

Article

The Cringe and the Sneer: Structures of Feeling in *Veep*

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Abstract: This article approaches cringe comedy through the lens of its affectivity, of the somatic experiences through which it puts its audiences' bodies, and it uses this as a point of departure to think about the genre's cultural work. Based on the observation that no cringe comedy makes its viewers cringe for the whole duration of its storytelling, the article suggests that cringe comedies thrive on destabilizing and ambiguating the affective valence of their performances of embarrassment, constantly recalibrating or muddying the distance between viewer and characters. They are marked by tipping points at which *schadenfreude* and other types of humor tip into cringe, and reversely, at which cringe tips into something else. The article focuses on one of these other affective responses, which it proposes to describe as the sneer. It uses the HBO-series *Veep* as a case study to explore how cringe and sneer aesthetics are interlaced in an exemplary comedy, and how they fuel this particular comedy's satiric work.

Keywords: cringe comedy; affectivity; satire

1. Introduction

The title of this article, "the cringe and the sneer," is inspired by Robyn Warhol's magisterial 2003 book *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms*, which includes a chapter entitled "The Thrill and the Yawn". Warhol's project in this book overall is to explore the affective dimension of engagements with popular culture. She sets out by noting that: "[r]eading is a physical act. [. . .] whatever else it may entail, reading always happens in and to a body. What is the somatic experience of taking in a narrative text? How does reading feel?" (ix). Warhol suggests approaching these 'feelings' by close, initially often autoethnographic, attention to what happens to bodies when they read or watch popular narratives, to the visceral responses that can range from the minuscule like a raised eyebrow to the more complex somatics of excitement, shock, boredom, or sympathy. While Warhol thus emphasizes the physicality of popular culture's affective dimension, she highlights how such affective experiences are always already entangled with the social and the cultural—e.g., in how existing cultural scripts and social norms shape the ways in which somatic experiences are interpreted, the names they are called, the meanings they are made to have.¹ For Warhol, the feelings engendered in and by popular culture are thus suffused with cultural politics and play a crucial role for the cultural work that popular artifacts do. She herself is particularly interested in the gender politics of pop-cultural structures of feeling,² more precisely in the ways in which the somatic experiences through which popular materials put their audience's bodies contribute to the creation of gendered modes of subjectivity. In this, her book's central focus rests on the somatics of the 'good cry' that sentimental texts encourage and its constitution of feminine³ subjectivities.

To locate this 'good cry' on a broader map of structures of feeling in popular culture, the chapter "The Thrill and the Yawn" explores affect in serial adventure fiction that primarily addresses itself to male readers. What Warhol observes there is an admixture of conspicuously different, even oppositional somatic experiences—the thrill and the yawn—that is structured into these serialized texts. Warhol is interested in how the genre orchestrates the interplay between these affects, putting its readers' bodies through carefully arranged sequences of feeling that alternate between excitement and calm. For



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Warhol, this cohabitation and artful sequencing of different feelings is central both for the genre's aesthetics of suspense and for its cultural work, which she sees revolving around the rehearsal of a particular structure of "'manly feelings'" (Warhol 2003, p. 89).

While Warhol's focus on gender is of less immediate concern for this article, I take from her a two-fold impulse: one, to approach cringe comedy through the lens of its affectivity, of the somatic experiences through which it puts its audiences' bodies, and to use this as a point of departure to think about its cultural work. This physical dimension is, of course, what the genre's (self-)description as 'cringe' itself highlights, so focusing on this attends to a key element of the genre's discursive construction. However, no cringe comedy makes its viewers' bodies cringe for the entire duration of its storytelling. With Warhol, I thus want to ask what other somatics and feelings can be traced in cringe comedy. How do these different structures of feeling play off of each other, how are they orchestrated? And what does this orchestration do, culturally speaking? I want to focus on one such other somatic experience that I observed in my own engagements with cringe comedy, an experience I want to describe as the sneer. In the following, I want to first explore the cringe and the sneer as pop-cultural structures of feeling, discuss what cultural work they enable, and what potentials for intersections and mutual resonances they hold. In a second step, I will look at the HBO-series *Veep* as an example of a comedy that interlaces cringe and sneer aesthetics (Iannucci 2012–2019). I will trace how this interlacing works in an exemplary episode, and how it fuels the show's satirical work. In particular, I will argue that the show's combination of cringe and sneer aesthetics allows it to move beyond some of the limitations and pitfalls that the satiric imagination currently faces—pitfalls tied to the co-optation of satire's affective repertoire by all kinds of political players, and to the erosion of satire's 'ideational' potential that has come with the decentering of normative worldviews.

