

# Meta: Aesthetics of the media assemblage

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*True Detective is an example of a recent spate of works that could generally be described as “nihilist pop culture”. True Detective is “meta” not simply as a work of meta-fiction, but also in an inter-textual media assemblage sense and furthermore in the way it dramatises a conflict over the value of (cultural) value. Meta is a minor aesthetic category of cultural works that operate by way of a recursive self-referential movement across singular qualitative thresholds of individuation. This essay reads True Detective in terms of Nietzsche’s concept of nihilism as a process of transvaluation and Simondon’s concept of meta-stability. Nietzsche and Simondon both gesture towards the germ of value from which normative values develop and this essay argues that works of nihilist pop culture such as True Detective are organised around articulating a sense of the meta-stability of cultural value.*

“Just spare me anything atmospheric: I’ve had enough hot air” (Nussbaum 2014).

“I get a bad taste in my mouth out here... aluminum, ash... like you can smell the psychosphere”  
(Rust Cohle, “The Long Bright Dark”, *True Detective*).<sup>1</sup>

“Have we really made any progress in understanding this hybrid of the grotesque and terrifying which, under the right circumstances, could determine the fate of us all?” (Deleuze 2004, p. 84).

Plenty of viewers were left unsatisfied with the ending of the first season of television show *True Detective*. Emily Nussbaum (2014a) in her online column for *The New Yorker* drew comparisons to the infamous ending of *Lost*, which is the “nuke it from orbit” option when it comes to critics trashing television finales. Nussbaum reads the *True Detective* finale in terms of whether or not the plot was satisfactorily resolved, and for her it wasn’t. Worse, argues Nussbaum, is the way the experience of the male characters, which largely drives the drama of the show, is in part created through a series of violent and traumatic acts carried out on or targeting female characters. The female characters are simply, as Matthew McConaughey’s character “Rust Cohle” describes one of the murder victims, “chum in the water”.

There are a number of ways to engage with *True Detective*. As a work in the detective genre, the *True Detective* audience follows the characters through a (multi-layered) process of discovery of who did what to whom. Indeed, the heavily gendered bias to the characters’ process of discovery meant that the male main characters were transformed largely by what other (mainly female) characters experienced. Nussbaum locates this bias as a failure of the show and its writing, rather than being a “failure” of the cultural values of the world represented by the show and therefore a success of the writing. Taking her critique further, Nussbaum argues that even as a work in the crime or detective genre, *True Detective* is a failure. As a polemical move she judges the show by collapsing the plot – that is, from a perspective not unlike reading a mystery novel in reverse (“was indeed our serial killer”) – and then systematically itemized its dense plot as a series of failures to “payoff”. This neo-Aristotelian re-reading of the entire series after the finale sees the characters as agents of their own inevitable destiny; the contextual milieu of their experience – and by implication the experience of the audience – is merely “atmospheric”. Nussbaum is arguably correct in everything she writes, but only so from the perspective of a twentieth-century television critic. The distributed character of the process of discovery – back and forth across narrative temporalities – that necessarily involves the experience of viewing and participation by the audience in the reception of a

<sup>1</sup> Most commentaries have interpreted this dialogue by Rust Cohle (Matthew McConaughey) in the first episode of *True Detective* in a metaphysical sense (for example, in Slate’s *True Detective* glossary it is defined as a pseudo-psychological realm of all consciousness), but another interpretation is indicated by Cohle’s disclosure in the bar and dancing scene of the third episode that he is a synesthetic.

television show did not really matter. She suggests she shouldn't discount the pleasure of audiences when really she shouldn't discount the collective work of the audience and other more or less professional critics in shaping the *event* of *True Detective*.

There is the television show or text of *True Detective* and then there is the cultural or media event. The media event of *True Detective* is more than the simple text of the television show and its reception by audiences. Nussbaum's piece on the finale and the re-reading of the season was a traditional critical review. She signals her sophisticated understanding of the text and then passes judgement (perhaps in spite of other audience's pleasure) following the closed hermeneutic of text-based criticism. The proliferation of media vectors means that the audience for the television program of *True Detective* has a participatory role in its media event. The media event of *True Detective* is not (solely) created by a television producer or marketing team, but through the recursive patterns of vectors that repeat a perspective on *True Detective* in different ways.<sup>2</sup> As Daniel Fitzpatrick (2014, pp. 138-140) argues in discussing the importance of acknowledging the textual-visual "True Detective Conversations" and hashtag-based #TrueDetectiveSeason2 internet memes derived from the television show. The broader point is that there is no longer a singular broadcast-based television assemblage; rather it is a specific assemblage for each "television" show. This is another way to engage with the show, as a post-broadcast media event is shaped by a transversal movement of affect across the television show and the mobilisations of the audience through social media and television commentary sites to shape the show's reception.

