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Breathing spaces? the politics of embodiment, affect, and genre in Mare of Easttown and Happy Valley

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**ABSTRACT**

This article explores the similarities and differences between *Mare of Easttown* (HBO 2021) and Sally Wainwright’s *Happy Valley* (BBC1, 2014–16), the series which served as a model for *Mare*. It argues that both series succeed in deploying the detective genre to centre a maternal subject who confronts both personal and communal loss, eliciting an affective response to the way in which she responds to the physical, political, narrative and generic world in which she is positioned. Both series succeed in creating “breathing spaces” which interrupt this most masculine of genres with a sense of embodied subjectivity that is also relational, compassionate and ethical. The difference between the series, it argues, lies in what, politically the two series do with these moments. In *Happy Valley*, it argues, they are tied to a critique of the forces that produce the losses to which they respond. *Mare of Easttown*, however, dilutes both the attack on neoliberalism and the feminism of Wainwright’s series, placing its emphasis on individual failure rather than structural inequalities. In doing so, it attempts to retrieve once more the promise of the “good life” offered by neoliberalism, ignoring the structural inequalities on which it is based.

**Introduction**

To begin with the personal . . . Watching HBO’s Emmy-winning series *Mare of Easttown* in 2021, I found myself with powerful but conflicted responses. On the one hand, there was anger and irritation. This was so clearly an Americanisation of Sally Wainwright’s compelling series for the BBC, *Happy Valley* (BBC, 2014–16), yet one which pulled its political punches at every turn, adding a romance narrative between its A-list star and another A-lister (Kate Winslet and Guy Pearce), and diluting both the attack on neoliberalism and the feminism of the original. On the other, as the series progressed I found myself with very much the same affective, often visceral response as I had had to Wainwright’s series. This article offers a theoretical exploration of these responses, interweaving questions of the political—both the overt politics of the two series and the more theoretically tricky gendered politics of genre—with questions of embodiment and affect. In seeking to understand my own ambivalent but often powerfully identificatory responses, I draw on the one hand on a feminist phenomenology that

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emphasises what Kate Ince calls “differentiated embodiment” (2017: 42) to explore the way in which the female protagonists of these two series move, look, and respond as (maternal) subjects to the physical, political, narrative and generic worlds in which they are positioned, and the way in which this elicits my own response. On the other hand, however, I am concerned with questions of structure and power: with the nature of those political, narrative and generic worlds, and with the power of narrative and genre to structure time, space, and bodies. For this exploration I turn to arguments about the politics of genre, narrative and space, and in particular to Lisa Baraitser’s reflections on time, ethics, and the maternal, and to Lauren Berlant’s re-thinking of the overlapping categories of genre and gender.

“In this trouble town . . .”¹

First, however, I want to examine the sources of my initial anger and irritation. Here in Mare of Easttown were the same opening aerial shots of terraced streets that introduced Happy Valley, the same setting of a de-industrialised town in which drug addiction is rife and hopelessness endemic, the same middle-aged female cop embedded in her community. Like Happy Valley’s Catherine Cawood, Mare Sheehan is compassionate but angry, living with the guilt of a child dead by suicide (an event seen in both series in momentary flashbacks), and bringing up her grandson, the son of that dead child, with the aid of an extended, female-centred, warm but dysfunctional family.

The plots of both series centre on the kidnap and murder of young women. In Happy Valley, the rape and suicide of Catherine’s daughter, Becky, which precedes the action of the series, is linked to the kidnap, rape, and murder of other young women through the perpetrator, Tommy Lee Royce, who is Becky’s rapist and the father of Catherine’s grandson. In Mare of Easttown the murder of young single mother Erin, which opens the series, is linked through Mare’s investigation to the kidnap and murder of other teenage girls. Both series feature an interlocking structure of paralleled familial figures: mothers, daughters, fathers. Both protagonists draw their strength from their relationships with other women. Yet whereas Happy Valley is overtly political, using its positioning within and against a, specifically, British tradition of social realist drama² for purposes of critique, its American adaptation, with no such anchoring, consistently deflects the political engagements which it seems to invite.

In Wainwright’s series the bleak North Yorkshire landscape, the aerial shots of the town of Sowerby Bridge into which the camera then takes us, the circular journeys, the images of canals, terraced streets, children’s playground: all are familiar from a British social realist tradition in which successive male protagonists, from Davey Fenwick in Carol Reed’s The Stars Look Down of 1939 to the figures in the work of Shane Meadows, struggle against entrapment within this increasingly impoverished setting. It is against this tradition that Wainwright positions her own very different protagonist, a single mother who is driven not only by the warmth which is a characteristic of the maternal figures of these dramas but also by emotional excess—by rage. Catherine is at once the nurturing mother of those earlier imagined Northern communities and the “bad”, “failed” mother against whom this figure is traditionally set. She has failed to prevent her daughter from falling into addiction, and above all she has failed to protect her from rape and then suicide. In presenting Catherine in this way, Wainwright draws on another tradition of British realist drama—the
female-centred soap opera with its emotional intensity and women’s humour. But she also challenges a more dominant, “serious” tradition in which the figure of “Our Mam” may be a nurturing and dependable figure but is, as Terry Lovell comments, far more often the background for stories than their protagonist (1990: 364).