2. On Cringing and Sneering

Among the scholarship on cringe comedy, several pieces have approached the genre through the physicality that is evoked in its (self-)description. Typical points of departure are often dictionary definitions of cringe as, for example, in Merriam Webster, referring to an activity of "recoil[ing] in distaste," of "draw[ing] in or contract[ing] one's muscles involuntarily (as from cold or pain)" ⁴. Scholars ranging from Jason Middleton to Maria Sulimma have highlighted that the cringing provoked by cringe comedy is tied to sensations of awkwardness, embarrassment, and overall discomfort, sensations experienced on behalf of characters depicted on screen. Marc Hye-Knudson accordingly speaks of "vicarious embarrassment" (Hye-Knudson 2018, p. 14), engendered by dramaturgies that place characters in—often excessively—awkward situations. Middleton emphasizes that the temporality of cringe-worthy scenes plays an additional, and indeed crucial, role for cringe comedies' provocations of vicarious embarrassment, as their stagings of awkwardness are often drawn out in ways that reach beyond any level of comfort. Cringe comedies, Middleton argues, thus "[c]reat[e] a form of spectatorship in which the viewer is compelled to feel time at a bodily level, where our cringe signals a profound desire for time to accelerate and the scene to end" (Middleton 2014, p. 146). The mode of spectatorship that cringe comedies encourage is an emphatically embodied one.

Julia Havas and Maria Sulimma proceed from a similar observation when they relate cringe comedy to Linda Williams's (1991) concept of 'body genres'. For Williams, genres like pornography, horror, and melodrama revolve around body spectacles—excessive, seemingly gratuitous stagings of bodies performing sex, violence, and emotion—that are "designed for audiences to experience excessive physical reactions resembling those of the characters on-screen" (Havas and Sulimma 2020, p. 83). Cringe comedy, Havas and Sulimma argue, shares both in the foregrounding of body spectacles that is characteristic of such genres—here, spectacles of awkward and humiliated bodies—and in their appeal to physical responses in the audience. However, Havas and Sulimma note, there is one significant difference: the cringing to which audiences are invited is not performed by

the spectacularly staged bodies on screen; in fact, it is often part of cringe comedy's performance of embarrassment that characters are either unaware of their violations of social norms or that they desperately try to maintain face. "[W]e do not cringe *with* but *at* characters" (p. 83), Havas and Sulimma suggest. This 'cringing at' requires a different kind of closeness to and empathy with on-screen characters than the audience responses that Williams notes for pornography, horror, or melodrama. Hye-Knudson describes this as a closing of psychological distance between viewer and character (Hye-Knudson 2018, p. 14), a distance that is of particular relevance in comedies that stage characters in various scenarios of trouble or discomfort. Such spectacles of bodies in trouble have long been a staple of the comedic, but primarily in the context of a humor of *schadenfreude*, which builds on a sense of distance between viewer and character that enables the former to take pleasure in the suffering of the latter—a point to which I will return in a moment. Cringe aesthetics differ from the aesthetics of *schadenfreude* in that they reduce this distance, prompting the viewer to feel *for* the character, to empathize with their troubles rather than to laugh at them.

