses her own affects and feelings, making a point in using them as a resource for her inquiry, she carves for herself the textual persona of a "feeling scholar." This positioning is a key move for her book's project in popular culture studies, in ways I will address in a moment. Yet it also impacts the book's contribution to an emerging affect studies paradigm: taking on the long shadow of the New Criticism's "affective fallacy," this positioning speaks to affect studies' core argument about the interdependency (rather than antagonism) of cognition and feeling, highlighting the epistemic productivity of feelings in and through the book's own critical practice. Warhol's writing is naturally selective in the structures of feeling she self-reflexively explores, setting clear priorities, but I feel invited to appreciate criticism as a practice in which cognition and feeling intertwine beyond these instances of explicit self-reflection

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5   Patricia Ticinento Clough and Jean Halley, eds., *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

to the more tacit, or more tacitly addressed, affective structures in her book and to the knowledge work that they mobilize (or immobilize).

In this spirit, I note, for example, how Warhol evokes a blend of intellectual frustrations and desires when outlining the motivation for her project. One of the frustrations she articulates concerns the slow and inconsistent de-essentializing of feminist studies which, despite mantras to the opposite, still often conceptualizes gender as tied to binarily sexed bodies. Even if not fleshed out in bold emotive colors, this frustration fuels one of the key conceptual moves of the book: to forgo the terms "feminine" and "masculine" for the denotation of gendered structures of feeling and to introduce an alternative terminology of "effeminate," "non-effeminate," and "antieffeminate" feelings. To me, this is one of the most interesting moves of the book, not primarily because it opens up a space to think gender independent of binary sex categories, but because it lays bare the affective signatures of disdain that are "stuck" onto several expressions of the feminine, to use Sara Ahmed's conceptual figure of "sticky feelings,"[6] and how this "sticking" affects the conceptual registers we have at our disposal as cultural critics. The pejorative coloration of "effeminate" connects the word with other ideas or phenomena that are dominantly conceptualized as associated with women and/or metaphorically feminized—ideas and phenomena that concern Warhol throughout her book, such as "sentimentalism" or, even more broadly, "popular culture." Arguably, Warhol's professed goal to "rehabilitat[e] effeminacy from the pejorative status it currently holds" (10) did not materialize in the book's aftermath, but I find exactly this failure productive: it highlights just how firmly the registers of disdain stick to some signifiers of the feminine and feminized, in ways that reach well into cultural inquiry. Perhaps what could be instructive here are the feminist efforts to recode sentimentalism from pejoratively framed beacon of cultural worthlessness to complex phenomenon very much worthy of sustained attention—efforts that started several decades ago with publications like Jane Tompkins's *Sensational Designs*:[7] Critical concepts come with their own structures of feeling, and while our scholarly conversations routinely shift the ideas that are attached to concepts, it takes more time and work to change how people feel about them. Feelings are stickier than ideas, also in academia.

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6   Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 89–92.

7   Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

While the invocation of intellectual frustrations and desires marks an af-fective structure that Warhol's book probably shares with many pieces of cul-tural inquiry, there is one common structure that the book makes a point in complicating: the aloof distancing of the critic from the phenomena and subjects they critique, a scholarly self-fashioning whose distinct "passions and pleasures" Rita Felski so poignantly discussed.[8] Warhol's writing actively works on reducing the distance between herself as critic and the implied and actual readers of the popular narratives she examines, conspicuously includ-ing herself in this readership, in ways she makes explicit as a conceptual move in her chapter on soap operas: "soap opera scholars have commonly referred to the viewers of daytime serials as 'them'" (105), she notes, "construct[ing] the perspective of longtime viewers of soap opera as 'other' ... in opposition to the scholarly perspective that centers each study" (106). To counter this othering, Warhol calls on "feminist scholars to begin 'speaking of soap operas' still more frankly in the first person" (107).