*True Detective* as media event is less the "high holiday" genre of Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz's (1992) concept of the media event and more like McKenzie Wark's (1994) immanent, vector-based conception of "weird" global media events. Dayan and Katz's concept of the media event made perfect sense for the past era (or very limited contemporary experience) dominated by broadcast television. In their version, there had to be a habituated regularity of television viewing for it to be disrupted by a pre-planned event happening on such a global or national scale that it is literally the live broadcasting of history. Wark's reworking of the media event prepares the concept for a time when "television" is a techno-cultural anachronism like "movie" (early twentieth-century moving pictures), "hifi" (1970s, high fidelity audio playback system), or even "phone" (twentieth-century, telephone, then cell or mobile phone; twenty-first-century, smartphone). Dayan and Katz's problem of explaining examples of hegemonic "history" being made by live television is corrected by Wark's dismantling of the normative mapping of history on global/national scale. Instead, Wark plots how historical events *become* as such as they propagate across "live" media vectors. A media vector has fixed properties, but it has no necessary position (Wark, 1994, pp. 11-12). A single image of a man in front of a tank becomes a media vector worthy of "perpetuating" and develops into a weird global media event as a kind of subterranean history Wark 1994, pp. 144-145, 158-159. There is a transductive relation here of the becoming of history – not an experience of "change" but "changing" (Munster 2013, pp. 157-158) – as the media vector propagates and returns through personal, local, regional, national, international and global affective circuits of media assemblages. The shift in the broadcast-based media event to the vector-based media event is one from a focus on an extensive or "historical" conception of media events to an intensive or "affective" conception of media events.

Contemporary media assemblages are characterised by a proliferation of vectors. There is still a singular focus, but this focus often surveys across a range of broadcast and internet-based media. Conflict in the realm of cultural taste – recognisable as social media arguments about the merits of one text over another or one perspective over another – are less about wasting your time (as the value of your attention sold to advertisers, for example) and more about wasting your affect (as social binding value in the relationality of a media event); exemplified by the view that *True Detective* is not worth your collective hype. This exercise in peer-to-peer media criticism has many effects, including on the cultural literacy of the audience and the relative disenfranchising of conventional critics. In complex media assemblages that subsist across media channels as part of a broader media event, *recommendation* has replaced *judgement*. The goal of recommendation is to signal something interesting and worthy of one's participation in the affective circuits of

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<sup>2</sup> I am implying a relation between Wark's use of vector and the way Felix Guattari discussed vectors as integral to the "third ecology" of the social and cultural milieu particularly in the way we undergo processes of subjectivation, see Goddard 2011.

the media assemblage, and this results in a correlative increase in assemblage-centric media literacy, rather than a performance of text-centric or media channel-centric cultural capital.<sup>3</sup>

At stake here is what Antoine Hennion (2004) calls the “pragmatics of taste” as a way of understanding the appreciation of cultural objects or events and, importantly, the circulation of such appreciations. This is different to the familiar sociological interpretation of cultural consumption by Pierre Bourdieu, which is premised on cultural judgement, and is furnished by class-indexed expectations of cultural value. Primarily writing about music, Hennion is also concerned with the logics of cultural “expectation”, but has a less rigid interpretation. Expectation, even that which scaffolds the driest of critical judgement, is also affective, so that cultural judgement is primed not only by generic or textual convention, but our embodied relations of anticipation, excitement and boredom. Even though Bourdieu (1984) famously develops an elaborate account of the bodily habitus as a “structuring structure” (see Noble and Watkins 2003), in the postscript of *Distinction* he dismisses “vulgar” cultural judgement that is explicitly embodied as indicating class-based distinction. The media event of *True Detective* is shaped in part by what Hennion (2001) calls “taste practices”: “that strange mix of precision and invention that makes them define, little by little, their paths to pleasure”. Writing with Genevieve Teil, Hennion writes that taste “is an *activity* and not a passive or determined state”. They continue:

Instead of seeing amateurs as passive subjects of objectifying (naturalising or sociologising) measurements and analyses, the idea is, on the contrary, to consider them as guides and to observe them as actively seeking the causes and determinations prompting them to make choices, to appreciate and consume (Teil and Hennion 2004, pp. 19-20).

The “review” is a kind of crystallised form of cultural and social judgement that fixes a closed cultural object as much as the audience and reviewer. For users of social media at least, the “recommendation” is a similar kind of cultural (para)text, but one that frames the cultural value of a work explicitly in terms of the experience of the audience or consumer. This is not to be critical of reviews in general; rather it is to suggest that in the assemblages of contemporary media events the “recommendation” is now the dominant critical form of appreciation. The “recommendation” is an example of what Hennion (2008) calls a “taste test” – tests of whether or not a given cultural text is worthy is also at same time a test of the audience or amateur’s passion or enthusiasm.<sup>4</sup>

The distinction between the television program as a closed text and the television-centric assemblage-based media event is important for recuperating what Nussbaum dismisses as “atmospheric”. I shall aim to do this by analysing the way the event of *True Detective* is *meta*. I am using “meta” here as an aesthetic category. By “meta” I do not mean the *True Detective* text is an example of meta-television, because it largely is not, except in the sense that it certainly does rely on an audience schooled in the conventions of crime or detective genre. It certainly is an example of meta-fiction; in the way writer Nic Pizzolatto inserted references to Robert Chamber’s (1895/2011) *The King in Yellow* collection of short stories as one of the more notable intertextual references. In the current era of television shows, the text of *True Detective* needs to be read alongside, for example, Michael M. Hughes’s (2014) post on io9.com titled “The one literary reference you must know to appreciate True Detective”, which is about Pizzolatto’s use of Chamber’s text. Like Jason Mittell’s (2006) work that shifts the focus of television scholarship from social effects to the aesthetics of television by engaging with what he calls “narrative complexity”, I am using “meta” in a more expansive way to refer to the aesthetics of the event of *True Detective* in the context of a media assemblage. What makes the aesthetics of media assemblages “meta” in a way that is different to the meta-aesthetics of specific media forms? There are two ways the aesthetics of the media assemblage is meta in the example of

