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Small Screen, Big Feels: Television & Cultural Anxiety in the 21st Century - Introduction

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Small Screen, Big Feels

Television and Cultural Anxiety in
the Twenty-First Century

Melissa Ames



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Introduction

Watching (and Feeling) Contemporary American TV: Understanding the Relationship among Societal Conflict, Technological Advancement, and Television Programming

Twenty-first-century television has been instrumental in cultivating the shared cultural memory of emotionally charged events unfolding in the United States. Consider, for example, this nonexhaustive list of traumatic events, societal conflicts, and political milestones that most Americans witnessed through television screens: the contested Bush-Gore 2000 presidential election, the September 11 terrorist attacks, Hurricane Katrina, U.S. Navy Seals infiltrating Osama bin Laden's compound, the presidential inauguration of Barack Obama, the Occupy Wall Street movement, the Boston Marathon bombings, the Ferguson protests, the controversial Clinton-Trump 2016 presidential election, the 2017 Women's Marches, the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, the mass imprisonment of asylum seekers at border crossings, the COVID-19 pandemic, and so on. With the proliferation of mobile technology, both the production and consumption of television have changed, which has allowed many of these events to be viewed through television coverage and video clips accessible on laptops, tablets, and smartphones. Likewise, traditional television coverage of such historical events now often comprises footage captured by everyday citizens with technological devices on hand to capture the aftermath of natural disasters and mass shootings, the real-time instances of police brutality and hate crimes, the on-the-ground experience of political rallies and social protests, and so forth.

Though television has always played a role in recording and crafting history, shaping cultural memory, and influencing public sentiment, the changing nature of the medium in the post-network era—the around-the-clock coverage enabled by countless cable stations, on-the-go accessibility granted

by streaming and mobile technology, the made-for-me personalization of television playlists and ideologically specific networks—finds viewers *experiencing* and participating in this process in new ways.¹ Studying the U.S. televisual landscape of the twenty-first century, this book traces the reciprocal relationship among current events, technological shifts, and programming trends and argues that these three work together to contribute to collective national affect states.² While television prompts multiple—sometimes idiosyncratic—emotions in individual viewers and communities, this project focuses primarily on the ways in which twenty-first-century programming has responded to and reinforced a cultural climate grounded in fear and anxiety in the United States.³

Entertaining the Era of Fear: Affect in the Post-9/11, Post-Social Media Period

For those old enough to remember the September 11 terrorist attacks, their memory of the day is probably framed within a television set: an image of a plane crashing into the side of one of the World Trade Center buildings; the footage of one or both of the towers toppling to the ground; horrific panoramic scenes of New York city filled with smoke and debris, injured people, shocked bystanders, and heroic first responders.⁴ Probably erased from those memories is the crawl running across the bottom of those images, the network logo displayed on the corner of the screen, or the somber commentary provided by the news anchors. As it had in past televised national tragedies, television transported viewers to the scene of this trauma, cementing the memory in their minds as readily as if they had been spectators on the ground. And, in doing so, it began broadcasting an era of fear that would grow and take on many different forms (and targets) in the following two decades.

Although the 9/11 events occurred twenty-one months after the start of the new millennium, the early decades of the twenty-first century can easily be theorized as a post-9/11 period. Many scholars have viewed the terrorist attacks as a watershed moment, “a sort of ‘year zero,’” in American history.⁵ For example, Walter Kalaïdjian has described 9/11 as “the inaugural trauma of the twenty-first century,” one that “decisively sutured globalization and disaster into the defining symptom of our times.”⁶ The affect theorist Brian Massumi argued that during this era “direct affect modulation” dominated over “old-style ideology” in ways more obvious than in decades past.⁷ In his essay “Fear

(The Spectrum Said),” Massumi discussed the U.S. Homeland Security’s use of the color-coded terrorist alert system, arguing that it is a dangerous political tool that allows the government to create a climate of controlled “affective attunement.”⁸ As Michael Fisher notes, “creating fear and ‘moral panic’” has always been a useful tool for the elite.⁹ As I will discuss in this text, however, the technological affordances of our time provide powerful tools for these elites, government officials, and entertainment moguls, as well as laypersons, to prompt such emotions.¹⁰ Discussing the current “saturation of social space by fear,” Massumi argues that mass media function as “technologies of fear.”¹¹ Similarly, Hisham Ramadan and Jeff Shantz argue that the media play a large role in crafting and circulating “phobic constructions.”¹²

It is not just public media created from above, however, that are playing this role. The rise of personally generated social media, perhaps surprisingly, can be tied to the current moment of fear as well. The post-9/11 era aligns, not inconsequently, with the post-social media era. The terrorist attacks and the rise of mobile technology both lie at the beginning of the twenty-first century’s road to fear indoctrination. Whether the latter is a response to this fear culture or a catalyst to its growth (or both) is unimportant. What is important is that the new millennium quickly finds personal technological devices receiving and sending a plethora of messages that align with the collective affect state of the nation.