Yet, as noted before, no cringe comedy makes its viewers cringe for the whole duration of the storytelling. Cringe comedies thrive on destabilizing and ambiguating the affective valence of their performances of embarrassment, constantly recalibrating or muddying the distance between viewer and character. Accordingly, "the same scene may result in viewing positions ranging from laughter to frustration to annoyance or disgust" (Havas and Sulimma 2020, p. 83). Cringe comedies are marked by tipping points at which *schadenfreude* and other types of humor tip into cringe, and reversely, at which cringe tips into something else. One of these other affective responses is what I call the sneer. 'Sneering' is how I describe the physical response I observe in myself when reading or watching certain forms of superiority humor (which might include instances of *schadenfreude*).⁵ The superiority theory of humor—one of the classical theories in the field—addresses a type of humor in which laughter is employed to articulate a sense of distinction and hierarchy between the one who laughs and the one who gets laughed at (Stott 2014, pp. 125–131; Billig 2005, pp. 37–56). One of the sources often highlighted in discussions of this approach is Thomas Hobbes's *Human Nature*, where Hobbes writes: "[l]aughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others" (Stott 2014, p. 127). Superiority humor is an invective type of humor that disparages by way of ridicule, affirming and elevating the laugher's sense of self while articulating various facets of depreciation for the laughed-at, depreciation that can range from ideationally grounded critique to bare othering or abjection. The dynamics of superiority humor are thus central, for example, to formations of humor that have been called out as racist or sexist; yet they are also often operative in humor-based critiques of hegemonic structures of inequality like racism or sexism (cf., e.g., Pérez 2016; Weaver et al. 2016). Among the formats of humor-based critique, satires play a particularly prominent role, which I will come back to in a moment.

Before, I want to note that instances of superiority humor can elicit different kinds of physical responses, and sneering is arguably one of them. Merriam Webster defines sneering as "smil[ing] or laugh[ing] with facial contortions that express scorn or contempt"⁶. In his discussion of contempt, William Ian Miller, in turn, foregrounds the body language of the sneer: "[c]ontempt [. . .] is usually captured by the metaphor of 'looking down on someone or something,' and this is even acted out concretely in the common facial expression of the one-sided smile and the raised head, the partially closed eyes which view askance the offending contemptible person" (Miller 1997, p. 476). As structures of feeling, the cringe and the sneer work in intriguingly different ways: If the cringe involves feeling with or on behalf of another, the sneer means to feel a distance—to, in fact, look down on another. If cringing means to vicariously experience another person's shame, sneering means to engage in shaming.

Cringing and sneering also markedly differ in their social and ethical connotations: While the empathy involved in cringing is typically seen as a positive and socially desirable

feeling, the contempt involved in sneering is usually connoted as the opposite. To fully appreciate the aesthetics and cultural work of these structures of feeling in popular culture, it is important to look beyond these connotations. Performances of contempt are pervasive and fundamentally dynamic in their semantics, also, and especially, in cultural artifacts like comedies. Contempt can be understood along the lines of Karin Wahl-Jorgensen's work on 'negative' emotions as political emotions: Media-based performances of emotions like anger, which is Wahl-Jorgensen's focus, or, I would add, contempt, have considerable political potential in that they allow for powerful expressions of dissent with and censure toward social structures and stakeholders, expressions that can "energize[...] groups of individuals towards a collective response to shared grievances, for better and for worse" (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, p. 170). Performances of contempt, like those of anger, are a potent means of political mobilization. In and of itself, the censoring distance toward social actors created by performances of contempt is neither good nor bad, neither progressive nor reactionary; it can be made to serve both agenda, depending on who sneers and who gets sneered at. Quite recently, the culture of white grievance has demonstrated how the affective repertoires of comedy could be used to 'energize' people in and for white-supremacist politics. Humor-based performances of contempt—a veteran tactic of emancipatory social movements and their arts—have especially been coopted there and proven quite powerful in forging communities and validating a shared sense of being wronged.⁷

This is exactly where I see the promise of *Veep*'s departure from purely contempt-based models of political satire. The show does work with satire's established repertoire of sneer-worthy moments but amends this with an aesthetics of cringe. By taking its viewers back and forth between sneering and cringing, constantly reorganizing their positionality toward the show's protagonists, *Veep* withholds from its audience the affective comfort of being reassured about the 'rightness' of their own position. Instead, it forces them to continually re-evaluate the characters and their own stances toward them. In other words, combining sneer and cringe aesthetics dynamizes the satiric critique that the show articulates, moving it beyond the static worldview and the comforting certainties that tend to govern satire's accusatory portraits of the world.