<sup>3</sup> See for example Emily Nussbaum’s (2014b) discussion of being deluged on Twitter about questions regarding Showtime’s “The Affair”. Curiously, even though it was the concerted work of Nussbaum’s Twitter followers to ask questions about the show, Nussbaum frames this relationality as being between her and the text: “Whether or not I wanted ‘The Affair’, the show seemed interested in me”.

<sup>4</sup> There is a parallel here with Weber’s charismatic mode of authority that attracts followers not by judging the authority as being worthy of followers but by testing followers in terms of whether or not they are worthy of being lead.

*True Detective*, as I shall outline below after introducing a concept of meta derived from the work of Gilbert Simondon.

The self-referential character of meta orbits a single site of both its emergence and its exhaustion, what Gilbert Simondon describes as a system's meta-stable conditions of individuation (see Barthélémy 2012, p. 217). The assemblage of the *True Detective* media event explicitly operates in such a manner to hold the audience in a state of potentialised meta-stability; this was expressed through speculation about the plot and then subsequent disappointment when some of these speculations proved overly imaginative. The notion of "meta-stability" comes from thermodynamics and refers to a state of a system where any change can shift the system to a new state or phase transition. Simondon calls this process of phase transition "individuation". A meta-stable system is characterised by its subsequent phases of individuation. Meta indicates a movement between "this" state of a system and via the passage of transformation of a phase transition to another "prior" state of a system. The complication is that there is no "prior" to which to gesture towards as soon as a system undergoes a phase transition, any other meta-stable state is in a state of potentialised superposition. This singular point is held in abeyance, yet nevertheless is *articulated* through an individuating intimacy folding the inside outside and vice versa as a virtual tendency. If you were to spatialise an event, lay it out without the potentiality of its meta-stable ontology, then the points of meta-stability would be frozen from a static fourth-dimensional perspective. This is actually dramatised through one of Cohle's speeches:

It's like in this universe, we process time linearly forward but outside of our spacetime, from what would be a fourth-dimensional perspective, time wouldn't exist, and from that vantage, could we attain it we'd see our spacetime would look flattened, like a single sculpture with matter in a superposition of every place it ever occupied, our sentience just cycling through our lives like carts on a track. ("The Secret Fate of All Life", *True Detective*)

In *The Logic of Sense*, Gilles Deleuze (1990, p. 103) refers to beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti's description of "the fourth person singular" perspective to describe a series of singularities distributed in a potentialised meta-stable system.<sup>5</sup> Simondon's philosophy of individuation is very useful for exploring the dynamic character of the interaction between singular points. In Simondon's theory of aesthetics, singular points serve a special role to bridge the separation of figure through technics and ground through religion.<sup>6</sup> Readers of Deleuze will find Simondon's aesthetic theory to be familiar; Deleuze is arguably indebted to Simondon's conception of aesthetics concerned with the production of new singularities, what Yves Michaud describes in his summary of Simondon's aesthetics as "a network of key points" (2012, p. 125).

<sup>5</sup> "...but I keeping slipping off the new wiped-off table because I and no one else has the true fourth sight to see without the old associational turning eye that turns all it sees into its own, and it is this fourth person singular voice of which nobody speaks but which still exists unvoiced that will speak in the eye of tomorrow's seeing man and which will see truly how there is no rapport of any kind between himself and natural objects except a rapport of strangeness..." (Ferlinghetti 1960, p. 93).

<sup>6</sup> There is a curious line in Yves Michaud's excellent summary of Gilbert Simondon's approach to aesthetics where Michaud proclaims that he "will not discuss the metaphysics of [Simondon's] hylomorphic conception [of aesthetics], renovated by the physics of phases and transitions" (128). Most accounts of Simondon's philosophy of technics and individuation borrow from this scientific terminology, if only because the key notion of a "singularity" (appears as "key point", "way point" and "special point") has been developed in a relatively straightforward manner using scientific discourse, not so much by "science" but from other philosophers working on "complexity theory" and the like. Michaud avoids using the terminology of phases and transitions and any of the terms from scientific discourse because he argues there is a danger of it imposing a "very systematic and even mechanical frame on thought" (129). A notable example is Delanda's *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, which is an explicit attempt to read some aspects of Deleuze's philosophy in ways congruent with scientific discourse. Simondon's philosophy is impossible without an effective appreciation of the notion of "singularity". If normative realist ontology is assumed when borrowing such concepts from scientific discourse, then the problem of imposing a systematic frame on thought is certainly possible. This is exemplified by Delanda's materialist philosophy, which has clearly been developed with a goal of systemising Deleuze's work. I am mostly using the notion of a singular or key point as akin to what Deleuze describes as a remarkable point in *Difference and Repetition*. Empirical ontologies (as compared to so-called "flat ontologies") require a distinction between remarkable points that signal a qualitative threshold and ordinary points that repeat a series so as to properly appreciate what Simondon describes as recursive causality.

