MARITA STURKEN

Comedy, Genre, and Netflix in Post-Irony American Popular Culture (or Disruption, Comedy, Humorlessness, and Genre Flail)

In the summer of 2018, President Trump threw what was then commonly referred to by his political opponents as a "temper tantrum," storming out of a meeting with Congressional leaders on infrastructure and holding a supposedly impromptu press conference (albeit with pre-prepared signs) in the White House Rose Garden that verged on a crazed rant. Stunned reporters attempted to cover the rant within the norms of political reporting, but the next day most major newspapers did what they had increasingly resorted to in the Trump era, which was to run a story about how late-night political comedy shows had made fun of the president's performance, replete with tweets and clips. That this was the strategy for political coverage in the Trump era is perhaps not surprising, because this norm-defying president made traditional modes of political performance obsolete, providing instead deranged and unpredictable soundbites to feed Twitter's and cable news' appetite for drama and unscripted content. In the Trump era, the norms of American political and public life were disrupted beyond recognition.

As the United States emerges from the Trump era and into a still uncertain future, it is worth situating the disruption of the Trump presidency within the broader disruptions of American life in the early twenty-first century. In this paper, I am interested in looking at the intersections of the disruption of political and presidential norms, the disruption of media consumption, the disruption of television viewership and the disruption of genre. In her epic survey of American history, *These Truths*, Jill Lepore defines the last two decades specifically as an era of disruption in American history, one that includes not only Y2K at the turn of the millennium; the attacks of 9/11; the rise of the tech

industry; the disruption of the media through deregulation and consolidation; the rise of social media; and the demise of traditional journalism; but also the 2008 election of Barack Obama; the rise of social movements such as the Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street, and Black Lives Matter; the Patriot Act; the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; and the election of Donald Trump in 2016.[1] Undergirding these political disruptions are disruptions of entire industries, continued job loss in the manufacturing sector, the financial crisis of 2008, and the class divisions arising from economic hardship in large parts of the country. Disruption can act as a force that demands more of norms, narratives, and industries. Disruption can also bring about divides and divisions, scapegoating, and othering because of the fear, insecurity, and desperation it can sow.

What does this disruption mean for American popular culture? And, moreover, what *is* popular culture in this norm-defying era? Is it YouTube? Twitter? Amazon? Netflix? And what genres, if any, could respond to and make sense of the United States in the era of Trump, a man who honed his image through the genre of reality television? I aim here to grapple with these issues, particularly in relation to the role of comedy in mediating disruption, using Lauren Berlant's work on comedy and humorlessness as a guide.

In attempting to make sense of these issues, I am an academic who teaches and studies popular culture, but I have also been – as were many of my fellow citizens during the Trump era and in its aftermath – a traumatized citizen existing in a space of constant anxiety with regard to the state of the nation. And we are still anxious. I was, like many others, unprepared for the surge of anger, xenophobic rage, cruelty to desperate refugees, rising white nationalism, and the continued support in the heartland and among Republicans for the Trump cult of personality. It has been hard to accept the enduring appeal of Trump's politics of grievance and anger. Our democracy continues to be endangered. We hope the rule of law will survive. In the meantime, we watch Netflix.

---

[1]   Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: Norton, 2018), chapter 16.

Netflix and Genre

In order to consider the disruptions taking place in American popular culture, in genre, and in American political culture, we need to start with the disruptions taking place in media consumption. I take the example of Netflix as my point of departure. A game changer in the economic terrain of entertainment media, Netflix is now in the unenviable position of being the target of competing imitators. Disney and other studios are now expanding their own online streaming services, so the 'Netflix factor' may be diminished in future years. At this moment, however, its power to shape entertainment media on a global scale is unparalleled. We are only just beginning to understand how dramatically the rise of broadband online streaming has changed media consumption world-wide, and how it is now changing entertainment media production as well. While the demise of the collective movie theater experience has long been mourned (especially in the wake of the pandemic), it is now the collective (family) experience of television that is being rendered obsolete. Now, each member of the family watches their own screen (phone, iPad, laptop) with headphones on, and the fractured viewing experience has been normalized.