Though research has begun to show a connection between social media use and increased depression and jealousy among users, links between social media and anxiety (preexisting or cyber-prompted) have been slower to receive attention.¹³ By design, social media seem to be associated with positive emotions—after all, we spent a decade “liking” things on Facebook before we were given other emoticon options to express negative rather than positive feelings. And Twitter’s introduction of the heart symbol, which allows users to “favorite” tweets, also suggests a connection between positivity and social media. As is true of most texts we choose to engage with, we flock to social media in theory to experience positive emotion rather than negative. But besides entertaining ourselves with cute cat videos and countless pictures of artistically prepared meals and picturesque photographs of our friends’ travels, why might we find the constant presence of social media feeds comforting? How might their embeddedness in our daily lives be tied to the larger cultural climate surrounding us? Richard Grusin argues that the popularity of various socially networked media can be explained by considering the historical moment in which they exist.¹⁴ Studying the rise of social media in the post-9/11 climate, Grusin

suggests that social media provide users with the illusion that they can media-tize their entire worlds; they allow users to feel a false sense of control by “producing a feeling of anywhere, anytime connectivity.”¹⁵

This need to feel connected, as well as the fear of being isolated or divorced from the safe confines of community, may account for other technology and media trends of the early twenty-first century. Consider, for example, the rise of reality TV (which is discussed further in chapter 2). In *Liquid Fear*, Zygmunt Bauman labels reality television “modern versions of the ancient ‘morality plays,’” arguing that such shows—especially the popular competition programs—focus on the “inevitability of exclusion, and the fight against being excluded.”¹⁶

Building on the research done on twenty-first-century media and particular entertainment genres, this text looks to situate television trends—across genres—within the technological and cultural moment they occurred. Following in the steps of other influential studies of television in regard to specific periods, this book provides a snapshot of the first two decades of the twenty-first century and the ways in which television programming reflects and contributes to technological shifts and societal mind-sets.¹⁷

Feeling through Our Screens: Pixelated Emotions (and Academic Theory)

During the decades studied in this project, academia saw a surge in scholarship on affect, or what Patricia Clough terms “the affective turn.”¹⁸ For the majority of this period, however, “television, a medium long associated with intimacy and emotional excess,” was “left on the sidelines of debates on affect in visual media.”¹⁹ Film scholars have produced various studies on the important role that affect plays in film viewership and in particular film genres.²⁰ The majority of the early studies on television and emotion focused on particular televisual genres, such as news broadcasting (which will be discussed shortly) and soap opera, and did not apply affect theory across televisual genres (as is attempted in this text). Where affect theory (even when the term *affect* was not specifically employed) had the most prominence in television scholarship was in regard to audience studies and fandom.²¹

The popular culture scholar Henry Jenkins discusses the importance of emotion within popular culture of all formats, arguing that “most popular culture is shaped by a logic of emotional intensification. It is less interested in making us think than it is in making us feel. Yet that distinction is too simple: popular

culture, at its best, makes us think by making us feel.”²² For many of the same reasons, Carl Plantinga argues for the importance of studying film through the lens of affect—an argument that can easily be applied to television.²³

Strong emotions have a tendency to make a mark, leaving lasting impressions that transform our psyche and imprint our memories. For that reason alone, the means by which the movies elicit emotion are worthy of taking seriously. . . . The expression and elicitation of emotion in a film is a central element of the film experience, an experience that is worthy of study in its own right. Moreover, emotion and affect are fundamental to what makes films artistically successful, rhetorically powerful, and culturally influential. . . . The function of emotion and affect is to make film viewing powerful, rather than merely an intellectual exercise. In the long term, such experiences may burn themselves into the memories of audiences and may become templates for thinking and behavior.²⁴

The idea that television programs, like film, might be “templates for thinking and behavior” is perhaps the greatest justification for studying the role that affect plays in television viewing. In a TED Talk, the television executive Lauren Zalaznick claims that “television has a conscience.” She argues that “television directly reflects the moral, political, social and emotional need states of our nation—that television is how we actually disseminate our entire value system.”²⁵ Attending to the ways in which television plays this role, especially in times of national crisis, is extremely important.