As I shall explore in the next section, the first way the *True Detective* media event is meta is through its singular or key points. If nothing else, *True Detective* clearly triggers meta-detective work by the audience. The show, its inter-textual references, and non-diegetic exegetical explanations of these references produced new edges of surprise and a new sense of expectation. For example, there is a folding of the crime fiction genre into existentialist horror and a topological transformation wrought upon both. Both genres frame a passage of discovery by the characters and audience. “Discovery” has become a buzzword in user-centred design to describe the design of platforms that assist users discover appropriate content, and this refers to the way users willingly embrace the delegated agency of “smart” interfaces. The liminal epistemology of discovery in meta-stable media assemblages pose answers to questions that haven’t yet been asked. The question isn’t simply asked of the characters of the show, but of the entire event itself as it repeated different elements of genres in different ways; in effect, the audience carries out meta-detective work.

*True Detective* is also meta in another more complex way. In the final section I develop meta in terms of what Sianne Ngai (2012) calls a minor aesthetic category, and in this case what characterises meta as a minor aesthetic category is the way any text, object or event that dramatises the suspension of cultural values. In Simondon’s terms, meta is an aesthetic category that refers to works that in some way repotentialise values that serve as the “preindividual norms” of value in a state of meta-stability ready to be potentialised in a multiplicity of ways (Combes 2013: 64). As I shall explore in detail, *True Detective* dramatises a conflict between systems of belief and cultural value through the figures of the two main characters, Rust and Marty. In this way, “meta” signals a threshold of value (or what Nietzsche (1968) calls “transvaluation”) more often associated with nihilism. Instead of the great epoch-ending (or creating) nihilism that concerned Nietzsche, nihilism of the contemporary era is produced through the disjunctive synthesis of competing and sometimes opposing systems of cultural value. That is, contemporary nihilism holds in abeyance the singular points of cultural value as a meta-stable system. This everyday nihilism has a banality closer to the traumas of cultural and social change rather than existential crisis. My purpose for engaging with *True Detective* is that it is but one example of many from popular culture (mostly television-centric media assemblages) that problematises the value of cultural value and may borrow from specific genres but belong to an overall category of meta and aesthetic classification as nihilist pop culture.

### Media assemblage aesthetics

“It was a sheet of yellow paper with torn pieces of white paper pasted on it” (Chandler 1938/1988).

“It goes on like that... you know the job: you’re looking for narrative... interrogate witnesses, parse the evidence, establish a timeline, build a story, day after day” (Rust Cohle, “Seeing Things,” *True Detective*).

There is a long history to meta- as a prefix, back to Ancient Greece continuing through to contemporary epistemology, where it means “about”; contemporary usage here includes metadata (or data about data) or Lyotard’s meta-narratives (legitimizing narratives about narratives). The term “meta” entered into popular culture in the early 2000s after almost two decades incubation in computer-based subcultures as a result of Douglas Hofstadter’s 1979 book *Gödel, Escher, Bach*. Hofstadter can apparently claim the fame for the phrase “going meta”, which is the rhetorical move to a level of logical abstraction above the terms being discussed. Hofstadter’s meta is an example of a meta-argument, an argument about an argument. As an index of popular culture acceptance, according to a 2005 definition in the user-generated Urban Dictionary definition, “meta” is used as an adjective “to characterize something that is characteristically self-referential”.<sup>7</sup> Practice-based understandings of meta in art and art theory have a longer history, back to the 1960s and 1970s, of art referring to itself, and indeed in literature the practice of the meta-novel emerges in the late nineteenth century, even if it is only described as such much later.

The history of meta- as a prefix in literary and media-based criticisms became very popular in the 1980s on, and Scott Olson’s work on “meta-television” is exemplary in this regard. Olson characterises

<sup>7</sup> (2005) “Meta” Urban Dictionary, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=meta>

meta-television as “self-conscious television” (1987, p. 284). By indexing the different levels of televisual self-reflexivity, Olson (1987, p. 285) argues that the relative “sophistication about conventions required to decode [in the semiotic sense] meta-television hints at the identity of its audience”. The kind of audience that Olson was writing about no longer exists, or at least not in the same way. Meta-television for Olson was basically television about television and for it to function required an audience of knowledgeable television viewers. He speaks of television’s second generation of viewers that have not known a time before television. His analysis is now historical not only due to the textual examples he cites, but because he is writing about a generation of television viewers that grew up with television before the internet existed.