Netflix has established a new frontier for television through on-demand viewing, as well as new modes of genre, taste, and viewing practices. Netflix's business model is central to its disruption of genre and audiences. In the world of Netflix, data is the key factor in not only determining taste and reinventing genre, but in greenlighting production. As Michael D. Smith and Rahul Telang explain in their book, *Streaming, Sharing, Stealing*, Netflix has disrupted traditional pro-duction gatekeeping by using data, rather than the creation and reception of a pilot episode, to make decisions about production.[2] They describe a meeting in 2011 with the creative team of *House of Cards*, who, despite the high-profile talent lined up behind their production, had trouble getting a studio to greenlight a pilot because conventional wisdom dictated that no political drama since *The West Wing* had sold. Netflix,

---

[2]   Michael D. Smith and Raul Telang, *Streaming, Sharing, Stealing: Big Data in the Future of Entertainment* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016), chapter 1.

by contrast, came to the meeting armed with aggregated data and greenlighted two seasons worth of episodes based on data indicating that fans of director David Fincher and actor Kevin Spacey as well as Netflix subscribers who had previously watched the British *House of Cards* would constitute a guaranteed audience. In addition, Netflix planned to release each full season in one 'drop,' so that subscribers could binge-watch all they wanted without commercial interruptions. At the time, the greenlight without a pilot, the two-season deal, and the all-at-once release were scorned by the industry, but these practices are now the norm at Amazon, Netflix, and other streaming services. As the producers noted at the time, the two-season commitment also changed the show's writing and structure, as each episode was able to spend less time recapping content. All of this also points to the ways that pilots have historically been gatekeeping mechanisms that have stifled production.

It is perhaps surprising that the vast economic power Netflix enjoys on a global scale is due to its subscription business model. Originally launched as a DVD rental subscription service, it began offering streaming in 2007. In April 2019, Netflix had over 148 million subscribers worldwide, which meant it increasingly had funds available for content production, which it had begun in 2012. Subscription business models have not only been thriving in comparison with advertising business models in television; they are also increasingly on the rise in newspaper subscriptions (often attributed to a 'Trump Bump'), music streaming services such as Spotify and Pandora, and subscription websites such as *Medium*. This is having an ongoing impact on advertising revenues, which have already been deeply impacted by the dominance of Google and Facebook. Ten years ago, the rise of the subscription model was not yet clearly on the horizon, and there was little understanding of the potential disruptive aspects of such a basic model.

A key outcome of the subscription model is the availability of data, which allows Netflix algorithms to customize recommendations from its vast content offerings for specific viewers. Customization starts at the moment of login by asking, "Who is watching?" (and thus discouraging family viewing). Algorithms gauge future behavior on the basis of past behavior, defying the long convention of using demographics (age, gender, race, economic status, etc.) to predict viewer interest. Early

research at Netflix found that past viewing experiences were far more predictive than demographics. Viewers today might fall into one of Netflix's more than 2,000 'microclusters,' or taste communities, rather than demographic segments. "Nowadays, in our modern world, hit play once and it tells us volumes more than knowing you're a 31-year-old woman or a 72-year-old man or a 19-year-old guy," Netflix Vice President Todd Yellin told *New York Magazine*.[3] Netflix can make increasingly tailored recommendations to viewers that defy conventional notions of audience.

One of the effects of this is a complete disruption of genre – Netflix does not trade in genre, so to speak. Its genre categories are increasingly microgenres, divided into taste categories (if you liked that, you will like this…) rather than the traditional categories of comedy, drama, science fiction, etc. According to *New York Magazine*, Netflix calls these groupings of similar programs "verticals" – highly specific film and television genres such as young-adult comedies, period romances, or sci-fi adventures.