In articulating this call, she invokes other feminist scholars of popular culture. Of course, such programmatic self-positionings of the critic as part of a social group of women have been a key move of feminist standpoint epis-temology. Yet such self-positionings also are a distinct signature in popular culture studies, where Henry Jenkins has arguably been the most vocal propo-nent of the positionality of an "aca-fan," i.e., an academic who also identifies as a fan and who embraces these two entry points into cultural materials as mutually enriching. Jenkins describes this positionality in *Textual Poachers*, without using the term "aca-fan" yet, as he reminisces in the introduction to book's twentieth-anniversary edition.[9] Later, Jenkins prominently deployed the term to label his influential blog, "Confessions of an Aca-Fan," and he has continued to reflect on and practice this reading position throughout his pub-lications.

Jenkins's self-positioning as an aca-fan and Warhol's programmatic ges-ture of discussing soap operas in the first person resonate with each other in interesting ways. A good way to trace the commonalities and differences in how the two operate their reading positions is to put Warhol's book in conversation with Jenkins's *The Wow Climax*, a book that shares with Warhol's an interest in the affective dimensions of popular culture, while proceeding

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8   Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 10.

9   Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, updated ed., (New York: Routledge, 2013), viii.

from different conceptual vantage points and engaging with different cultural materials: Jenkins comes from a background in media-cultural studies rather than feminist narratology.[10] For example, his book is primarily interested in the Vaudeville tradition and its legacies in popular culture, it explores spectacle more than narrative, and it pays particular attention to the affective work of moments when popular materials violate the formulas that underwrite them. Like Warhol, Jenkins regularly uses his own affective responses as a resource for critical inquiry, pairing them with metacritical reflections that emphasize the surplus knowledge that becomes available when popular culture is engaged from up close rather than from a distance: "These aspects of popular culture are difficult to understand from a stance of contemplative distance. To understand how popular culture works on our emotions, we have to pull it close, get intimate with it, let it work its magic on us, and then write about our own engagement."[11] Such a position of closeness not only provides Jenkins with empirical data that he can use, in autobiographical fashion, for his cultural analysis. Such closeness also allows the fan-literate scholar to fully understand the cultural dynamics of popular materials, including the ways in which they theorize themselves.[12] Jenkins's chief horizon for his self-positioning in this book thus is an intervention in the methodology of popular culture studies. In the spirit of the figure of the aca-fan, he highlights how he understands his role as cultural critic as one of mediating between the epistemological regimes of vernacular and academic cultures, moving back and forth between the immersion and distance they respectively require.

Warhol operates her critical position using a similar movement back and forth, but she describes it in different ways and ultimately develops it to make a powerful argument about gendered structures of feeling. Warhol discusses this back and forth in her reading of the blockbuster movie *Pretty Woman*, where her concern is not an exploration of sentimentalism, as in the chapter on soap operas, but the structures of feeling that are tied to the conventional marriage plot. Warhol frames her reading of the film, from the start, as full of "discomforts" (64) that she describes in terms of an oscillation between

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10   Henry Jenkins, *The Wow Climax: Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

11   Jenkins, *Wow*, 10.

12   Jenkins, 3–11. For an extended discussion of pop-cultural practices of self-observation, see Frank Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality," in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 16–18, 22–26.

excitement and shame: "If, as a feminist reader, I feel shame in getting excited about marriage plots, *Pretty Woman* brings me to the point of humiliation" (64). With great attention to detail, Warhol tracks the somatic responses that perform shame and excitement in her practice of reading the movie, and the specific dimensions of the film that trigger them:

> The accelerated pulse and pleasure of the interest and enjoyment alternate with the mild nausea of shame, depending whether I'm attending to the text's overt narrative or to my almost compulsively experienced ideological critique, both of the text and of my enjoyment. … [I]nterest and enjoyment mark my face when I am responding to the intradiegetic level of the action, the exchanges among the characters; to the extent that I can participate at the extradiegetic level as a member of the film's intended audience, I feel the widening up and out of my lips, the absorbed track-look-listen signifying excitement. But at a metadiegetic level that opens up when I adopt the perverse strategy of self-conscious, self-consciously feminist close reading, my eyes lower, my head is down, shame sets in (67).