*True Detective* is meta in the way it encourages the audience to read the show in terms of an intertextual cartography of its own self-developing media assemblage. Appreciating literary and “serious” televisual fictions in terms of the intertextual references invoked is now commonplace, so much so that it has become a generic convention. (We expect “Easter eggs” in all “serious” cultural works; being able to appropriate and appreciate a text for intertextual references is an index of its aesthetic of “seriousness”). For Nussbaum the philosophical dialogue between characters “was deeply, sometimes deadly serious, those layers of Lovecraft and nihilism just felt like red herrings”. Pizzolato signals this in the form of a warning in the first episode as the two main characters discuss the murder scene of Dora Lang. Cohle suggests that murder victim Lang’s “body is a paraphilic love map” and then goes on to offer a textbook-type definition of paraphilia when questioned by his partner Martin (Marty) Hart. Marty doesn’t “buy it” and replies: “You got a chapter in one of those books about jumping to conclusions? You attach an assumption to a piece of evidence, you start to bend the narrative to support it... [you] prejudice yourself”. Rather than a close reading of a text, the media event of *True Detective* requires a close mapping.

*True Detective* is an example of post-broadcast “anthology” television, a condensed season of limited run of anywhere from three to slightly more than a dozen episodes.<sup>8</sup> Post-broadcast practices of television viewing are at best loosely determined by broadcast television schedules. The contemporary anthology format, as compared to the mid-twentieth-century format, is designed to capitalise on new viewing practices, such as “catch up” television or “binge” watching. It also definitively signals to potential viewers that there will be an end and the narrative shall be “tied off”. The regularity of contemporary television viewing is no longer anchored by broadcast media technologies and is instead anchored by the affective dimension. The affective dimension of television viewing is not new, now it has just become central in scheduling rhythms of engagement.

The experience of contemporary television is imbued with an anticipatory logic in the pre-view (everything from set photos to script leaks to press release materials) to post-view experience (summary judgement of whether or not the television show in question lived up to what had been anticipated). Promotional pre-view material dominates much of the cultural magazine-based content online (Gray 2010); this writing serves to shape the viewing experience – you feel it: the excitement or disappointment. Practices of participatory culture, including practices of television viewing, are characterised by an augural temporality of “yet” (“Have you seen it yet?”). Hence, the ironic manifest urgency of *having to* watch television in an era of maximum technical flexibility. *True Detective* is an exemplar of the furtive event-based relations of intensive temporality produced in the participatory culture of networked media.

One way to engage with the *True Detective* media event in its completed form as a work of anthology television: draw it out atemporally all at once and spatialise it once and for all. Spatialising an event is the equivalent of reading an unfolding narrative as simply indicating a series of situations that at the end of the narrative have always already happened. This is the founding problem engaged with by the field of narratology: what are the generic techniques in presenting the relation between the story as a series of situations and the plot as the way these situations are told. Fredric Jameson (2005, p. 101) describes this as the “double inscription” which marks the “vocation of the mystery writer: namely that of inventing some first narrative which is to be hypothetically reconstructed as ‘fact’ in the second or properly narrative time of the detective himself”. Is there not, however, a third narrative, which can be complicated in any

<sup>8</sup> Mauer, Mark “‘True Detective’, ‘American Horror Story’ and Why the Anthology Series is All the Rage” *Indiewire*, February 12, 2014. <http://www.indiewire.com/article/television/rise-of-the-anthology-series>

number of perspectival articulations and is particularly evident in mystery or detective fictions dealing with “serial killers”? This is the narrative of the “next” of when the killer is expected to “strike again” and of when the work of detection is mobilised not so much to “simply” solve the existing crime but to thwart the crime to come and to do so “in time”. The third narrative of “next” thus functions intensively, not as an index of two narratives moving against each other in a spatially deductive hermeneutic similitude (what “really” happened), but operates affectively as a relation of anticipatory futurity.

*True Detective* moves beyond the “simple” complexity of a non-linear narrative, however. *True Detective* has a non-linear narrative structure of multiple pasts and futures, involving past crimes, present detection, plus the future crimes/detection. It is an exemplary work of analepses (or “alterations in chronology”, see Mittell 2006: 36-37), temporal cuts that frame the action through the multi-temporality of the show's self-contained seasonal arc. The plot of *True Detective* unfolds in increasing levels of complication between events of 1995 and 2002 (told from the perspective of the “present” in 2012 as narrative flashbacks), until Rust and Marty cease participating in the interviews with the 2012 detectives and begin operating themselves as detectives once again. They shift from telling a story to living it. Once the pair begins operating as detectives once again, Marty is not convinced of Rust's guilt or innocence, and takes his gun with him into Cohle's storage unit. He is won over only after he watches the video of a terrible ritual being carried out upon one of the missing children. Rust is the only character that watches the video all the way to the end. The video serves as a *key point* in the series – it signals a threshold in the individuation of the *True Detective* narrative complexity *and* media event – the metastable superposition of multiple plot speculations is reduced or actualised as a conventional detective narrative. As such, one way to approach the narrative complexity is in terms of spoiler-based fan practices. The superposition potentiality of narrative speculation signals that this key point could also serve as a spoiler. Jonathan Gray and Jason Mittell (2007) discuss spoilers in multiple ways including both as epistemological objects and signifiers of status within fan-based communities. Gray and Mittell note that fans look beyond a normative conception of “what will happen?” (story) to a question of “how is it being told?” (plot). There is a complex affective relationship between recommendations and spoilers in that both function as affective and epistemological primers.