3. *Veep*

Veep, which ran on HBO from 2012 to 2019, revolves around the character of Selina Meyer, initially Vice President, later for a period of time also President of the United States, her staff, and her colleagues. In journalistic as well as academic writing, the show has regularly been characterized as satiric—as offering a dark satire of Washingtonian politics by portraying it as a world governed by narcissism, hypocrisy, and large-scale dysfunctionality⁸. While scholarship on the genre or mode of satire is markedly polyphonic—especially when it tries to move beyond the classical theories, as Dustin Griffin, for example, does—it tends to conceptualize satire as a form of expression that aims to critique, or "attack," as Northrop Frye puts it (Frye 1957, p. 224). Satire's critique or attack relies on a set of rhetorical strategies, which, for Frye, revolve around "wit or humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd" (p. 224). *Veep*, in this sense, can be read as critiquing prevalent (self-)descriptions of political institutions and players as fueled by idealism, as selfless and hyper-competent servants of the people. In *Veep*, institutional politics is the opposite of idealistic and efficient, and so are the show's protagonists: in politics for purely selfish reasons, lacking any kind of political principles or ideas, and often strikingly incompetent.

While the show makes a point in depicting all political players as selfish and opportunistic—there are no heroic characters to set off the main characters' flaws and mark what would be desirable in the world of politics—the characterization of the show's recurrent protagonists takes them beyond being flat caricatures. This most prominently applies to Selina Meyer: on the one hand, her character is painted in the darkest, most caricatured colors, in ways I will exemplify in a moment; but on the other hand, narra-

tives repeatedly have her feature glimpses of redemption. These are especially tied to dimensions of her character that are marked by a relative lack of power in the world of politics, thanks to her office as Vice President and thanks to her gender⁹. This complexity in Meyer's characterization, as I will outline, plays a key role in enabling the show's oscillation between cringe and sneer aesthetics, allowing it to move between framings of her character as someone the audience is invited to look down on and as someone to empathize with.

To illustrate how *Veep* combines sneer and cringe aesthetics to satirically de-mystify institutional politics, I want to discuss the show's pilot episode ([Fundraiser 2012](#)). The episode introduces the characters and storyworld of *Veep* in medias res, narrating what appears to be a regular day in the working lives of Selina Meyer and her team. Like many subsequent episodes, it revolves around Meyer struggling to leave her mark in Washington, searching for something to do that would establish her importance, if not bare relevance, in Washingtonian politics. What she pursues in this episode is an environmental policy initiative that she hopes would allow her to distinguish herself in the political limelight. However, the initiative quickly angers the powerful plastics lobby, which mobilizes so much opposition to Meyer's green initiative that she finds herself wiggling to take everything back and to re-endorse herself to the plastics people. In quite stark terms, the episode thus portrays Meyer as someone who does not care a bit about environmental policy (nor about any other policy, for that matter), but only about advancing her own interests and career.

What is more, the episode makes a point in staging this opportunism as a quasi-universal feature in Washington. For example, one of the things that the plot has Meyer do to appease the situation is to try to persuade a Senator with close ties to the plastics lobby to join a commission that her green initiative provides for. This is part of the conversation that ensues:

Meyer: I wanted to talk to you about coming onboard the Clean Jobs Commission.

Senator: To get plastics off your back? No, sorry, Selina. That would be bad for me.

Meyer: Oh, come on. They're not gonna pull funding over this.