The politics of Happy Valley also address a contemporary political narrative. The series first aired in 2014, three years after Conservative prime minister David Cameron had blamed a summer of civil unrest on fatherless families (Cameron, in De Benedictus 2012: 1), and a year after the subsequent report from The Centre for Social Justice identified the cause of neighbourhood breakdown as the “throngs” of women “raising children more or less singlehandedly” as a matter of “lifestyle choice” (2013: 3, 12). In Wainwright’s series, it is not “lifestyle choice” that produces what Catherine, in a speech to her journalist ex-husband, calls the “wasted lives” that we see. Unemployment, hopelessness and drugs, and in the second series sexual trafficking, are the by-products of globalised business. The invisible figures at the centre of the international drug chain that Catherine uncovers are, she comments, invisible and “untouchable”. Above all, they are “perfectly respectable”. Its central players corrupt both senior figures in the police force and local politicians, and they exploit the unemployed young men who are the object of Catherine’s day-to-day policing.

As police officer, Catherine holds the patriarchal structures of the police force up to angry ridicule. “Every day was a misogynist delight from start to finish”, she says, recalling her early days in the police force of the 1980s, the years of Thatcher’s Britain. Her self-introduction in the series’ first episode, however, is as sister, mother, and grandmother, a part of the community she polices:

I’m Catherine by the way. I’m 47; I’m divorced. I live with my sister who’s a recovering heroin addict. I have two grown up children: one dead, one who doesn’t speak to me, and a grandson.

Catherine is paralleled by other maternal figures in the series, with whom she has a relationship of support. All of them are fractured, compromised characters who carry the burden of a socially attributed guilt of the kind proclaimed by Cameron, but they are also heroic, compassionate, and ethical, embodying a moral code which centres on community, an extended notion of kinship, and inclusivity. In the final episode of the second series Catherine cradles Alison, a woman who has just shot and killed her son, the young man responsible for the murders of sex workers that have constituted the series’ major investigation. As she does so, we are drawn into a complex web of engagements, which are at once embodied, emotional, moral, and political. Like Catherine’s grandson, Alison’s son was the product of rape, a child, says Catherine later, “that she both loved and hated”, but whom she has brought up “because—what else could she do”. As Catherine holds Alison, then, we are invited to feel the network of identificatory relationships that bind them and the other women—mothers, daughters and sisters—in the series; but we are simultaneously offered an ethics, a mode of being, and a politics, which contest those of the cultural moment in which the series was produced.
“Livin” in Easttown’

What, then, of Mare of Easttown? Like Catherine, Mare is a maternal figure who carries the weight of both loss and guilt, who is embedded in her community, and who offers and finds emotional sustenance in her relationships with other women. Hers, too, is a community undermined by de-industrialisation and loss of hope, so that drug addiction is common. Here, however, weary resignation replaces political anger, and it is individual failure not corporate greed that Mare’s investigation uncovers. The series begins with the murder of teenage single mother Erin, an event that recalls the disappearance a year earlier of another of the town’s teenage mothers, Katie Bailey. As the search for Erin’s murderer becomes increasingly focused on the identity of her child’s father, suspicion falls on a series of paternal figures: on Dylan, Erin’s ex-boyfriend; on Mare’s ex-husband Frank, who was Erin’s teacher; on Erin’s father Kenny; on the priest, Deacon Mark; and on brothers John and Billy Ross, cousins of Erin’s father and friends of Frank. A range of interconnected fathers, they are flawed and frequently angry, often failing to live up to their responsibilities as fathers, or fathers of the community. They are not, however, linked to corruption or to a destructive masculinity. Each flawed father is ultimately forgiven or redeemed, and the ideal of masculinity that they fail to uphold is not itself critiqued.

Both John and Billy Ross, then, offer themselves as guilty of Erin’s murder in order to shield the real culprit: John’s thirteen-year-old son Ryan. Erin’s father, Kenny, repents his outbursts of drunken violence. Ex-boyfriend Dylan, discovering that he is not the biological father of Erin’s child, reveals his love for the infant as he shyly hands over the money that he has been saving for the child’s ear surgery. Ryan himself is an honourable boy. His access to a gun is accidental, the result of his helpfulness to a neighbour, and he intended merely to frighten Erin. Above all, he acts because he feels compelled to take on the paternal role that his father has failed to fulfil: “I wanted to keep my family together”, he says, echoing many a cinematic father.