Broadcasting the Catastrophic: Scholarship on Television and Trauma

The role television plays during times of trauma has long been studied by various scholars.²⁶ Mary Ann Doane builds on Roland Barthes’s discussion of photography, in particular its *noeme* (the essence of “*that-has-been*” or its “pastness”) to argue that television offers quite a different visual experience, that of “*this-is-going-on*” or a sense of “present-ness.”²⁷ Likewise, Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin explore the connected concept of immediacy in regard to new media. They argue not only that immediacy is a sense of transparency in which the media give off the illusion that they are *not* a mediation or a representation, and hence indicate an absence or erasure of mediation, but also

that immediacy can be tied to “the viewer’s feelings that the medium has disappeared and the objects are present to him, a feeling that his experience is therefore authentic.”²⁸ News broadcasts obviously capitalize on television’s claim to immediacy. The word *LIVE* appearing in the lower corner of the TV screen and the anchor’s quip, “This just in,” help transport the viewers to the event, giving them the feeling that they are there, that they are witnessing this event unfolding before their eyes (and allow them to ignore, should they so choose, the fact that it is being delivered to them across distance and through technology that has the potential to transform such scenes).

It is important to note that networks do exploit their power as a “live” supplier of coverage and do systematically manipulate the viewer’s affective responses. The news attempts to deliver anxiety in order to enact its role of relieving it. Discussing this process, Patricia Mellencamp argues that “anxiety is television’s affect” and suggests that when studying this medium, we should shift “our analysis from theories of pleasure to include theories of unpleasure.”²⁹ She states, “TV envelops the shock, delivering *and* cushioning us from stimuli which it regulates in acceptable levels . . . turning news or shocks into story and tragic drama.”³⁰ The reporter is there to inject viewers with anxiety, fear, and anger, but also to quickly administer the antidote, the assurance that everything will be just fine, and that he or she will be there to present that final happy diagnosis just as soon as it is.

The everyday news does this on a small scale, but in attending to large-scale catastrophes, this practice, which indeed predates 9/11, is all the more noticeable. Mary Ann Doane discusses these moments that disrupt “ordinary routine.”³¹ TV from its onset has had the capacity to capture these moments and deliver them right to viewers in their living rooms: Kennedy’s assassination, the *Challenger*’s explosion, Chernobyl, the rescue of Baby Jessica, the massacre at Columbine, 9/11, the 2004 tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, the earthquake in Haiti, and countless other natural disasters (floods, tornadoes), acts of violence (bombings, wars), or unexpected death (plane crashes, fires).³² These mediated moments not only disrupt our routine, drawing us to the screen to consume them in endless (even painful) repetition, but they also end up acting as time markers for those who witness them, epochal reference points, and they probably play a large role in a generation’s structure of feeling. Doane claims that “catastrophic time stands still.”³³ Hence, the event, the frozen moment in time, becomes one potentially shared with an entire generation. For example, it is likely that most people of an age to remember 9/11 could answer the question “Where were you when the Twin Towers were attacked,” just as the

previous generation could remember their whereabouts when they heard that Kennedy had been shot, or as the generation before that could recall where they were when they heard of the atomic bombs being dropped on Japan or the attack on Pearl Harbor. Arguably, such traumatic events—these shared generational moments—produce the shared affect that make a generation.

Focusing on media practices post-9/11, Richard Grusin theorizes “the emergence of a media logic . . . a form of medial pre-emption” he terms premediation.³⁴ He argues that “premediation works to prevent citizens of the global mediasphere from experiencing again the kind of systemic or traumatic shock produced by the events of 9/11 by perpetuating an almost constant, low level of fear or anxiety about another terrorist attack.”³⁵ Grusin clarifies that premediation differs from prediction in that it “is not about getting the future right, but about proliferating multiple remediations of the future both to maintain a low level of fear in the present and to prevent a recurrence of the kind of tremendous media shock that the United States and much of the networked world experienced on 9/11.”³⁶

While Grusin focuses primarily on premediation in regard to the news industry, as I will discuss later in this text, similar things are happening within fictional television programming. The plethora of 9/11-related worst-case scenarios fashioned for the small screen arguably prepare viewers (at least emotionally) for a variety of future outcomes.