Warhol goes on to discuss, by way of example, a set of moments in the movie that induce this mixture of excitement and shame for her. In doing so, she makes a point in highlighting the productivity of both feelings, those of pleasure and those of discomfort. More precisely, she highlights the productivity of their interplay, when it is engaged on a metaconscious level which she describes as that of "the perverse lover of marriage plots, the self-consciously feminist close reader" (69). This oscillation between excitement and shame, she argues, constitutes a uniquely gendered—"effeminate"—structure of feeling fueled by popular culture, "inscrib[ed] on the faces of effeminate viewers of 'chick flicks,' again and again, every time devotees of this genre read another marriage plot" (69). Reflecting on these structures of feeling, which only becomes possible when the critic owns and embraces them through a "body-conscious reading strategy" (70), provides a unique access point for critiquing these very structures, as she demonstrates in her reading of *Pretty Woman*. Not a position of aloof critical distance, but a closeness that is willing and agile enough to observe itself fuels the kind of critique that she outlines—a critique both of the gender politics of commercial popular culture and of the feelings that structure gendered existence. Elsewhere in the book, when Warhol discusses sentimental narratives, she carves out a similar reading position that oscillates between closeness and self-observation. There, she does not

so much tie it to discussions of critical method, but much more broadly to reflections that go into the direction of a public pedagogy:

> As for the effeminate readers who love "having a good cry," I envision a community empowered by a relationship to sentimental texts that is both visceral and self-aware, fully conscious of how strategies "get us," and free to enjoy the physical act of crying. If we can dispel this sense of embarrassment and isolation associated with textually induced tears, our potential for participating in the transformation of culture and society will be that much more powerful. (57)

These remarks about embarrassment at "textually induced" affect, about the oscillation between excitement and shame bring me back to my testimonial from this essay's beginning—although I want to note that my sense of embarrassment and shame is different from the ones described by Warhol, because I observed myself responding to a TV show's invitation to look down on its characters. I want to conclude this essay by bringing some of the thoughts triggered by my reading of Warhol's book to bear on the experience I sketched in this testimonial—an embodied reading experience like the ones that fuel Warhol's analysis, yet one that is embedded in a pop-cultural ecosystem that has considerably changed in the seventeen years since the publication of *Having a Good Cry*. *As the World Turns*, the soap opera that takes center stage in one of the book's chapters, came to an end in 2010, after a run of 43 years.[13] This cancellation is part of a larger pattern that sees especially the daytime soap opera in decline, replaced by other formats that bring their own affective signatures to US popular culture. *As the World Turns* was replaced by a talk show (*The Talk*, currently in its tenth season).[14] Additionally, reality TV has become increasingly dominant in the field of daytime entertainment and beyond—though this dominance might already be on the decline, too (the Style Network that aired *Clean House*, for example, was discontinued in 2017). The "good cry" that inspired the title of Warhol's book still plays a significant role in these formats and genres—within the genre of reality TV, for example, the *Queer Eye* reboot has brought "good cry"-techniques to a new level of mastery.[15] But more and other structures of feeling have come to prominence in recent popular culture, and my personal viewing experience of *Clean*

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13   *As the World Turns*, created by Irna Phillips (CBS, 1956–2010).

14   *The Talk*, created by Sara Gilbert (CBS, 2010–present).

15   *Queer Eye*, created by David Collins (Netflix, 2018–present).

House might offer a platform for thinking about them. When approaching this viewing experience as a historically situated instance of a body-conscious engagement of popular culture, which structures of feeling are particularly noteworthy?

One structure I find noteworthy is the guilty pleasure that resonates throughout my testimonial: the way in which I am self-censoring about the pleasure I take in watching *Clean House*, how I strive to keep it secret, hesitate to own it and feel vaguely nauseous when I do by writing about it; how I develop rationalizations for why staring and sneering are not so bad in watching this—as compared to other—shows. "Guilty pleasure" has, of course, become a canonized trope in recent popular culture practices, a trope that makes it possible to simultaneously own and disown types of pleasure that, for whatever reason, seem illicit. I find it stimulating to think about "guilty pleasure" against the backdrop of Warhol's remarks about the "alternation of excitement and shame" she discerns in "effeminate emotional experience" (65). On the one hand, experiences of guilty pleasure echo the oscillation between reading positions that Warhol outlines: an oscillation between a responsiveness to the appeal that pop-cultural materials extend to their intended audiences, and a self-conscious critique of this appeal (and one's own response), possibly due to its politics, possibly due to other reasons. In this sense, the formation of guilty pleasure into a ready-made trope could be seen as signaling a new cultural recognition and awareness of the "perverse" reading positions into which popular culture invites (some of) its consumers, especially those who identify as feminist or along other non- or anti-hegemonic lines. This trope could be seen as an instance of popular culture observing itself, theorizing itself, and, through the vernacular circulation of this theorizing, providing participants in the culture with better tools to productively navigate the contradictory affective structures in which commercial popular culture places them.[16]