This is a town, then, in which patriarchal authority has been undermined, but its structural legitimacy is never questioned. Mare’s superior, Chief Carter, is a benign and kindly patriarch, her colleague Zabel a good son. The town’s two priests, though flawed, speak with moral authority to and for a community, which despite its internal fractures, remains a collectivity united in religion. Central to this is the redemption of Deacon Mark, an early suspect in Erin’s murder. Speaking in the final episode to a packed church eight months after the events the series has shown, he proclaims his own redemptive journey as one that stands in for that of the whole town: “I feel as if we’ve finally come out of a tunnel, arrived at the next level of healing”. Crucially, it is his exhortation to “go to” those members of the community who now feel themselves to be outside its circle, because “Our job is only to love”, that impels—and authorises—Mare to seek out her friend Lori, Ryan’s mother and wife of John Ross, so that we can witness their climactic embrace, visually so like that of Catherine and Alison, in which Mare wordlessly cradles Lori.

Masculine failure here is individual, not structural. Mare’s father committed suicide and her son Kevin turned to drugs because of mental illness. The man who raped and imprisoned Katie Bailey is a lone—and unexplained—figure, outside the community. His crimes are unconnected to the murder of Erin. If a parallel is drawn between Kevin and Freddie, the other drug addict that we see killed by his own hand, it is not one of social context but seems to concern the pain and guilt they leave behind for the
women in their families. The fact that Freddie is black does not become a larger comment on structural inequalities. Above all, whilst the men in Happy Valley are lost and potentially violent, failing to find sustenance or meaning in an ideal of masculinity which is clearly both redundant and toxic, here that ideal is revalidated. In the complex structure of paralleled familial figures that we see, Frank, the good husband, teacher and father, redeems fatherhood; Zabel, the good son, dies saving the life of Mare; and patriarchal structures, whether worldly or spiritual, are reaffirmed through police chief Carter and the priest who can once again provide spiritual guidance to his community.

The complex structure of parallels between the town’s women also operates to different effect from that in Wainwright’s series. In Happy Valley, as I noted, both maternal figures and daughters are paralleled. The young female officer, Kirsten, whom Tommy Lee Royce kills in the first series, and Ann Gallagher, victim of kidnap and rape by Royce in the first series and police officer in the second, both parallel Catherine’s daughter, Becky. Catherine’s feeling of maternal guilt extends to both. In Mare of Easttown, too, Mare’s situation parallels that of other mothers who have lost children. She, like them, is raising her grandson. Her daughter Siobhan both parallels and contrasts with the teenage mothers for whom Mare seeks justice. This interwoven structure, however, functions less as identificatory parallel than as displacement. Catherine’s grandson is the product of a sadistic and brutal rape, which led to her daughter’s suicide. She fears seeing his father in this child, and finds her ambivalent feelings towards him reflected in those of Alison, who kills her son. In Mare, however, maternal ambivalence, familial betrayal, and male violence are displaced onto Mare’s friend Lori and her extended family. Mare feels no ambivalence towards grandson Drew and her fear is not that he might be echoing his father’s violence but that he might have inherited his illness, from whose effects she failed to protect him.

A similar shift occurs in the motives that drive the two protagonists’ investigations. Mare, as her therapist tells her, is obsessively pursuing the cases of missing and/or murdered teenage girls in order to avoid her own grief and guilt at her child’s death. Less explicitly stated (she does not embrace therapy, and the series does not show it), a similar motive is clearly driving Catherine. There is a crucial difference, however. It is not Catherine’s son but her daughter whom she has lost, and Becky’s suicide was the product of the same brutality as that inflicted on the young women who are being trafficked and/or killed. Catherine is acting not just from unprocessed grief but from justifiable (and feminist) anger. Our focus is not, as it is in Mare, on the community’s (and mothers’) failure to protect and guide its sons but on its brutal exploitation of its daughters. Moreover, Catherine’s anger at the “wasted lives” and ensuing brutalisation of her community is directed not just at the perpetrators of that brutality but at the structures of global capitalism that produce it. It is the nature of Catherine’s anger, indeed, that most clearly separates the two characters. Mare’s anger is directed at herself—it is this, we learn, that caused the breakdown of her marriage—and if guilt and loss drive her prickly tenacity in resolving the cases of the young women who have been abducted and/or killed, her dealings with the guilty are characterised by compassion and a weary resignation. Her two involvements in violent confrontation are reactive. Catherine, however, is intentional in her private pursuit of Royce, Becky’s rapist. She has, she says, “no intentions of dealing with it rationally . . . My intention is to deal with it effectively”. When she finds Royce, her
attack on him is furious and merciless; she refuses to kill him only because she wants him to experience helplessness. “You’re gonna to have to get someone to wipe your arse for you”, she says, echoing his own words to her earlier. She is still kicking him when fellow officers arrive and restrain her.