Guiding Principles: Central Assumptions about and Theories of Affect

This book builds on a range of—sometimes conflicting—affect theory and rests on a few key theoretical assumptions concerning affect that explain television’s relationship to contemporary anxieties. This project engages with the rich pool of media scholarship focused on the way “people experience affects through entertainment products.”³⁷ These include:

- The Mood Management Theory: the notion that we turn to certain texts to alter or maintain our emotional states (see chapters 1, 2, 3)
- The Relief or Excitation Transfer Theory: the idea that we experience positive affect through the release of negative affect (see chapters 3, 5)
- The Theory of Escapism: the belief that we turn to entertainment texts to distract ourselves from our everyday lived reality (see chapters 2, 4, 5, 6)

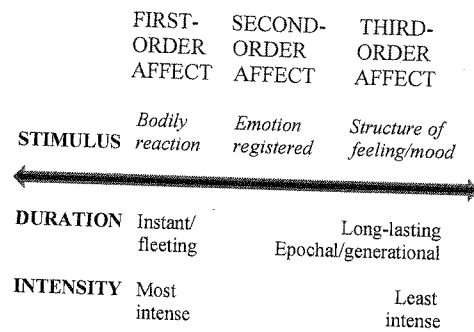


Figure 0.1. The affect continuum, or the three "orders" of affect. (Figure by the author.)

- The Empathy Theory: the explanation of the ways in which we form affective attachments to fictional characters or faux celebrities (see chapters 2, 5, 7, 8)
- The Social Comparison or Schadenfreude Theory: the argument that we consume entertainment texts in order to feel better about ourselves (see chapters 2, 8, 9, 10)
- The Uses-and-Gratifications Theory: combining all the above to a degree, the argument that we turn to media texts "for various reasons, informative, social, affective, or dispersion seeking in nature"³⁸

Not particular to any of these theories specifically, this project rests on three central assumptions concerning affect. The first assumption, represented in Figure 0.1, is a nod to definitional debates in the field and explains the purposeful conflation of emotion and affect found in this project. This slippage falls into an intentionally broad conceptualization of affect.

Affect theorists have provided many useful definitions for terms such as affect, emotion, feeling, mood, sentiment, and so forth.³⁹ These scholarly definitions often stress the differences between such psychological and bodily states and argue for very different approaches to studying them. Consider, for example, two foundational affect scholars, Silvan Tomkins and Brian Massumi, who differ widely in their theorizations. Tomkins views the human affect system as operating like a feedback system, whereby affects are a sort of motive and humans act (unsurprisingly though not without exception) "to repeat rewarding affects and to reduce punishing" ones.⁴⁰ Tomkins uses both the terms *affect* and *emotion* in his discussion of what he sees to be the eight

primary affects: interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy, surprise-startle, distress-anguish, fear-terror, shame-humiliation, contempt-disgust, and anger-rage.⁴¹ Massumi, on the other hand, maps out a theory concerning the corporeality of affect that is based on Spinoza's definition of affect as "an impingement upon" the human body.⁴² Unlike Tomkins, Massumi distinguishes sharply between affect and emotion, equating affect with intensity "embodied in purely autonomic reactions most directly manifested in the skin—at the surface of the body, at its interface with things."⁴³ For him affect is unconscious and is not correlated logically between content (object/image) and the bodily effect it produces, a claim Tomkins would agree with in terms of both affect and emotion.⁴⁴ Massumi argues that "it is only when the idea of the affection is doubled by an *idea of the idea of the affection* that it attains the level of conscious reflection"—and this is where he would more readily place the term *emotion*.⁴⁵

This particular study envisions affect as an umbrella concept that represents all the more specific terms that are often used rather interchangeably outside scholarly circles.⁴⁶ As figure 0.1 shows, this conceptualization imagines affect as divided into different "levels" or "orders." This continuum can be represented in terms of temporality or duration and possibly in terms of intensity as well. On the leftmost part of the continuum is first-order affect, or bodily affect. This is the instantaneous reaction in the body to a given object or stimulus. A fear-invoking situation will result in bodily arousal: a racing heart, a sweaty brow, raised hair, and so forth. Moving along the continuum, second-order affect might be what we usually consider emotion more generally. This occurs when cognition is coupled with the bodily arousal, when the affect is realized, processed, or named. The time that separates the two orders on the left side of the range can be mere seconds, so it is often fruitless to study them as separate experiences, but it is important to acknowledge the differences between the two processes. Also, it is important to note the causality or dependence between the two: first-order affect sparks second-order affect. Or, as William James famously argued: we do not cry because we are sad; we are sad because we cry.⁴⁷ We emote in reaction to our body's instantaneous reactions to stimuli. Between second-order affect and third-order affect is a potentially large space on the continuum. This represents the temporal difference that exists between these affectual stages. On this chart third-order affect is associated with Raymond Williams's (1977) structure of feeling.⁴⁸ This concept is often used to denote a collective state of affect, the shared affect of an epoch or a generation. It is the least immediate of the affect stages