Senator: Honey, what is plastics made of? You piss off plastics, you piss off oil. And you do not want to fuck with those guys because they fuck in a very unpleasant fashion. ([Fundraiser 2012](#))

The profanity-laced dialogue of which we get a small glimpse here is another key element of the show's satiric portrayal of the political class as 'rotten' and hypocritical. This use of profanity is especially significant in contrast with the hyper-polished niceties and rhetorically controlled spin that the show's politicians emanate when they feel they are in the public eye. Overall then, *Veep* stages the world of professional politics as a world governed by unmitigated selfishness and hypocrisy, a dark place of opportunism and an utter lack of principles. It is a staging of politics that I describe as informed by a sneer aesthetics: It implements the kind of critical perspective that is characteristic of satire through a structure of feeling that encourages contempt, a censorious looking-down on the characters and their actions, and a tacit reassurance that the implied viewer's own sense of how politics is supposed to work is different and is 'right'. My hypothesis—to be substantiated by more extensive readings and viewings—is that this 'feeling right' is a residue of the normative stance that classical satires used to maintain: While classical satires typically spoke from a normative sense of how the world should be ([Griffin 1994](#), pp. 35–39), many contemporary satiric formats do not articulate such a normative worldview. Some of them seem to replace it with this kind of affective address to the implied viewer to feel good and right about being different from what is depicted in the satiric storyworld—the affective address of the sneer—and to have this feeling validate a moral or political position that remains implicit.

It is precisely this comforting feeling of difference and distance that the show's cringe moments complicate. *Veep*'s pilot episode is ripe with such moments. In one particularly powerful scene, for example, Selina Meyer is supposed to give a speech on the President's behalf at a fundraiser, and her green initiative is planned to be the main topic. When

lobby-driven opposition to the initiative starts to mount, the President's office intervenes and 'edits' the script of the speech—literally at the last minute, and to an extent that erases any reference to the speech's actual topic. Here is part of the conversation between Meyer and one of her staffers, as she is already being announced by the fundraiser's host:

Staffer Mike McIntock: Just a small change in the speech. [. . .] Plastics apparently talked to the President. The White House doesn't want us mentioning oil or cornstarch or plastic. Just wing it.

Selina Myer: This has been pencil-fucked completely?

ML: Uh, yes, front and back. Very little romance.

SM: That's the entire speech, okay? What's left here? I've got 'hello' and I have . . . prepositions. ([Fundraiser 2012](#))

The scene's subsequent moments wallow in the awkwardness of Meyer trying to improvise a speech without mentioning its topic, moving from unfunny jokes ("I've stepped into the President's shoes this evening, and who knew he wore kitten heels") to hollow phrases ("Politics is about people"). The scene intercuts close-ups of Selina, who tries to maintain face by smiling ferociously, with shots of her audience at the fundraiser. This intradiegetic audience can be read as a stand-in for the show's implied audience, a set up that Havas and Sulimma observe in other cringe comedies as well ([Havas and Sulimma 2020](#), pp. 83–84). This audience's facial expressions vary between *schadenfreude* at Meyer's predicament and a notable discomfort with an embarrassing situation that just does not want to end, with some faces changing their expression from mirth to vicarious embarrassment in the course of the scene's considerable duration. The scene's lingering on Meyer's awkwardness—in drawn out shots of Meyer that illustrate the temporal logic of cringe comedy addressed above—plays a significant role in affecting this switch in Meyer's double audience from contemptuous distance to unwitting empathy with her—the extended spectacle of Meyer's writhing in humiliation extends a powerful pull to that effect. Yet this spectacle-driven impulse to feel for the character is additionally bolstered by the narrative set-up of the scene as a constellation that highlights Meyer's vulnerability: As the Vice President, she has to follow the President's directives, and her standing in institutional politics is solely that of the President's proxy. The kitten heels joke with which Meyer tries to relax the situation might be lame, but it throws into relief how the protagonist's job-related subordination and dependence on a (male) President mirrors larger societal structures of gender inequality. In this moment, the episode complicates its audience's positioning in contemptuous distance to Meyer, concomitantly irritating the affective foundations on which satiric critique conventionally rests: an invitation to the audience to sneeringly feel good about being 'better' than the protagonist.