Pizzolato does not rely on a kind of layered Neo-Aristoteleanism, rather the layering of narrative and diegetic voiceovers of Marty and Rust retelling events to the 2012 detectives of their detective work in 1995 and at the end of their partnership in 2002 makes it obvious that there is a degree of falsity at play (specifically, the events of the 1995 raid and 2002 “breakup”, etc.). In his brief remarks about detective fiction Deleuze (2004, p. 84) suggests that in “bad literature the real is an object of stereotypes, puerile notions, and cheap fantasies, worse than any imaginative imbecile could dream up”. (Doesn't this description match most experiences of playing first-person shooters over the last two decades?) Rather than this ontology of similitude and representational identity, Deleuze (2004, p. 85) gestures towards the work of parody “that shows us directions of the real which we would not have found otherwise”. Yet, there is a danger in postmodernist forms of parody and irony, as Massumi (2002, pp. xv-xvi) notes, not only “covertly conserving the true,” but also conserving the true so as to perform a kind of nostalgia-driven mastery over it. The properly “meta” aspects of *True Detective's* narrative structure is that truth itself is only ever partial and even at the end of the series when the case of the serial killer is seemingly resolved, it is apparent that this case is merely a perspectival glimpse on a sadly familiar societal horror of systematic abuse and cover-up.<sup>9</sup> *True Detective's* narrative is used as a dramatic device, not to signal an ironic lassitude, but to affectively potentialise the (meta) experience of *detection* in the narrative. This level of meta cuts across both the work of manipulating audience expectations through intertextual meta-genre references and the representations of meta-detective work of a shared liminal epistemology.

Contemporary popular culture is an effect of the globalisation of the creative industries and the ongoing territorialisation of everyday life by mass-media spectacles intensified through personalised vectoral modes of delivery. Sianne Ngai provides an insight here, as she seeks to address the open-ended question, how has aesthetic experience been transformed by late capitalism? Her response is to investigate the way

<sup>9</sup> As Deleuze (2004, p. 84) points out “capitalist society more willingly pardons rape, murder, or kidnapping than a bounced check, which is its only theological crime, the crime against spirit”.

late capitalism's socially binding processes of production, circulation, and consumption are indexed by the "minor" aesthetic categories – the cute, the zany and the interesting. At stake for Ngai is the way "basic human and social competencies [affect and emotion: zaniness; language and communication: interesting; intimacy and care: cute] are increasingly encroached on by capitalism":

The zany, the cute and the interesting thus call forth not only specific subjective capacities for feeling and acting but also specific ways of relating to other subjects and the larger social arrangements these ways of relating presuppose. In doing so, they are compelling reminders of the general fact of social difference and conflict underlying the entire system of aesthetic judgement or taste, making that underlying condition transparent in ways in which many other aesthetic categories do not. (Ngai, 2012, pp. 11, 13)

Alongside Ngai's production, circulation and consumption as three socially binding process of capitalism, the use of "meta" similarly indexes *logistics* as a mode of social organisation. Meta is the aestheticisation of the intertextual and socio-technical supply chain of culture and the nested circuits of meaning that resonate across cultural texts organised as discrete media assemblages. It is experienced as a kind of contradictory intensive concentration of ambiguous focus, which in a negative example is akin to the agitation of checking the timetable when waiting on a late train or the pleasure of finally receiving a pre-purchased novel based on an Amazon.com algorithm recommendation. The liminal epistemology of "meta" is dramatised in *True Detective* through the nihilistic dialogue and perspectival embodiment of the two main characters. Meta calls forth a way of relating to other subjects and ourselves through a shared liminal epistemology. The analogical relation between the detective work in *True Detective* and the meta-detective work of the audience that constitutes the media event of *True Detective* frames an investigation into the value of cultural value operating in a transversal manner diegetically and non-diegetically.

### Nihilism and the meta-stability of cultural value

"We know what transmutation or transvaluation means for Nietzsche: not a change of values, but a change in the element from which the value of values derives" (Deleuze, 1983, p. 171).

"People follow their intuitions about what they don't know and so change the shape of the present, which is not fleeting at all, but a zone of action in a space marked by its experiments in transitioning" (Berlant, 2011, p. 77).

The nihilist dialogue of *True Detective* should be understood in the larger cultural context of the show belonging to a series of nihilist popular cultural works. Nihilism often appears almost too big a concept, so large in scope that it becomes naïve or intellectually adolescent to think it. Yet, there is a case for recognising a large number of examples of contemporary nihilist and crypto-nihilist popular culture. Most are pre- or post-apocalyptic, from the brutal hyper-pragmatism of UK Channel Four's *Utopia* through to the survivalist post-apocalypse zombie genre of *The Walking Dead*. Basically all of British television creator and media critic Charlie Brooker's works can be appreciated for their celebration and mockery of nihilistic media cultures. The television adaptation of Tom Perrotta's *The Leftovers* is another example that turns on challenging normative systems of social valorisation, explicitly dramatised in the novel through the actions of the cultish "Guilty Remnant" group.