and is probably the most durable. This conceptualization works on an individual level also. A sad event will register on the body temporarily (it could result, for example, in tears); the emotion of sadness can be felt for longer than the physical reaction (the tears themselves may last just minutes, whereas the emotion can last hours, maybe days); and sad events can often contribute to a milder form of lurking sadness that can linger even longer as a “mood” (shared or not). It could also be possible to argue that this continuum works when discussing the intensity of the three orders of affect: the first order being the most immediate and intensely felt in the body, the second order being sometimes slightly less striking, and the third order being the least intense of the three stages of affect as a lingering, low-level “feeling.”

The second affect assumption (see figure 0.2) pertains to affect-object reciprocity, which becomes particularly relevant when discussing the relationship among texts, consumers, and producers. Obviously, certain objects cause certain affects (e.g., a sad movie can make one sad). One’s emotional state, however, can also color the interpretation of an object or event (e.g., a sad mood existing before a film viewing can make one read it as sadder than it may actually be to others). This theoretical underpinning attends to the larger relationship between third-order affect—shared or collective affectual states—and textual production and reception. This process can be oversimplified into this sequence: an object triggers affect or emotion, which in turn can contribute to larger structures of feelings; those cultural moods produce certain texts that align with (or respond to) these affect states, and these texts are consumed by viewers, perpetuating the cycle. This process, of course, is not always a conscious one. Jonathan Flatley notes that “we are often ignorant of the determinative effect our moods have on the world we see and how we relate to it.”⁴⁹ He details the importance of understanding the effect that structures of feelings can have, explaining that though they can be ephemeral, they can also be “just as durable and forceful as ideologies, perhaps even more so.”⁵⁰ Therefore, he argues, structure of feelings should be theorized as a “full-fledged parallel to ideology,” one whose function “is to narrate our relation to a social order so as to make our daily experience of that order meaningful and manageable.”⁵¹

Thus, many of the arguments throughout this book require associating emotions with rationality (which has not always been done in scholarship), and acknowledging that emotions (affects in their second order) are not purely biological, evolutionary creations, but rather are social constructs deeply influenced by cultural situations.⁵² It is not unfounded to claim that emotions are inherently rational, as in fact the argument has been made as far back as Aristotle.

Introduction

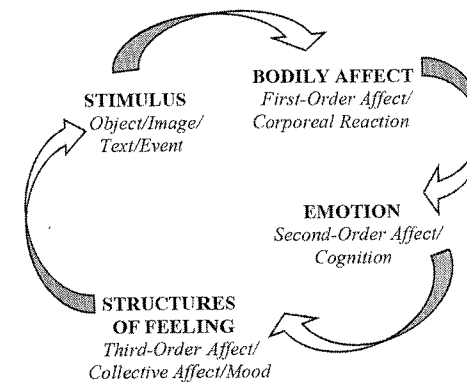


Figure 0.2. Affect-object reciprocity. (Figure by the author.)

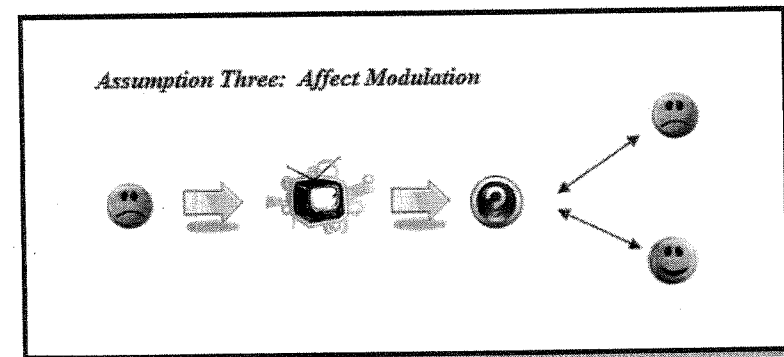


Figure 0.3. Affect modulation. (Figure by the author.)

Aristotle defined emotions as “those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgments, and that are also attended by pain or pleasure.”⁵³ In his discussions on affect, Tomkins asserts that “the marriage of reason with affect” is what makes human beings the most complex system in nature, and he notes that “reason without affect would be impotent, affect would be blind.”⁵⁴

The final affect assumption is quite simple: people use things (texts, events, environments) to control their emotional state (see the previously mentioned Mood Management Theory). The extremely simplified chart shown in figure 0.3 applies this assumption to the causality of television viewing practices. The general argument would be that viewers often flock to

TV to manipulate or modulate their emotions. Those involved in production may attempt to use the medium for this purpose as well, as may other outside powers (e.g., politicians, corporations, activists).