Yet this, too, is only temporary. The scene once again reshuffles the implied audience's affective stance and positioning toward Meyer when it has the character, still in desperate search for something to talk about, start to joke about one of her staffers—the one whose tweets had mobilized the plastics lobby to intervene in her campaign. To Meyer's visible relief, this joking finally gets her intradiegetic audience to laugh and connect with her. But her initially playful ridicule of the staffer soon escalates, getting increasingly vicious, until she eventually calls him a "retard". At this, her audience at the fundraiser immediately stops laughing, their faces showing signs of disgust. The contemptibility of Meyer's actions, to which this proxy audience reacts, is of course very obvious: she attacks a low-rank staffer, for the sole purpose of bonding with her audience, using an epithet that is steeped in a history of symbolic and physical violence against people with disabilities; and, to round things off, when Meyer realizes what she has done, her single concern is to fix her public image.

4. Conclusions

"The Fundraiser," to me, is indicative of how the cringe and the sneer are orchestrated in *Veep*. This orchestration goes back and forth between encouragements to look down

on and to feel with the protagonist, continually remodulating the distance between implied viewer and character, and denying the viewer a stable affective relationship to the protagonist. In other words, the interplay of the cringe and the sneer in *Veep* contributes to a notable instability of feeling in the show, which I see as particularly productive in a contemporary world of (mediatized) politics where appeals to feeling have become a key tactic of political influencing. Against this backdrop, an instability of feeling has the potential to be ‘emotive’ in the most literal sense of the word, moving and mobilizing engagements with the world that resist the pull of comforting certainties.

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Notes

- ¹ The question of whether and, if so, how to distinguish between the physical and socio-cultural levels of feeling has been a point of vibrant discussion in the multidisciplinary field of affect studies, and the terminology circulating in the field—affect, feeling, emotion, etc.—is often used to enable such distinctions and disentanglements. Warhol’s book engages these discussions (as far as they were already under way at the time of her book’s publication), but not so much in discussions of terminology. I follow her lead in putting less emphasis on this.
- ² Warhol uses ‘structures of feeling’ independently of Raymond Williams’s development of the term, to designate the affective work configured by pop-cultural forms: “popular narrative forms are what I call technologies of affect, providing structures of feeling in the daily lives of their devotees” (Warhol 2003, p. 7). I believe Warhol’s and Williams’s concepts could be brought into fruitful conversation with each other, but this is beyond the scope of this article.
- ³ To highlight that she talks about cultural scripts that are connoted as gendered, rather than affective protocols that are tied to women and men, Warhol actually uses the terms ‘effeminate’ and ‘antiefeminate’ instead of ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’.
- ⁴ Available online: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cringe> (accessed on 1 October 2021).
- ⁵ While I here simply treat superiority humor and *schadenfreude* as formations that overlap to a significant extent, a lot more could be said about the relationship between the two. What is more important to me at this point is to bring into focus the affective, somatic side of such formations of humor, and to use the notion of the sneer as a point of entry to think about how such humor feels.
- ⁶ Available online: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cringe> (accessed on 1 October 2021).
- ⁷ The use of humor by the alt-right and their cooptation of progressive humor tactics has become an urgent point of discussion in recent humor studies. For an example, see Viveca Greene’s argument that: “[i]n the past decade, people associated with what is known as the alt-right have employed a strategy similar to that of progressive, antiracist satirists to advance a decidedly white supremacist, anti-Semitic, misogynist, and deadly serious agenda” (Greene 2019, p. 31). Green goes on to characterize the alt-right’s cooptation of satire’s repertoires as a ‘weaponization’.
- ⁸ To give one example, Erin Schwartz in *The Nation* writes: “The portrait of Washington that emerges [in *Veep*] is [. . .] made up almost entirely of minutiae: slights, mistakes, backbiting, gaffes. There are no lofty ideological debates [. . .]. Any private moral convictions [Selina Meyer] may have once held have been smoothed away by decades in public office, and all that remains is a quest for power, hamstrung by dysfunction” (Schwartz 2019).
- ⁹ The alleged insignificance of the office of the Vice President is proverbial in American culture. One of the voices often quoted in this context is that of John Adams, the nation’s first Vice President, who, in a letter to his wife, described the vice presidency as “the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived” (John Adams to Abigail Adams 1793). For a more extensive discussion of the role and semantics of gender in Selina Meyer’s characterization, see (Kanzler 2019). This article also contains a reading of the episode on which I focus in the following.

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