Algorithms have gotten a lot of bad press lately, and arguably deservedly so, because of the ways that social media algorithms augment engagement and thus amplify content that engages a range of negative affective responses, such as anger, outrage, and hate. It could certainly be argued that social media algorithms helped elect Trump and have exacerbated political divisions in the U.S. But with its genre-defying model, Netflix demonstrates an algorithmic model that is about creating connectedness across traditional cultural boundaries rather than sowing negative engagement. Netflix is phenomenally global. Having begun international streaming in 2010, it is now streaming in over 190 countries and has more subscribers outside the United States than in it; it has programs subtitled in twenty-six languages and has increased the amount of dubbed content it offers. Importantly, it also has a vast amount of non-U.S. content and is producing original content outside the U.S., funding productions in France, Spain, Brazil, India, South Korea, and the Middle East.

---

[3] Josef Adalian, "Inside the Binge Factory," *New York Magazine*, June 11, 2018.

This means that Netflix might actually be a model for a more cosmopolitan effect of algorithms. *New York Times* technology columnist Farhad Manjoo writes that:

> Despite a supposed surge in nationalism across the globe, many people like to watch movies and TV shows from other countries… Instead of trying to sell American ideas to a foreign audience, Netflix is aiming to sell international ideas to a global audience. A list of Netflix's most watched and most culturally significant recent productions looks like a Model United Nations: Besides Marie Kondo's show, there's the comedian Hannah Gadsby's "Nanette" from Australia; from Britain, "Sex Education"; "Elite" from Spain; "The Protector" from Turkey; and "Baby" from Italy."[4]

Manjoo argues that norm-changing programs like these have become popular and influential in markets they otherwise would not have reached, with *Sex Education* sparking debate about sex education in Thailand, for instance. The globalization of Netflix has not been without its roadblocks and stumbles, however. As Ramon Lobato notes in his recent book *Netflix Nations*, Netflix has come up against regulatory barriers in many countries and was unable to enter the vast Chinese market – it partnered with a Chinese streaming service to carry its content instead.[5]

This brings us to the phenomenon of *Nanette*. Netflix has been a huge platform for stand-up and political comedy. The site offers a vast array of edgy stand-up routines from Dave Chappelle, Kevin Hart, Tig Notaro, Trevor Noah, and others. This means that it streams numerous uncensored, boundary-pushing, stand-up routines for global audiences. After it was released by Netflix in 2018, *Nanette* received an enormous amount of attention and critical acclaim. This quirky rumination on comedy and sexual identity by the previously unknown Hannah Gadsby became a huge global hit despite the fact that, as many commentators have noted, queer feminist comedians normally play to much smaller crowds. One could therefore argue that the algorithmic structure of

---

4   Farhad Manjoo, "Netflix is the Most Intoxicating Portal to Planet Earth," *The New York Times*, February 22, 2019.

5   Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nation: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), chapter 4.

Netflix, in its global promotion of *Nanette*, allows for niche cultural products to travel in ways that can open up space for new voices.

Much credit can be given to the complexity of Gadsby's performance, but for the purposes of my argument I would also like to note here that the performance is a genre-defying one, so much so that it generated considerable debate about whether it was a comedy. This, in fact, was Gadsby's intent. She asks: What is it not okay to laugh about in this moment (for her, that moment is about identity, sexual violence, and tensions around gender fluidity)? Is the comedy genre a way of avoiding addressing pain and difficult issues? Yet it may be that her work demonstrates precisely how comedy as a genre has the flexibility to engage disruption, morph into new subgenres, and make connections across traditional cultural divides.

Gadsby's performance aims to deconstruct comedy in relation to how it creates and dispels tension. Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai have written that "Comedy's pleasure comes in part from its ability to dispel anxiety…but it doesn't simply do that. As both an aesthetic mode and a form of life, its action just as likely produces anxiety: risking transgression, flirting with displeasure, or just confusing things in a way that both intensifies and impedes the pleasure."[6]

As Gadsby gets further into her performance, her tone continues to shift, becoming darker as she narrates her experiences of homophobia, misogyny and sexual violence, and the cruelties she has experienced because of others' perception of her as being different and what she terms her "gender not normal" status. She argues that her comedy, which had been done in the very common mode of self-deprecation, was ultimately a detriment to her own self; her performance in *Nanette* is a demand that we rethink our laughter at these comedic modes. Gadsby's refusal to continue to engage in comedy at her own expense resonates with audiences, as it allows her to turn comedic laughter around and expose its potential cruelty. Gadsby may move from comedy toward dark truths, but comedy is what provides the means to test and gauge where the audience will go with her. Her performance thus disrupts the genre of comedy in order to reinvent rather than reject it.