Viewer agency and participation in affect modulation need to be stressed. An example could be the ways in which media outlets *and* viewers interacted with Trump's negative political discourse during and after the 2016 presidential election. As has been much discussed, Trump received more media coverage during the campaign than any of his opponents on either side of the aisle and, not inconsequently, he benefited the most from the overall negative focus of the election coverage.⁵⁵ Likewise, knowing that people could not turn away from his emotionally hyperbolic rhetoric, the news networks benefited from airing it, and hence Trump dominated the coverage. The media outlets were right: viewers tuned in, for whatever reason; they watched to be incited (joining in his fear or anger over x, y, z) or they watched because they were afraid or angry about his stances (on x, y, z). Either way—conservative supporters or liberal opposition—viewers participated in his rise to fame (and office) by tuning in. And, arguably, they tuned in knowing full well how watching his press conferences or political rallies would make them feel. Typically, we do not stumble unknowingly on our televisual texts. Their emotional triggers do not often surprise us.⁵⁶ Just as we cue up certain genres expecting emotional outcomes from them (sitcoms will make us laugh, a melodrama will make us cry, an action drama will excite us, etc.), we tune in to individual media segments knowing—often—how they will make us feel.⁵⁷ And, even when those feelings are negative, we do it anyway (something that might seem to run counter to Tomkins's claim that we look to minimize negative affect and maximize positive affect).

Figure 0.3, of course, is an oversimplification of an imperfect process. First, as Beverley Skeggs notes, as consumers we cannot always predict with absolute accuracy what emotional output a televisual text will have, and this unpredictability may actually increase its entertainment value.⁵⁸ Second, even if producers do have an intended emotional reaction in mind when crafting television programming, this is not to suggest that such is always an inevitable outcome. To buy into such an inevitability would be to duplicate the illogical premise of the hypodermic needle theory, which assumes that an intended communication or (ideological) message is directly and wholly accepted by the receiver—only in this case we would be replacing “message” with “emotion.”

These three assumptions concerning affect and television consumption could easily enter into larger debates concerning technological determinism,

and media determinism more specifically.⁵⁹ While this book does argue that televisual programming and technological advances in the industry have affected society (a claim that might seem to align with a determinist perspective), active viewing and audience agency—which have expanded in recent decades—ultimately suggest a relationship that is not one-directional (a belief more in line with social determinism). That said, part I of this text does touch on the consequences of televisual trends, such as the desensitization that results from repeat screenings of violent imagery or plots. Although outside the purview of this project, burgeoning research in neuroscience on plasticity (and the role that technology may play in “rewiring” the brain) could provide an entirely different (and perhaps more terrifying) perspective on television's influence on individual and societal affect states.⁶⁰

While not a major focus in this text, many of the arguments found here would entertain previous scholars' arguments concerning the actual physical and mental effects that media products can have on us. For example, discussing the rise of cinema in the twentieth century, Walter Benjamin made the bold claim that “technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training.”⁶¹ And in regard to television specifically, decades later Lynne Joyrich made the bold claim that “TV has begun to alter our very ways of seeing and knowing.”⁶² It would not be a big leap from these arguments to then consider the ways in which television may be changing the ways in which we experience and feel emotions. Grusin considers the possible influence technology may have on human affective processing, stating: “If brains and neural processing co-evolve like thumbs and video-game controllers, it then seems likely that our affective states would also co-evolve with our media and other new technologies. It is thus not unreasonable to imagine that certain affects become stronger and more muscular in different cultural and historical contexts, while others might atrophy or grow weak from disuse.”⁶³ In fact, it may be irresponsible not to consider this particular co-evolution and the ways in which it contributes to twenty-first-century fear indoctrination.