Both women, then, embody an ethics of compassion, female-centred kinship, and community that is at once rooted in place and inclusive of the marginalized. Both series are rare in placing at their centre an investigating agent who is also a specifically maternal subject. Whereas Catherine, however, accepts loss, anger, ambivalence, and guilt as aspects of her subjectivity and acts intentionally from that acceptance, Mare works through her sense of loss and guilt, finally confronting her grief at Kevin’s death, with the implication of a future “healing”, as promised (and shared) by Deacon Mark. The two series’ endings point up this ideological difference. At the close of Mare we are offered several openings onto a world beyond Easttown. Mare’s daughter Siobhan—a positive character throughout—leaves for Berkeley and a promising future, and Mare herself is now open to a relationship with writer Richard, who is also leaving Easttown, however precarious that future might be. There exists, it is suggested, a world of bright possibilities beyond Easttown. Easttown itself, as Deacon Mark tells us, can be redeemed: “a great spirit [is once more] rising” within it. The final resolution returns us to the scene of Mare’s individual trauma: to the accompaniment of a swelling piano track we see her wake in the bed of grandson Drew, gently extricate herself, then climb decisively up to the attic to finally confront the site of Kevin’s suicide and her own hitherto repressed emotions.

In contrast, both series of Happy Valley end with Catherine climbing the hill outside Sowerby Bridge to look down on the town. Its vantage point offers distance and perspective but neither escape—she looks towards the town—nor redemption: the town itself does not change. It is a place linked to maternal loss—the hillside cemetery is where Catherine buried her daughter—and in the first of these closing sequences, her gaze is at first turned inward. We see flashbacks of the events of the series and she closes her eyes. Then, she lifts her face to the sky and wind, smiling, before looking down at the town, her gaze conscious and focused; the final long shot sees her turn and stride across the hill and out of shot, as we continue to look down on the town. The second, less optimistic series closes with Catherine, walking behind son Daniel and sister Clare as they climb the hill, watching as grandson Ryan runs ahead. She has just told Clare about Alison and the son whom “she both loved and hated”. The episode ends once again on her gaze, direct and troubled. Both endings, like that of Mare, focus on their protagonist as reflective subject, but their wider context and interweaving of memory and landscape function to root Catherine once again in place. If they, too, suggest hope it is not the individualised promise of trauma resolution, or the vision of a community spiritually redeemed, but a more tentative hope founded on understanding and acceptance—of loss, sadness, anger, ambivalence—and on an ongoing sense of responsibility born of an ethics of relationality.

**Questions of affect**

As I began by stating, however, the critique I have presented here was not my only response to Mare of Easttown. How, then, might I theorise my very different, powerfully identificatory, affective response, and what relationship does it have to the reading I have
just offered? Did I simply experience a split between my political reading of the text and an emotional response to it, of the kind that E. Ann Kaplan describes in relation to the ending of Stella Dallas)? Despite her earlier argument that “the work of the film is to reinscribe [Stella] in the position patriarchy desires for her” (1983: 82), Kaplan confesses that “Stella Dallas continues to make me cry”. The reason, she reflects, is to do with identification—she identifies with Stella’s loss of her daughter at the end of the film—and with the desire that this evokes for “emotional connectedness”. Identificatory processes, she argues, “involve emotional needs for symbiosis, wholeness, becoming one with an Other” (1989: 197). With rather more theoretical precision, Kaja Silverman links such responses to memory: to look, she argues, “is to embed an image within a constantly shifting matrix of unconscious memories” which can “irradiate” an otherwise insignificant, or perhaps problematic image (1996: 3–4). Writing about her affective response to the film Mandy (1952), Annette Kuhn, too, links such responses to memory. “Images”, she writes, “and the feelings evoked by them, … [can be] held in the store of remembrance like a compelling dream, a vision”; a film may then “articulate[,] and seize[,] me into”, such feelings and memories (1992: 234, 237).

Such arguments, suggests Anu Koivunen 2015, are early indications of a move within feminist film theory towards an increasing engagement with questions of affect. All three of these engagements, however, exhibit some discomfort, as we can see from Kuhn’s description of being “seized into” her affective response. Our responses to (popular) texts are powerful, it is suggested; through them we gain access to the “pains, pleasures, and struggles of others” (Kaja Silverman 1996, 4). They must, however, be subjected to analysis—brought “into the light of analytic day” (Annette Kuhn 1992, 237)—since, as Silverman suggests, they are for the most part tools of a representational practice that “works through [them] to confirm dominant values” (ibid.). Despite this discomfort, however, all three accounts address and seek to theorise what Vivian Sobchack calls ‘the gap that exists between “our actual experience of the cinema and the theory that we academic film scholars construct to explain it” (Vivian Sobchack 2004, 53, original emphasis), a gap addressed very differently by the phenomenological film theory of Sobchack herself.