Conversely, this might not be how the trope works, at least not in many instances of its use. When the sociologists Charles McCoy and Roscoe Scarborough conducted a set of interviews with television viewers who used the discourse of guilty pleasure, they found that the trope was primarily employed as a coping mechanism: viewers used it to deal with the "normative contradiction" they experienced when consuming TV content that they "know" to be "bad": "while they have created or embraced a symbolic boundary between

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16   On self-observation in popular culture, see Kelleter, "Five Ways," 18.

'good' and 'bad' television, they find themselves transgressing that boundary by consuming and, in some cases, enjoying the shows they condemn."[17] In such constellations of use, then, the discourse of guilty pleasure serves to soothe precisely the discomfort that Warhol frames as productive in her reading of *Pretty Woman*. As a ready-made and recognizable trope, guilty pleasure calms the nausea that attends sensations of shame, translating them into a talking point that no longer has to be physically felt. It allows readers to take themselves out of the equation, to withdraw to a position of jaded super-awareness, in which affective states and feelings tend to be citational performances rather than bodily realities—the opposite of a "body-conscious reading strategy."

A second affective structure I find noteworthy when I look at my viewing experience of *Clean House* is how it revolves around feelings of distance and disapproval: I caught myself enjoying how the show made me disidentify with the characters, how it encouraged me to judge them, providing me with plenty of narrative details to sanction my judgmental stance (in the particular episode I watched, the husband of the family was so negatively drawn, so nasty to his wife *and* responsible for most of the mess in the house that I gladly looked down on him). I enjoyed when the experts in the diegesis verbalized my visceral disapproval, because I thought the man deserved it. In fact, my knowledge of the genre's formula assured me that such sneering and chastising would do the man good: it would catalyze his and his home's makeover into better versions of themselves. So the distance I felt was only temporary, a phase in the progression of the episode whose second half veers into sentimentalism (where we are told that the man suffers from separation anxiety because he lost a sibling and that this anxiety governs his behavior, where we see him commit to working through it, to being nicer to his wife, etc.). The later acts of the episode's dramaturgy asked me to feel with and for the man, but what sticks with me are the earlier moments where the episode took me through the moves of looking down on him.

Sentimentalism's structures of feeling are quite dominant in the forms of effeminate culture that Warhol's book discusses. These structures, to a significant extent, revolve around affective attunement. *Clean House* and several other formats of recent US popular culture are, at least partly, designed to generate seemingly opposite structures of feeling, structures that build on

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17   Charles Allan McCoy and Roscoe C. Scarborough, "Watching 'Bad' Television: Ironic Consumption, Camp, and Guilty Pleasure," *Poetics* 47 (2014): 41–59, here 41.

affective distance and dissociation, on disdain rather than affection. With re-
gard to *Clean House*, it could be argued that moments of affective distance
serve as a mere prelude to the attunement that marks each episode's narra-
tive closure; that they are merely one move in an intricate choreography that
modulates the implied viewer's affective proximity to the characters in the
diegesis. Yet even there, these moments stand out: they are tied to spectacular
images of domestic disorder that work independent of the episodes' narra-
tives of transformation and their carefully delayed sentimentalism—specta-
cles that Jayne Raisborough aptly describes as "clutter porn."[18] They are ad-
ditionally tied to resourceful and creative performances of disapproval by the
expert-characters, performances in which verbal and non-verbal invective in-
tertwine, and which unfold an appeal of their own that, too, is independent
of their narrative embedding.