---

[6]   Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, "Comedy Has Issues," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (2017): 233.

Comedy Disrupted/Post-Irony and Post-Genre

This brings us back to the question of disruption and genre. U.S. popular culture in the 1990s was replete with irony, so much so that after 9/11, irony and ironic humor came under attack for their tonal dissonance with the consequences of actual violence. Ironic humor was the norm in the era of Jon Stewart's *Daily Show*, a show that had a deeply formative influence on today's political comedic landscape. Irony is about the construction of the knowing viewer who understands the sources and references and rejects sentiment. In this context, genres become genre parodies, at once following the formula and commenting upon it. This "waning of genre," according to Berlant, creates openings.[7] In other words, as genres fracture and fade, we lose the comfort of their familiar conventions. But a post-genre context might be one in which we acquire new skills that enable us to understand the crises of our time.

In the era of Netflix and Trump, irony is less dominant and genre has been micro-clustered, hybridized, and effectively mashed up. Let's take, for example, 2018's *Vice*, a film about former vice president Dick Cheney and the ways he, as the architect of the response to 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, effectively ran a shadow government during the Bush Administration. The film was directed by Adam McKay, who had made a career out of irreverent Will Ferrell comedies like *Talladega Nights* and *Anchorman* and talky films like *The Big Short*. McKay stated at the time, "I think we're just barreling toward a post-genre world [...] Something can be horribly tragic, tear inducing tragic, and something can be funny, or it can split the structure, and audiences can handle it [...] the saturation of media we have now with streaming and YouTube and all of that, audiences have gotten really sharp."[8]

Tonally, *Vice* careens through a range of modes to explore the scheming, the brutality, and the power-grabbing antidemocratic machinations of the Bush-Cheney administration, but, importantly, it is rarely ironic. The film jumps instead from straight dramatic depiction to

---

[7]   Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 6.

[8]   Scott Myers, "Interview: Adam McKay," *Go Into the Story*, December 30, 2018, gointothestory.blcklst.com/interview-adam-mckay-5a7912ab8387.

satire to dark comedy to the absurd (such as a scene in which Dick and Lynn Cheney recite lines from *Macbeth* while contemplating whether Dick should become Vice President). *Vice* plays with viewer's expectations at every turn, by, for example, presenting an alternative outcome and then running fake credits in the middle of the film, or by having Dick Cheney's heart transplant donor, an Iraq War veteran, narrate the film. In one scene, a menu of torture practices is offered up to Cheney and his cronies in a high-end restaurant.

How does the comedic aspect of *Vice* serve as political critique? Does it encourage us to laugh at Bush and Cheney's war crimes and the damage they inflict on US democracy? *Vice* is a political critique of American empire as comedy. Yet in a certain sense, the film's tonal post-genre shifts perform the labor of making the Cheney story watchable rather than so distressing that it cannot be stomached. The film is a kind of instructional farce, a comedic docudrama that swerves through a range of modes while explicating complex aspects of Cheney's shadow executive status. I would argue that dark comedy veering in and out of straight drama, farce, and pedagogy provides the appropriate mix of emotional registers for the film's deconstruction of the undermining – if not the destruction – of U.S. democracy in the post-9/11 era. Finally, the film even critiques itself in a post-credits sequence featuring a mock focus group session that devolves into a screaming match, effectively telling viewers: we can't use jokes to bridge the political divide.