Navigating the Times (and This Text): The Emotional Terrain of Twenty-first-Century Television

It is with the abovementioned foundational affect scholarship and grounding assumptions in mind that this book considers the ways in which national anxieties make their way into U.S. television programming across genres, and

the ways in which such anxieties affect viewers and the larger cultural conversations and sentiments that surround them. Part I, "Post-9/11 Televisual Trends: Analyzing the Affectual Climate on and off the Small Screen," traces programming shifts in three specific television genres (prime-time drama, reality television, and news shows). Drawing on affect theory, these chapters discuss the proliferation and dominance of these entertainment outlets and question how emotion plays into their audience appeal and societal influence. Chapter 1 analyzes how television responded to 9/11 not only immediately after the tragedy, but also how it responded (and continues to respond) to it years later through fictionalized dramas. By studying the presence of post-9/11 motifs (e.g., salvation, justice, fear, conspiracy) in twenty-first-century fictional television narratives, this chapter argues that such programs are important sites where the terrorist attacks (and the cultural climate they sparked) are emotionally worked through. This chapter also suggests, however, that television's reluctance to revise its post-9/11 narrative in order to reflect contemporary geopolitical realities may also contribute to the perpetual fear cycle shaping national discourse. Chapter 2 turns to reality television, exploring three emotional theories that explain the rise of this televisual genre in the wake of 9/11. A study of the 2000–2010 programming schedule reveals the cultural anxieties with which producers and viewers of these shows engage—or not. Although often considered superficial, lowbrow entertainment products meant primarily for escapist purposes, reality television programs, this essay argues, grapple with important societal concerns: surveillance culture and privacy rights; the pressure of identity performance in the social media era; and shifting social, domestic, and familial expectations for men and women. Turning to one final entertainment genre, chapter 3 studies the rise in popularity of parodic infotainment news shows following the 9/11 attacks. Drawing on humor relief theory, as well as theories concerning affect mimicry and imagined communities, this essay argues that news parodies, such as Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, satisfied various emotional needs for viewers during this traumatic period. Critics often worry that therapeutic laughter diffuses fear and anger and quells rebellious impulses, but this chapter argues that the humor provided by these programs has the potential to help viewers transform their negative emotions into action.

Part II, "Mediating Fear and Anger: How Televisual Affect Reflects and Influences Current Cultural Conflicts," moves from a discussion of larger programmatic patterns to analysis of specific television shows and subgenres that showcase the ways in which cultural fears are embedded in our

entertainment. For example, ABC's *Lost* (2004–10)—the show that television scholars such as Jason Mittell have credited with starting the wave of complex television—encompasses a myriad of societal concerns and commentaries.⁶⁴ Chapter 4 focuses on just one of these: the changing status of fathers and authority figures in the twenty-first century. This chapter looks at *Lost*, and its over sixty episodes devoted to damaged or deceased dads, and it analyzes the ways in which *Lost*'s parent-child relationships comment on shifting conceptions of masculinity and, on a more metaphoric level, the eroding faith in governmental father figures in the era of the endless war on terror. Shifting from a focus on fictional fathers to fictional mothers, chapter 5 analyzes the ways in which AMC's hit show *The Walking Dead* (2010–present) critiques contemporary gender roles. Through a study of one particular character, Carol Peletier (Melissa McBride), this essay argues that the violent landscape of the zombie narrative might be an ideal space in which to interrogate conceptions of femininity more broadly, and maternity more specifically. Supernatural shows by their nature often incorporate themes such as survival, community, revenge, resurrection, and the dark side of humanity—themes that take on a new meaning in the post-9/11 period. Chapter 6 analyzes how these are incorporated into twenty-first-century vampire narratives, such as HBO's *True Blood* (2008–14), CW's *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–17), and the film adaptations of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight Saga* (2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012). Through a recurrent focus on "us versus them," these story lines bring attention to the cultural divides within the United States caused by things such as continued racial conflict, progress in the LGBTQA rights movement, and ongoing religious and political debates concerning family values. Delving into trauma theory, chapter 7 narrows its focus to one particular year of programming that featured story lines about police brutality, inequity within the criminal justice system, and the Black Lives Matter movement that has risen to speak out against both. This essay analyzes special episodes of CBS's *The Good Wife* (2009–16) and ABC's *Scandal* (2012–18)—which have been referred to by media critics as each program's respective "Ferguson episode"—and the first season of ABC's *American Crime* (2015–17), a gritty crime anthology/miniseries that unflinchingly tackled racial conflict in its debut year. While there are reasons to be wary of attempts to fictionalize current race relations, this chapter ultimately argues that series that include thoughtful, complex story lines, and televisual aesthetics that underscore the social commentary contained in the program, may allow these issues not just to be understood, but *felt*.