There are multiple models of nihilism, but for my purposes I need to only discuss two broad types. The first type of nihilism is a conservative (or postmodernist) lament for the loss of moral or cultural value as represent in cultural texts due to an alleged waning of belief or faith in normative social ideals (Hibbs 2012). Conservative nihilism is born of a loss of religio-epistemological "certainty". The production of certainty through faith attempts to "fix" truth: the truth of faith, the truth of the family, the truth of being a man. This is dramatised in *True Detective* through the perspective of Marty. He apprehends these truths, and lives as if he is certain of them, but in spite of his belief in the certainty of these truths he fails as a "man" to live in accord with the correlating normative social ideals. Nietzsche (1974) emphasised the role

of these “articles of faith” as “goals” that, in themselves, were not good or bad, but functioned in certain ways to stretch or diminish human capacities. The resolution of tension is mistaken for “truth”, as represented in the *True Detective* scene from 1995 involving the travelling evangelical preacher. Marty suggests that people should be left to their faith, but Rust is unforgivingly critical when he says:

Transference of fear and self-loathing to an authoritarian vessel. It's catharsis. [The preacher] absorbs their dread with his narrative. Because of this, he's effective [in] proportion to the amount of certainty he can project.

“Certainty” is not related to truth, but the cathartic transference of existential dread. The conflict over who directs the investigation (with the “Billy Lee Tuttle” character) is actually a conflict over the police investigation not as way to detect “the truth” but to transform the case so it serves as a cathartic process involving a tabloid journalism “devil worshipping” narrative. The decline in the belief of God and the efficacy of compositions of social relations organised around the associated goals leads to nihilism as a “psychologically necessary affect” (Ansell-Pearson and Morgan 2000, p. ix). Daniel Colucciello Barber engages with this problematic in *True Detective* through dialectical relationship between story and what he calls “sprawl” and what I’ve described as an affective meta-stability:

Affection of the all-sprawl dissolves and drowns every story. Affect has no story, and so the story can be imagined only as a detection-of-story; one can stop being affected by the sprawl only insofar as one detects a story, or as one tells the story of detection. In these ways, one denies the sprawl in favour of the contingent drama of detection. And what is at stake in this drama is less the outcome that is established, and more the establishment of a contingency of outcomes (Barber, 2014, pp. 203-204).

The second model of nihilism is derived from Nietzsche (1968: S22-23) and is framed in terms of being an active nihilism or a passive nihilism. This dialectical nihilism becomes necessary when social and cultural values become insufficient for directing the “circumstances under which one flourishes, grows [and] gains power”. Jean Baudrillard (1994, p. 160) was concerned about the possibility of nihilism after the great liquidation of “appearances” (i.e. the symbolic realm through which values are anchored); instead we are “fascinated by all forms of disappearance”. Fascination, as a mode of affective engagement, “for the very operation of the system that annihilates us [...] is nihilistic passion par excellence” (Baudrillard, 1994, 160). Keith Ansell-Pearson and Diane Morgan associate Baudrillard’s nihilism with that of the “observer and the acceptor”:

It is the nihilism of the passive nihilist who no longer aspires towards a transcendence or overcoming of the human (condition), but who simply announces and enjoys its disappearance, the spectator watching the spectacle of its own demise (Ansell-Pearson and Morgan, 2000, p. ix).

Rust’s appreciation of “truth” is underpinned by a kind of socio-biological or evolutionary pessimism expressed at multiple times throughout the series including the first and last episodes. The “illusionary” aspect of identity in Rust’s dialogue is what Nietzsche describes as the realm of “appearances” and Baudrillard as “disappearance”:

I think human consciousness is a tragic misstep in evolution. We became too self-aware, nature created an aspect of nature separate from itself, we are creatures that should not exist by natural law. We are things that labor under the illusion of having a self; an accretion of sensory, experience and feeling, programmed with total assurance that we are each somebody, when in fact everybody is nobody. (Rust Cohle, “The Long Bright Dark”, *True Detective*)

In the final episode Rust is arguing with Marty about the ethics of value judgements and implies value judgements are a necessity: “as sentient meat – however illusory our identities are – we craft those identities by making value judgments”. Does Rust’s relentless “pessimistic” focus on the material and the

biological underpinning of human nature, using what Marty calls “ten dollar words,” present a different kind of certainty? I am certainly not going to romanticise Rust as a heroic Nietzschean-style nihilist. The character of Rust needs to be located in the context of the media event of *True Detective* and the media event of *True Detective* needs to be understood in the context of exemplifying contemporary nihilist popular culture. Nihilism is a culturally specific *event*. I want to locate this quasi-Nietzschean conception of nihilism – as an active affirmation of the possibility of value and transvaluation in response to a crisis of meaning and value – in what Deleuze and Guattari might have called a “schizo” context. Ansell Pearson and Morgan (2000, p. xi) suggest that as an experience nihilism “appears as a force that comes, like a shockwave, from the future, destabilising established values and petrifying ossified forms of life”. Yet, there is no singular future through which we pass, but multiple relations of futurity for every assemblage and universe of value of which we are part.<sup>10</sup> The presentation of possible futures implicates us through charismatic tests of participatory worthiness – do you “get” the joke, “get” the inter-textual popular culture reference or “get” the dead French intellectual’s concept? Don’t we immediately respond by rejecting such naked interpellation and questioning the assumption of underpinning values? I am suggesting there has been a multiplication of the conditions of possibility for nihilism, not least of which is because of the changes to perception and feelings of belonging in the mediated experience of socio-technical assemblages. In some ways we are passive and are constitutive spectators of great existential worlds of symbolic efficacy and in other ways we are active destroyers not only of these systems but the transmutation of new values.