One could furthermore argue that these moments of affective distancing
work to intensify the show's delayed sentimentalism, expanding the emo-
tional space that viewers are called upon to travel as each episode asks them
to feel compassion for characters they had initially been positioned to dismiss
and dislike. Or it could be argued that moments of affective distancing only
facilitate the show's sentimentalism—a facilitating that might have become
necessary in a pop-cultural ecosystem affected by the long-lasting contempt
for sentimentalism in the broader culture. Maybe the emotional dramaturgy
of makeover shows exemplifies how, at least in this segment of contemporary
popular culture, sentimentalism's strong emotions of affection need to be bal-
anced by strong emotions of a different sort, emotions of disaffection; how
materials that showcase the sentimental "good cry" now require some dose
of "invective relief" that provokes sensations of disdain capable of offsetting
sentimentalism's calls to empathy.

Yet it is also possible to approach these processes from a reverse perspec-
tive, asking how the show's sentimentalism might serve its moments of af-
fective distancing. The sentimental wrap-up that the makeover show's con-
ventions provide for could be read as legitimizing the performances of dis-
tance and dislike in which such shows indulge. Sentimental closures can pro-
vide such legitimization by giving performances of depreciation a goal and
a purpose, claiming that they serve as catalysts in the personal transforma-
tion of allegedly suffering contestants. Such strategies of self-legitimization

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18   Jayne Raisborough, *Lifestyle Media and the Formation of the Self* (London: Palgrave
Macmillan, 2011), 66.

are not a new phenomenon in commercial popular culture. They recall, for example, twentieth-century exploitation films and their forerunners in nineteenth-century exposé novels, which sought to authorize their graphic depictions of sex and violence by claiming to serve an educational purpose.[19] My clandestinely enjoyed makeover shows might similarly build their appeal on the promise of scenes that transgress the boundaries of what is deemed socially and medially acceptable—compared to the exploitation genre, the rather mild transgression of incivility, both enacted in the diegesis and encouraged in the sneering target viewer; and they might similarly seek to legitimize this transgressiveness by framing it as instrumental in projects of reform.

The kind of transgressiveness that makeover shows feature seems to enjoy a particular currency at the present moment. It has been observed in various contexts, described in various grades of emotional intensity, and conceptualized by way of various paradigms—from Berry and Sobieraj's "new incivility" to Higgins et al.'s "belligerent broadcasting."[20] The latter is particularly instructive in the context of my viewing experience of *Clean House*: Michael Higgins and his colleagues use this term to describe a distinctly "hot" version of conspicuous incivility they observe on US and UK television. They note:

> in a variety of genres, … there has been a move in recent years to stage increasingly aggressive, and sometimes violent, forms of verbal confrontation. These genres range from talk shows which specialize in "confrontainment" … through instances of "lifestyle" and "reality" TV, to adversarial forms of accountability interviewing…. The verbal confrontations that occur here often include forms of language not previously (or very exceptionally) heard in public discourse such as swearing and direct, unmitigated insults.[21]

While the "belligerence" they describe is certainly more aggressive than the moments of performative disdain in *Clean House*, I would insist that these

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19   See Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

20   Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sovieraj, *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility* (Oxford University Press, 2014); Michael Higgins et al., "Belligerent Broadcasting and Makeover Television: Professional Incivility in *Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares*," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 5 (2012): 501–518. Especially in the context of political entertainment, and in response to the eroding boundary between entertainment and politics in the wake of the Trump presidency, there have been numerous discussions of conspicuous incivility in media culture.

21   Higgins et al., 502.

are related—that they are different points on a spectrum of symbolic abuse. Robyn Warhol's *Having a Good Cry* offers valuable impulses for thinking through the structures of feeling that pervade the contemporary popular culture of symbolic abuse. It encourages us to look closely at the somatic effects that this culture's materials elicit in their readers and viewers and at how these affective structures shape the ideas that people take out of their engagement with the materials. It encourages us to examine the popular formulas that inscribe such affective structures on the bodies of readers and viewers, fortifying these structures through the repetitions that are built into them. It encourages us to ask how the affective structures of the materials mold the social bodies of their readers and viewers, their sense of social self. It encourages us to explore the signatures of gender and other categories of social identification in these structures of feeling. It encourages us to come close, to not rest on a position of enlightened disdain for this culture, to take seriously the feelings that people feel when they engage with it. And it encourages us to reflect on our own affective investments and entanglements when critiquing the popular culture of symbolic abuse—to reflect on, that is, the structures of feeling that pervade our scholarly practice, in which distance and disdain have signatures of their own.