As part of her theorisation of what she terms “the embodied nature of the film experience” (1992: xvii), Sobchack turns to Jane Campion’s The Piano (1993), and particularly to its opening shots which she argues she “comprehended . . . sensually and sensibly” not consciously (2004: 65, original emphasis). The film, she writes, though “intellectually problematic in terms of its sexual and colonial politics, . . . moved me deeply, stirring my bodily senses and my sense of my body”, sensitising “the very surfaces of my skin . . . to touch” (ibid.: 61, original emphasis). This is not an identification with character or experience, as Kaplan suggested, but a bodily response, “commingling flesh and consciousness”. It is, moreover, a response, which is not ideologically complicit with “dominant values”, as Silverman suggests such responses most commonly are, but “subversive”, because it challenges “fixed subject positions”, both onscreen and offscreen (ibid.: 67). Any “theory of cinematic intelligibility”, Sobchack concludes, must therefore not only respond to but be grounded in “the corporeality of the spectator’s consciousness” (ibid.: 72).

Reading Sobchack’s account of The Piano I find my own response to the film echoed in it, as it is in Sue Gillett’s lyrical account of her own first viewing of the film (1995). Yet I am uneasy with Sobchack’s swift dismissal of what she sees as the film’s politics, and with the
disconnection between this political dimension of the film, which she mentions but then ignores, and her claim that the film, or her experience of it, is subversive. When her account extends to take in Speed (1994) and Toy Story (1995) as other instances of “such tactile, kinetic, redolent, resonant” (and therefore subversive?) film experiences (ibid.: 54) I become even more uneasy. There is, it seems to me, a political dimension to these affective experiences, and this dimension has to do with the way in which they function within or against the structures of genre. In what follows, therefore, whilst I shall draw on the insights of Sobchack and others into our embodied responses to the visual text—its appeal to what Margrit Shildrick calls “the phenomenological sense of being-in-the-world” (2002: 58)—I shall also consider questions of structure, turning to arguments about genre, narrative and space, and in particular to Lauren Berlant’s re-thinking of genre.

As Shildrick makes clear, the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1962) on which Sobchack draws locates subjectivity and intentionality in the body, not the mind. It also argues, however, that in order for us to act in the world that body must be experienced as a “transparent capacity for action and movement” (Vivian Sobchack 2004, 33). It must, in other words, be absent from consciousness. If we are aware of the body, then time is arrested, and space ceases to be “transparent”—simply that through which we move fluidly as we follow “the direction of [our] intent” (ibid.: 20). In another essay in the collection which includes her reflections on The Piano, Sobchack discusses this feeling of being “lost in space”, drawing on Iris Marion Young’s (1980) discussion of gendered differences in Western women’s lived experience of space. The sensation of being lost, writes Sobchack, with its spatial disorientation and sense of arrested temporality, is for women a familiar experience. That sense of the body as “pure fluid action” (Young 2005: 36) which is necessary for intentional action in the world is, as Young argues, inhibited in women by the cultural structures of femininity. Ascribed qualities of passivity and immobility, the “lived bodies” of women, writes Young, cannot, like those of men, simply “move out to master a world that belongs to us, a world constituted by our own intentions and projections” (ibid.: 42–3). We are inhibited in our intentional movements, aware of our bodies as objects, positioned in space. For women, then, the circularity and temporal arrest of being lost described by Sobchack is nothing new—we are used, she argues, to being positioned in a discontinuous worldly space not of our own making, reaching out to others for support.³

The narrative that Sobchack outlines here—of circularity, inhibited intentionality, a body rooted in place and substituting social connection for a “transparent capacity for action” and movement through space—is familiar. We recognise it not only from the social and fictional situations she describes in her essay but from those “feminine genres” that, argues Lauren Berlant, share the conventions and expectations of femininity itself. Extending the concept of genre beyond its usual application to cultural texts, Berlant uses it to describe the narrative structures through which we understand and experience our lives: the stories through which they are lived. Genre, she writes, is “a loose affectively-invested zone of expectations about the narrative shape a situation will take” (2011b:2). Thus, it is not only “women’s texts”, with their gendered norms and conventions, expectations, pleasures and fantasies, which constitute a genre, but femininity itself. The texts themselves—romance fiction, melodrama, soap opera, the woman’s magazine—function
as “gendering machines” (2008: 35), structuring not only our fantasies but our lived experience and subjectivity. Her description of “the feminine project” itself is very close to those of Sobchack and Young, as well as to descriptions of “women’s genres”, though her starting point is very different. “The circularity of the feminine project will not escape you”, writes Berlant: “it is a perfect form, a sphere infused with activities of ongoing circuits of attachment that can at the same time look like and feel like a zero” (ibid.: 20).