The conservative conceptualisation of nihilism is to understand this loss of narrative efficacy of the “family” or “religious institutions” as catastrophic. The family assemblage, for example, collectively individuates material, social and psychic registers and there is a truth to this assemblage more powerful than the convenience of mere convention. In this case, the reproduction of biological and social life necessitates a concept analogically congruent to “family”, but *not the specific concept of “family”*. The incorporeal materiality of the concept of “family” that narrativises contingencies is itself an expression of the “family” assemblage. Nihilism is a critical event of transvaluation; not as the loss of meaning, but a working backwards to the primary scene of the “crime”, a kind of practice of existentialist detective work. Beyond the trappings of genre what the contemporary run of television-centric media assemblages characterised by a fascination with nihilism have in common is a problematisation not only of value, but the *conditions of possibility for value*, such as “the church”, “the family”, governmental authority and so on.

## Conclusion

*True Detective* is meta because it encourages the audience to operate across at least three registers of the *True Detective* media assemblage. The first level of meta analyses the detective work as represented in the plot of the television show. Detectives interview ex-detectives about previous detective work while the ex-detectives are attempting to detect what current detective work needs doing. Relatedly, the *True Detective* media event is meta at the level of narrative, generic conventions of crime fiction and the affective potentiality that Nic Pizzolatto creates through inter-textual references in concert with the participatory commentary of fans and critics. The meta-stable virtuality of future detection/crime is articulated at a structural level through a certain affective tension or even a sense of dread. The individuation of the story (as the actualisation of future detection/crime events in the present) is maintained in *True Detective* as a state of narrative meta-stability, so what happens in the “present” and the “past” exist as phase transitions of each other. The particular aesthetic character of this meta-stable state is what characterises *True Detective*.

Second, *True Detective* can be aesthetically appreciated as “meta” in the way fan and mass audiences can be encouraged to develop an intertextual “meta-detective” media literacy. It is the event of *True Detective* in the context of a cross-platform media assemblage that is self-referential. This includes all the paratexts of amateur television criticism that I have characterised as belonging more to the genre of the “recom-

<sup>10</sup> Even within the *True Detective* media event there are multiple relations of futurity – the diegetic world of the show and the present detection of future crimes and the contemporary experience of television and commentary that develop in different ways the media event (even into the second season).

mentation” as an affective aestheticisation of a relation of belonging rather than that of the ‘review’ as a performance of critical judgement and cultural capital. “Media Assemblage Studies” is not yet a sanctified scholarly discipline, but it is possible to glimpse what Television Studies, Platform Studies and many other disciplines concerned with networked aesthetics will become with the ubiquity of the deterritorialising “screen”. It is clear that examples of the aesthetic category of meta have multiplied due to the vectoral character of the creative industries and the current attempts to commodify entire media assemblages as cultural franchises.

Lastly, *True Detective* is also meta in the way it dramatises the value of cultural value. As such, it belongs to a larger context of nihilist popular culture. I have argued that for my purposes nihilism can be understood in two ways, and these are dramatised through the conflict of values between the two main characters of *True Detective*, Marty and Rust. The first kind of nihilism is a state characterised by a social-conservative lament for institutional loss of social efficacy. The other kind is a process of transvaluation whereby cultural values are suspended in such a way to present the opportunity to affirm new values appropriate for a new set of circumstances. The nihilist potential of *True Detective* and other related media events is that the audience is presented with the opportunity for a process of transvaluation.

Ironically, the limit of meta may be nihilism, but the meta-detective work of transvaluation is fuelled by optimism. Lauren Berlant has explored ambiguities and nuances of the relation between optimism and trauma. The aesthetic category of meta is a dramatisation not of the everyday experience of apocalyptic loss of value, but the regular traumas that we encounter as part of contemporary existence. Berlant (2011, pp. 77, 9-10) describes “trauma” as “a zone of action in a space marked by experiments in transitioning” and argues that trauma is the “primary genre of the last eighty years for describing the historical present as the scene of an exception that has just shattered some ongoing, uneventful life”. There is possibly an even longer history to trauma and its relation to such experiments in transitioning, with the most famous being Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (loss of father triggers a “transition” and possibly the most well-known existential crisis in all literature). What if we actually lived in an inherently abusive culture that operated through the continual production of trauma? For Berlant (2011, p. 77) the potentiality of trauma (that “the deal could turn out sour”) is also the “primary scene” of optimism, hence the inherent “cruelty” of “the potential for achieving genuine human reciprocity is always held out as the seduction to become further invested in the normativity of the techno-political game”. Is *True Detective* worthy of our optimism? I am not sure. To return to Nussbaum’s critique of the representation of women, it is clear that there is no “genuine human reciprocity” or (in Simondon’s terminology) the possibility of “collective individuation” organised around the traumas of the female characters in *True Detective*. Hence, the show is clearly insufficient to herald more than what is at best a critical questioning. Yet, the apparent popularity of nihilistic popular culture allows me to feel optimistic for the possibility of transvaluation and the ongoing detective work of creating new values.

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