Comedy and Trump

What, then, of the state of comedy in popular culture in the Trump era? Many commentators felt that satire was the first mode to fail under Trump. Trump frequently appeared to be performing a satire of himself by slurring, cajoling, and performing exaggerated gestures. It was commonly noted that Trump "does a better Trump" than his imitators. This was a problem for comedy. As PJ O'Rourke states, "Trump is a joke, but you can't make a joke about a joke or you quit being the

comedian on the stage and start being the heckler in the crowd because you're angry. Comedy, of course, has a lot to do with anger."[9]

Berlant argues that the opposite of comedy is not tragedy but humorlessness, and the strange combination of comedic and humorless behavior in the former president prompted many debates about whether Trump was good or bad for comedy. Numerous commentaries have suggested that Trump destroyed not only satire, but even fiction and other genres. For instance, the White House Correspondents' Association dinner, an annual affair that has historically been an occasion for politicians and journalists to comedically "roast" each other, has not had a comedian as its host since Michelle Wolf made fun of White House press secretary Sarah Sanders, and the Trump crew (Trump himself had refused to attend) left in a wounded huff. It's now an apocryphal story that Trump decided to run for president after sitting in fuming silence as Barack Obama (whose comedic timing is extraordinary) ribbed him at the 2011 Correspondents' Dinner, saying, "Obviously we all know about your credentials and breadth of experience. You fired Gary Busey [on *Celebrity Apprentice*]. And these are the kind of decisions that would keep me up at night." In this story, it was the cruelty of comedic roasting that sent the country down the intensely destructive path of the cult of aggrieved masculinity.

The inability of the press and comedians to participate in a shared comedy roast would appear to be evidence that comedy was in serious trouble during the Trump era. But humorlessness is also potentially fertile ground for comedy. Trump can be very entertainingly funny, but, as Kurt Anderson noted in the Intelligence Squared debate "Is Trump Bad for Comedy?", Trump is good for comedy because "He gives comedy the power to unsettle him. And comedy at his expense really does upset him, which strikes me is good for comedy and America."[10] Anderson and his fellow comedians at *Spy Magazine* had a history of targeting Trump (in one prank, they sent checks for miniscule, gradually diminishing amounts of money to wealthy people, and Trump was one of a handful who cashed the final check for 13 cents). Trump was an easy target for the irreverent *Spy* because he was so thin-skinned.

[9]   "Trump is Bad for Comedy," *Intelligence² Debates*, November 1, 2018, www.intelligencesquaredus.org/debates/trump-bad-comedy.

[10]   Ibid.

Humorlessness in the powerful, however, can be insidious. Berlant notes that "If you already have structural power your humorlessness increases your value and your power… Meanwhile, the privileged demand that the less privileged not be humorless… the person who names the problem becomes the problem. And if the person who names the problem is a kind of subject like a feminist, a person of color, a politicized queer, or/and a trans person, the privileged devalue them [...]." Gadsby performs this dynamic many times, in particular in her riff about being called "too sensitive" to homophobic and racist jokes. Humorlessness has been a hugely powerful force in Trump's popularity, as the hurt feelings and the sense of woundedness shifted via Trump from the margins to the mainstream. The aggrieved victim status of the most powerful person in the nation was a toxic mix of affect and power, one that continues to feed his supporters' anger at cultural elites (such as comedians).

It is thus no surprise that political comedy has been criticized for its degradation of those who live in the "flyover zones" of the country and whose sense of being looked down upon by coastal elites made Trump's particular combination of aggrieved hostility appealing. In other words, political comedy has been accused of helping to increase support for Trump because of its exacerbation of the political divide. As Caitlin Flanagan wrote in *The Atlantic*,

> The late-night political-comedy shows – principally Trevor Noah's *Daily Show*, Samantha Bee's *Full Frontal*, and John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight* – staked their territory during the heat of the general election: unwavering, bombastic, belittling, humiliating screeds against Donald Trump. Fair enough..… But somewhere along the way, the hosts of the late-night shows decided that they had carte blanche to insult not just the people within this administration, but also the ordinary citizens who support Trump, and even those who merely identify as conservatives.[11]

The genre of political comedy can be destructive when it seeps into cruelty.