What I want to argue, therefore, is that Sobchack’s affective responses, like those of the women she describes for whom the circularity and temporal arrest of being lost are familiar experiences, are to do with structure as well as embodiment. Her powerful responses to specific scenes in The Piano are not the same as those elicited by the viscerally exciting “thrill ride” of Speed or the “glossy tactility” of Toy Story. They are responses to a film which both uses and opens to interrogation the narrative and affective structures of the “woman’s film” and the wider structures of femininity that it supports. Its slowing of time; its insertion of what Muriel Andrin calls “breathing spaces” into narrative progression, so that narrative is “made strange” (2009: 28); its invocation in these moments of the sensuality of touch through a mode of vision that seems textural as well as textual: all these are not separate and distinct from the film’s politics, but essential to them. The “carnal subversion” that the film produces is not simply of “fixed subject positions”, a “heightened instance” of our common experience of cinema, as Sobchack suggests (2004: 65). In its engagement with genre it is also a questioning of the normative structures of femininity and the “woman’s film”.

“You’re getting too bloody old for this”

I want to return now to my own responses to two texts very different from The Piano, both of them television rather than film and framed within a genre—the detective series—whose traditional focus on action, investigation and narrative resolution positions it as what Rebecca Feasey calls “the most masculine of television genres” (2008: 80). They are not alone in recent police series in choosing a middle-aged female detective who is also a mother as their protagonists—two recent UK series, The Bay (2019–21) and Before We Die (2021), for example, also did this, as did Danish series The Killing (2007–12) and its US adaptation (2011–14)—but they are unusual in making us so insistently aware of the bodies of those protagonists. How might the arguments outlined above be applied here?

I start with a scene from the opening of the second episode of the first series of Happy Valley. Catherine has been visiting an elderly man in a tower block. Hearing and seeing an ice-cream van from which drug dealers are operating, she gives chase, calling in her intention to stop it. The hand-held camera stays on her as she runs. “Do not chase the vehicle on foot”, says the voice from the control room. “Right. Whatever,” she answers, and smashes the driver’s window with her truncheon, following the van until it pulls away. Stopping, out of breath, she turns to see the amused glances of the young couple watching her. Turning away from them, the camera on her face, she mutters, “You’re getting too bloody old for this, Catherine love”—and the title sequence begins. The chase has lasted almost two minutes, and for much of it the camera is closely focused on Catherine as she runs. Wearing uniform and a heavy police vest, her movement is not easy; we are aware of obstacles—a fence, iron railings, the van itself—of her shortage of breath, of the bulk of her clothing, of the fact that the two men in the van are large and much younger. This is not, in
other words, the “pure fluid action” that we might expect in a generic narrative of a police chase. The world has become “thick”, no longer simply the context for action; the body is no longer a “transparent capacity”. We are sensibly, insistently aware of Catherine’s body—of its effort, its attempt at speed, its frustration. When she turns to camera and makes her own self-aware comment on her efforts, on her own lack of embodied fit with the generic conventions her actions echo, we are also clear that this is a reflective and intentional subjectivity.

What I want to suggest, then, is that at moments like this our awareness of Catherine’s body pulls against generic expectations, expectations that, following Berlant, we might align with the “genre” of masculinity, to centre a very different, embodied subject. Elsewhere in the series, this disruption takes the form of a temporal interruption: a slowing or pausing of time to focus on Catherine’s face or body, and on affect not action. Often this is in close physical relationship to another woman, especially her sister Clare; sometimes it is to register a solitary sense of maternal loss. In the scene in which she deals with the discovery of the body of Kirsten, the young constable whom she has tried to toughen up (“I’m not your mother. … Nobody bullies you”), for example, Catherine manages the situation, then kneels slowly beside the body, head bowed. We hear the whirring of helicopter blades and the camera pulls out, leaving a long moment of stillness as Catherine faces another maternal loss.

These moments provide a rhythm to the series which punctuates the forward movement of narrative, suspending plot progression to make us aware of what it feels like to be Catherine in this world: embodied, enmeshed in a network of caring, as a mother, carrying a weight of guilt, anger, and loss. In her account of “maintenance time”, time that seems suspended but is “the temporal dimension of care” (Lisa Baraitser 2017, 53), Lisa Baraitser draws on Lauren Berlant’s (2011a) notion of suspended time as “impasse”, but makes of it something both more positive and aligned to the maternal: a “thick or viscous time” that is also “the time of maintaining connections with one another” (2017: 68). It is, she argues, time lived “in the feminine”: arrested, neither transparent nor directional, but a kind of “maternal time” that is a “time of mattering” (ibid.: 79, original emphasis). In a rather different way from Sobchack, Baraitser is revaluing time that does not flow, that is embodied and relational. Taken together, however, and considered in relation to Berlant’s concept of genre as a structuring of both texts and lived experience, the two give some sense of how such moments, when absorbed into the “circularity of the feminine project”, may work to reinforce the “gendering machines” of popular culture, as Kaplan suggests of Stella Dallas. Alternatively, as in the case of The Piano, they may work to radically question those structures or, as I want to suggest is the case here, to disrupt them. When, towards the end of the second series of Happy Valley, we see Catherine cradle Alison in her arms, the image carries the weight of earlier such moments in the series, which it echoes. It is part of a temporal structure different from that of the series’ generic narrative of crime and resolution and cutting across it: a pattern of moments of stillness, of a specifically female corporeal presence, and of care. It suspends the narrative, and forces us into a response that is affective and embodied (I, at least, cried). But it is also, no less than Catherine’s violence against Royce, an intentional action, and therefore an action with both ethical—this is the physical expression of an ethics of care—and, I would argue, political implications.
Kate Winslet’s body