Returning to the three televisual genres studied more broadly in part I, the final section of the book provides three audience studies: analyses of live tweets commenting on Shonda Rhimes's drama *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014–20); ABC's long-standing reality television franchise, *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* (2002–present); and political coverage of the first 2016 presidential debate. The final chapters in "Amplifying Affect: Twenty-first-Century Viewing Practices—From Fandom to Digital Activism and Beyond" study how cultural anxieties appear within these television genres and how viewers engage with them online. As Rhimes is credited with transforming contemporary network television production and consumption practices—and having the most avid Twitter followers—it is fitting that an analysis of her hit program begins this section. Chapter 8 considers fictional television's ability to engage in public pedagogy by looking at the ways in which viewers support or undermine Rhimes's social commentary. Attending to tweets focused on the main character, the female antihero Annalise Keating (Viola Davis), reveals the warring sentiments (and different ideological camps) that still exist surrounding identity politics involving women of color, same-sex relationships, and interracial relationships. Chapter 9 builds on research concerning the ways in which reality television includes conflicting postfeminist messages that affect the contestants on the shows, as well as the viewers watching them. This chapter studies viewer reactions to a particularly controversial season of *The Bachelorette*—one that aired the star having sexual intercourse before the show's pre-scripted, approved point. The online discussions among fans on Twitter reveal the ways in which viewers resist or reinforce gender stereotypes and participate in or criticize the practice of slut-shaming. The final study presented focuses on one of the most consequential events of the twenty-first century thus far: the 2016 presidential election, which ended as it did probably in part because of a combination of the cultural fears discussed throughout the previous chapters. For example, the presidential campaign run by Trump played on post-9/11 uncertainties about homeland security and employed fear-based, divisive rhetoric about race, gender, class, and sexuality. The acceptance of this rhetoric—and his ultimate victory—may be explained by the process of phobic construction highlighted in this text. Since "phobias (of terror, crime, migration, invasion or infection, cultural decay), often involving a targeted 'other,' create 'frames by which people make sense of changing socio-political environments,'" it is not surprising—although it may be disheartening—that a large populace was receptive to such messages.⁶⁵ Chapter 10 analyzes the final months of the

election cycle, in particular the first presidential debate between Trump and Hillary Clinton and the ways in which it stimulated conversation among viewers during the live broadcast and ongoing dialogue and activism beyond it. The conclusion, "Screening Emotion, Archiving Affect, Circulating Feelings," ends with some brief thoughts on how television and other entertainment and communication platforms act as storage houses and distribution mechanisms for personal and cultural sentiments. If the dominant affect of the twenty-first century continues to be fear, this text argues that it is more important than ever to understand and intervene in the ways in which it is circulated through media and technology.

As the summaries above reveal, this text purposely navigates between different television genres and cultural events spanning two decades, most notably those between 9/11 and the 2016 presidential election. The chapters in part I feature large-scale analyses of fictional shows, reality television, and news-related programming. In this same order, the chapters in part III provide small-scale analyses of viewer responses to specific television broadcasts from these three genres. While chapter 1 does begin with a focus on post-9/11 programming and chapter 10 closes with a focus on the 2016 election, the text does not necessarily move throughout this time period in perfect chronological order, nor does it make absolute claims about causality when it comes to the cultural anxieties discussed. It is difficult to contemplate the role television plays in shaping cultural sentiments, however, without considering how cultural events (and their televised offspring) influence one another and how cultural anxieties layer on one another over time. For example, whether explicitly or implicitly discussed, echoes of post-9/11 fears undoubtedly reverberate through every chapter. Likewise, by nature of its design, the text prompts readers to make their own connections between not only the various cultural events highlighted, but also the anxieties that connect to them.

This book also purposely draws from diverse methodological approaches, allowing for these considerations to take on different forms. Consider the different ways in which part I analyzes programming trends from across the past two decades. Chapter 1 provides quantitative data concerning thematic motifs that appear in fictional programming; chapter 2 includes a study of all reality programming throughout a ten-year period, aligning the shows' subject matter with relevant affect theories to explain television appeal; and chapter 3 situates the rise of infotainment and news parody within historical contexts and selects one sample to analyze through three particular affect theories. The chapters in part II, likewise, provide varied ways of analyzing

individual television programs: chapter 4 includes tallies of particular motifs as part of its analysis; chapter 5 reads the thematic messages of a television program against the online conversation it sparked among reviewers and fans alike; chapter 6 studies a television horror subgenre alongside a popular book-and-film franchise that helped ignite the televisual trend; and chapter 7 provides a close reading of a television show down to its use of sound editing and image framing. And, finally, part III studies the live-tweeting practices of viewers—focusing on specific episodes, entire seasons, and connections to larger digital discourses. Together, these chapters aim to model the various ways in which cultural anxieties can be studied in relation to television production and consumption practices.