---

[11]   Caitlin Flanagan, "How Late-Night Comedy Fueled the Rise of Trump," *The Atlantic*, May 2017.

Political Comedy Disrupted

So where has disrupted political comedy gone in order to reinvent itself? Late night political comedians like Stephen Colbert, John Oliver, Trevor Noah, Samantha Bee, Seth Myers, Jimmy Fallon, Jimmy Kimmel, and others have been working overtime to wrestle with comedy's challenges and have, as I noted at the outset, regularly filtered into mainstream media as a means of navigating the satire of Trump's presidency. These shows are increasingly edgy (Bee), they offer increasingly instructive forms of comedic news (a genre established by Jon Stewart with *The Daily Show* and continued by Oliver), and they are increasingly cosmopolitan (Noah). It's worth noting that Colbert, who built his career deploying ironic humor while in character as a right-wing TV host, now plays it straight by deconstructing the news as himself. He told the *New York Times* that the intention of *The Late Show*'s nightly monologue is not to jump from punchline to punchline but to "tell you what happened today." He stated, "It's almost as if the president is trying to cast a spell to confuse people so they cannot know the true nature of reality, and what we do is pick apart the way in which the [expletive] was sold to you. I think that's why it's going well. Our job is to identify the [expletive], and there's never been more."[12] Similarly, John Oliver's show is a deeply researched analysis of contemporary issues that is sophisticated enough to fit neatly into a college classroom.

This would seem to take political comedy down the road of instruction. One example of this genre comes to us, not surprisingly, from Netflix: Hasan Minhaj's appropriately and ironically titled show, *Patriot Act*. Minhaj, a Muslim Indian-American who began his comedy career on the *Daily Show*, describes the show's format as an "investigative visual comedic podcast" in which he stands on a stage surrounded by large screens that regularly display graphs and statistics. The show is a kind of pedagogical comedy, a hybrid of stand-up and a TED talk. A list of the show's topics illustrates its instructive range: Affirmative Action, Drug Pricing, Student Loans, Civil Rights Under Trump, Indian Elections, Oil, Amazon, and so on. Minhaj regularly deploys his status as a Muslim-American and a member of an immigrant

---

[12]   David Marchese, "Stephen Colbert on the Political Targets of Satire," *The New York Times Magazine*, May 31, 2019.

family in order to intervene in discussions about ethnicity and race and examine the particular demands on and of immigrant families.

Minhaj begins his show with an intro in which he depicts himself as a traumatized citizen, both surrounded by and peering anxiously at the theater of the political divide. In *Patriot Act*, comedy has to be in service of pedagogy. Minaj performs with a kind of earnestness, interpellating his audience as those who want to know more in order to understand the state of things at the present moment. The show has a global reach, which produced a mini-crisis that exposed the limits of Netflix's global ambitions. In an episode on Saudi Arabia, Minhaj's discussed the history of the U.S.-Saudi relationship and the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and he criticized Prince Mohammed bin Salman from a Muslim's perspective. The episode was banned in Saudi Arabia because it violated laws governing criticism of the royal family, but Netflix made the decision to keep the rest of its shows – and the other episodes of Patriot Act – streaming in the country. It's hard to argue with that decision in retrospect when one imagines young Saudi women watching *Nanette* or *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* behind closed doors.

In *Patriot Act*, Minhaj bounds around the stage, pointing to his surrounding screens in a geeky way for the infographics they deliver; his explication of an issue is punctuated by jokes. The appeal of a show like *Patriot Act* is that, at its core, it believes we as citizens can resist the destructive forces of our government by exposing their schemes and being better-informed citizens. However, this relies on the idea that being uninformed due to a constant diet of Fox News is what is making Trump supporters follow him despite his cons and lies. That, of course, is an illusion. The bitter truth is that politics is much more about affect than facts, and Trump's capacity to sell himself as the aggrieved victim is far more powerful than Minhaj's PowerPoint-style takedowns. The show raises interesting questions about where the genre of comedy takes us in moments of crisis and the flexibility of the comedy genre. Yet despite critical acclaim, *Patriot Act* was cancelled by Netflix in August 2020.