Drawing on a tradition of British drama that has both its masculine and its feminine generic articulations, in the form of British social realist cinema and television and the British soap opera, Sally Wainwright, Happy Valley’s creator, writer, executive producer and director, could play on the traditions of both in her drama of an active, articulate, mobile and angry maternal subject. As I have suggested, Mare of Easttown is much less securely anchored, both generically—it has no similar tradition of social realist drama on which to draw—and politically. Though less coherent, however, I want to argue that it can work in a similar way. Here too, at the points in the narrative where Mare gives chase to suspects we are aware of the difficulty of this movement and of the obstacles, the sheer density of this world that frustrates her. This appears most clearly when, at the beginning of the final episode, she is pursuing John and Billy Ross along the bank of the river where they are fishing, believing Billy to have killed Erin. Like Catherine, she is told to wait but continues. The narrative builds tension, cutting to the brothers as John takes a gun from the fishing tackle box and threatens to kill first Billy and then himself. Mare is in pursuit, but this is not the “pure fluid action” that we might expect from a chase, and the landscape through which she moves is far more than the ground, the context, for that pursuit. The rocks beside the river loom huge, and the sound of the rapids is overpowering. Mare’s progress is difficult, clumsy, impeded not only by branches and rocks but by her own slipping, sliding, less than agile body; she fumbles for her gun and stumbles heavily in the water. We are “sensually and sensibly” (Vivian Sobchack 2004, 63) aware of her body in its bulky, wet, awkward clothing, and of its laborious progress.

Earlier, the most violent episode in the series similarly engages us in a visceral response to Mare’s situation and her embodied reaction to it. Having tracked down the abductor of the missing young girls, Mare and her colleague Zabel find themselves inside his house. Mare, being officially suspended, is without her gun; Zabel is too slow to draw his and is shot dead. The following sequence begins by more closely following generic conventions than is usual in the series: cutting between Mare, the intended female victim, the imprisoned young women, and the pursuing killer. The atmosphere is claustrophobic, the movement through the house impeded and circular, and the focus is on Mare’s wounded body and her face: terrified, disorientated, intent. When she finally retrieves Zabel’s gun and kills the kidnapper, slumping to the floor, the camera holds on her breathless, shaking body and face for a full minute; the sequence as a whole has lasted five minutes. We hear the sounds of a belated rescue around her but what compels our affective response is Mare’s still face, her gaze focused inwards, it would seem on memories, since we hear the excited voice of the child Kevin on the blurred soundtrack.

As in Happy Valley, this repeated focus on Mare’s still, reflective face provides a pattern that interrupts the forward narrative flow, temporarily suspending its movement. At these moments, Mare’s gaze is inwards. Occasionally, flashbacks confirm that the pain we see is the result of memories of her son. More usually, however, what these moments of suspended time register is an embodied subjectivity, fully intentional and also maternal. In describing them in this way, I am consciously linking them to Baraitser’s concept of “stilled time”, a kind of “intra-temporal resistance to time” that constitutes “a relation to, and condition of the maternal” (2017: 91–2). Baraitser is specifically referencing here Denise Riley’s account of her own response to the death of her adult son, but her
argument also ranges more widely, taking in ideas of repetition and of a “stay[ing] alongside” another which is a “kind of ethical labour” (ibid.). That this “time that does not flow” is also an arresting of narrative is clear from Riley’s account (2020: 108). That the forward movement that it interrupts is a generically masculine one is suggested by both Sobchack and Berlant, and that this movement is also conventionally identified with the “modern project” of progress, change, and history is argued by Baraitser and other feminist theorists of time.  

What I want to suggest, therefore, is that when it stills the narrative in this way, and places its focus on a subjectivity that is embodied and not directional, “transparent”, the series, like Happy Valley, invites a response that is both affective and political.