Genre Flail

I am aware that this essay is a bit of a post-genre mix, symptomatic of our contemporary crisis of interpretation. Have I achieved the proper genre balance, have I connected Netflix to comedy to genre to Trump? Like Gadsby, I want to get off the hook here by telling you I know I have a genre problem. Berlant uses the term "genre flail" to describe those moments of disruption in our chosen "objects," be they modes of analysis, political identities, institutional frameworks, etc. She writes, "Genre flailing is a mode of crisis management that arises after an object, or object world, becomes disturbed in a way that intrudes on one's confidence about how to move in it. We genre flail so that we don't fall through the cracks of heightened affective noise into despair, suicide, or psychosis." [13]

While I understand the post-genre mode of popular culture in terms of possibilities of intervention, Berlant's concept of genre flail is an appropriate descriptor of the state of the traumatized citizen, with whom I identified at the beginning of this essay. How to resist, how to survive, how to retain hope in this moment of flailing, when institutions, foundations, the nation, democracy, and the planet are at risk. Is this the end of American dominance as a global superpower? What is the genre of this crisis? We ask these questions in a certain way every day. Berlant continues:

> Countless encounters since the Trump election hiccup into the genre flail in the riff on *what's happening*? Anything anyone writes in the ongoing [...] eddy of his world-shaking thud [...] is a genre flail. Protest is a genre flail; riot, sometimes too, and so is whatever we do off the cuff or in a last minute insert when we're giving a conference talk and cannot not comment on the present moment, in which the speaker presumes that we're all disoriented or in crisis and wanting to fix the world.

We cannot *not* comment on the present moment. In that sense, we certainly need comedy, and we need to be attentive to those modes of popular culture that enable us to listen, analyze, connect, and watch across digital platforms. This brings me back to Gadsby:

[13]   Lauren Berlant, "Genre Flailing," *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (2018): 157.

> I wrote a comedy show that did not respect the punchline – that line where comedians are expected and trusted to pull their punches and turn them into tickles. I did not stop, I punched through that line into the metaphorical gaps of my audience. I did not want to make them laugh, I wanted to take their breath away, to shock them, so that they could listen to my story and hold my pain, as individuals, not as a mindless laughing mob […] the point was to break comedy so that I could rebuild it and reshape and re-form it so that it could hold what I needed to share, and that is what I meant when I said I quit comedy.[14]

Perhaps, within these strategies of post-genre popular culture, these forms of newly reshaped comedy can bring us hope.

---

[14] Hannah Gadsby, *Three Ideas. Three Contradictions. Or not*, TED, April 2019.

Works Cited

Adalian, Josef. "Inside the Binge Factory." *New York Magazine*, June 11, 2018.

Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

---. "Genre Flailing." *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (2018): 156–162.

Berlant, Lauren, and Sianne Ngai. "Comedy Has Issues." *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (2017): 233–249.

Flanagan, Caitlin. "How Late-Night Comedy Fueled the Rise of Trump." *The Atlantic*, May 2017.

Gadsby, Hannah. "Three Ideas. Three Contradictions. Or not." TED, April 2019.

Lepore, Jill. *These Truths: A History of the United States*. New York: Norton, 2018.

Lobato, Ramon. *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution*. New York: New York University Press, 2019.

Manjoo, Farhad. "Netflix is the Most Intoxicating Portal to Planet Earth." *The New York Times*, February 22, 2019.

Marchese, David. "Stephen Colbert on the Political Targets of Satire." *The New York Times Magazine*, May 31, 2019.

Myers, Scott. "Interview: Adam McKay." *Go Into the Story*, December 30, 2018.
    gointothestory.blcklst.com/interview-adam-mckay-5a7912ab8387.

Smith, Michael D., and Raul Telang. *Streaming, Sharing, Stealing: Big Data in the Future of Entertainment*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016.

"Trump Is Bad for Comedy." *Intelligence[2] Debates*, November 1, 2018.
    www.intelligencesquaredus.org/debates/trump-bad-comedy.