Towards the end of the series’ final episode, Mare visits her friend Lori, whose thirteen-year-old son she has arrested for murder and whose husband has been revealed to be the father of the baby of the murdered teenager, Erin. Lori has repulsed Mare’s previous efforts at contact. The two-minute scene, in which Lori folds her body into Mare’s and the two slide awkwardly to the kitchen floor, is, as I have suggested, a close parallel to that in Happy Valley in which Catherine holds another broken mother, Alison. Both include long moments of silence, both are focused on the bodies of their protagonists as with difficulty but infinite care they hold the heavy weight of another mother of a guilty son. We can barely hear Mare’s whispered, “I’m here’. As I have indicated, it is their narrative and ideological positioning that differentiates the two scenes. Mare is directly authorised in her action by Deacon Mark, with his renewed spiritual authority, and it is notable that the scene also returns these two mothers to the home, as that in Happy Valley does not. At the same time, however, the scene also has a very different provenance: as in Happy Valley, it echoes earlier scenes in which the two women hold each other, or other mothers in the series who have also suffered loss similarly embrace. Despite its narrative and ideological motivation, therefore, this is not a scene that works to redeem patriarchal authority and structures. It draws us into the experience of this embrace: heavy, clumsy, without adequate language, but the kind of “staying alongside” of which Baraitser writes, which is both ethical and maternal.

Breathing spaces: a conclusion

I referred earlier to Muriel Andrín’s description of Jane Campion’s narrative interruptions as “breathing spaces” which serve to “ma[k]e strange” the generic narrative that they pause (2009: 28). Baraitser uses the same phrase to describe the interruption that the maternal can make into the “public time” of neoliberal capitalism, to become, she writes, a “breathing space that . . . reminds us of the intimate and relational, the inter-dependent” (2014: 488). To bring these two together is to link, as does Berlant, questions of the contemporary political moment with the cultural narratives through which our relations to that moment are organised, or questioned. The temporal structuring of narrative and genre is not merely an aesthetic matter. If, as Berlant claims, popular texts are “gendering machines”, then this structure is crucial to such gendering. If, in trying to understand my own often powerfully identificatory but ambivalent response to Mare of Easttown I am drawn, then, to the insights of feminist phenomenology, with its emphasis on the gendering of embodied response, I am also drawn to questions of structure: to the
the power of narrative and genre to structure time, space and bodies; to the ways in which these structures may be disturbed or questioned; and to the political implications of such disruption.

In her reflections on “Lived Body vs. Gender”, Iris Marion Young insists that the category of gender is best thought of not as an identity but as a structure: a “particular form of the social positioning of lived bodies in relation to one another within historically and socially specific institutions and processes” (2005: 22). Such structures, she writes, are reacted to, reproduced, and modified in “the movement and interaction of bodies” (ibid.: 26). It is a formulation not so far from that of Berlant, for whom the overlapping categories of genre and gender are “the two clarifying institutions of social intelligibility” (2011a: 176), or indeed, as Young points out, from that of Judith Butler, for whom gender is a “norm [that] governs the social intelligibility of action” (2004: 41). It is Butler’s formulation on which Baraitser draws in her account of the ways in which the suspended, relational, maternal time of which she writes may interrupt and disturb these norms, or structures, but it is Berlant’s that is most useful for my analysis, insisting as it does on the relationship between fictional and lived forms.

Baraitser, paraphrasing Berlant’s argument in Cruel Optimism (2011), writes of the contemporary moment that “our collective optimism about structural transformation has less and less traction in a world in which markers of the good life—upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, a lively, durable intimacy—are further and further away from people’s daily struggles” (2014: 475). To return to my two texts and their deployment of the detective genre to centre a maternal subject who in some sense confronts this loss, as she does the loss of a child, in both her immediate locality and her personal life, I am struck once more by both their similarity and their difference. Both, it seems to me, succeed in creating “breathing spaces” which interrupt this most masculine line of genres with a sense of embodied subjectivity that is also relational, compassionate and ethical. In this sense, both are political. Yet, whereas Happy Valley ties this interruption to a critique of the structural forces that Baraitser describes, Mare of Easttown does not. Here instead, and against the pull of its powerful moments, we find an attempt to reinstate the promise of that fantasmatic “good life” as still possible within current structures, with all their hierarchies of inequality. Finally, then, for all the disruptive power of its sense of embodied, maternal subjectivity, and my own “sensual and sensible” response to it, I cannot quite shake my irritation.

Notes
1. The phrase is from Jake Bugg’s “Trouble Town” (2012), used as the title track for Happy Valley.
2. For more discussion of this, see (Sue Thornham 2019).
3. For men, however, to whom space is more easily felt to be transparent and directional, being lost can constitute “an existential crisis” (Vivian Sobchack 2004, 34).
4. See for example Lidia Curti’s account of “the suspended circular narrativity of soap opera” (1988: 163).
5. Wainwright directed one episode in the first series and four in the second.
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Films and TV

The Bay (ITV 2019-21)
Before we Die (C4 2021)
Happy Valley (BBC1, 2014-16)
The Killing (DR1/BBC4 2007-12)
The Killing (AMC/Netflix 2011-14)
Mare of Easttown (HBO 2021)
The Piano (dir. Campion, 1993)
Speed (dir.de Bont, 1994)
The Stars Look Down (dir. Reed, 1939)
Titanic (dir. Cameron, 1997)
Toy Story (dir. Lasseter, 1995)