

White Men with Scalpels: Technology, bodies and 'male melodrama' in *Nip/Tuck*

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Open wounds, slimy pink organs and welling blood: these have become familiar sights on our television screens as a range of programmes have begun using the interface between technology and human bodies as the source of their drama. The doctors, forensic analysts and plastic surgeons of contemporary television, by virtue of their specialized technological skills, are regularly embroiled in battles waged on and through the body. On the hit FX cable television show, *Nip/Tuck* (2003-), the interventions of the show's surgeon protagonists, Sean McNamara (Dylan Walsh) and Christian Troy (Julian McMahon), reveal to our eyes a range of gory spectacles. Incisions are wedged open by surgical clamps; breast implants are vigorously pushed through small cuts beneath the breasts; noses are broken and reset and the blood pools and splatters. Rather than dismissing such material as sensationalist excess, this article examines how the body, subject to technological investigation and manipulation, operates as a powerful expressive device in television drama.

I will consider how graphic material of this nature can be read as a site where ideologically grounded sentiments are articulated in a particularly ambiguous, visceral and emotive register. On *Nip/Tuck* the 'body trauma' (Jacobs, p.2003) produced by the contact between medical technology and bodies on our television screens operates as a form of melodramatic heightening. Like the facial close-ups, soaring music and hysterical bodies of traditional women's melodramas, these visceral images of the exposed bodily interior punctuate the drama

and guide viewer responses to characters and events in the diegesis. I will show how this form of dramatic orchestration through grotesque surgical detail is ultimately used to voice reactionary sentiments about women and racial ‘others’.

Nip/Tuck: On the Scalpel’s Edge

A promotional slogan on *Nip/Tuck*’s official website describes the show as ‘the scalpel’s edge of entertainment’ (Official *Nip/Tuck* Website, ‘About Season 4’ par.1). This phrase sums up *Nip/Tuck*’s dual appeal to viewers. On the one hand, the show relies on extreme, graphic surgical content to distinguish itself from other shows but, as this phrase also implies, *Nip/Tuck* presents itself as more ‘sophisticated’ than other television shows. *Nip/Tuck* can be seen as appealing to a model of ‘quality’ television. I use the term ‘quality’ television to describe programming that employs certain aesthetic markers of superiority in order to appeal to a desirable middle to upper-middle-class audience of viewers who are assumed to be more ‘sophisticated’ than the majority of those who consume television (Feuer, Kerr and Vahimagi, 1984, p.56).

In line with an appeal to ‘sophisticated’ viewers *Nip/Tuck* positions itself as a self-aware commentary on the two troubled white men at the centre of its narrative. A plot summary on the show’s official website describes *Nip/Tuck*’s protagonists as being ‘in full-blown midlife crises as they confront career, family and romance problems’ (Official *Nip/Tuck* Website, ‘About Season 1’, par.2). References to feminism, Freudian psychology and criticisms of contemporary cultural life are as much features of this show’s address to viewers as are its raunchy sex scenes and candid ‘boundary-pushing’ surgical images. An awareness of progressive discourses is

introduced economically through the character of Liz (Roma Maffia), the anaesthetist, whose feminism and lesbian identity is positioned in sharp distinction to the normative heterosexuality of the surgeons. Liz constantly (and with large doses of dry humour) chides Sean and Christian for their sexism and displays of machismo. Sean himself is constantly expressing doubts about his own life-style. Racism and homophobia are often explicitly problematized and denounced. This happens, for example, in series three when Sean's son Matt begins dating a homophobic white-supremacist (of course, storylines like this do little to critique less overt forms of bigotry).

As much as *Nip/Tuck* harnesses politically correct discourses, its reactionary message can be detected in the way it articulates the suffering of its central protagonists in the face of a range of threatening racial and ethnic 'others' and women with whom they become entangled. All of the show's major antagonists are either women or ethnically 'other' from Sean and Christian. The drug dealers that torment them in the first series are Columbian; their ruthless major rival, Merrill Bobolit, is Jewish; and the show's serial rapist is revealed to be Quentin Costa, a bisexual Hispanic man without a penis. More striking than the construction of heroes and villains along racial and gendered lines is the way in which Sean and Christian's struggles are dramatized through visceral encounters with the bodies of 'others.'

The first part of this paper will analyse a scene featuring a particularly messy tummy tuck to explore how *Nip/Tuck* features the displacement of white male suffering onto the gored and exposed bodies of patients. The second part of the paper pays closer attention the melodramatic investment of the relationship between technology and the 'raced' body. In each case I will examine the way in which

white male suffering and innocence is established in relation to the grotesque bodies of the 'other'.

Crisis and 'Backlash'

Nip/Tuck can be understood as one amongst a range of contemporary cultural responses to the growing perception that white masculinity is somehow under siege. David Savran describes this perception as a paranoid and reactionary response amongst white men to relatively recent developments in cultural and political activism, such as feminism, multiculturalism and the gay rights movement (Savran 1996, p.128). In the context of contemporary America, where white men still enjoy greater social power than any other group, the sense of white male disempowerment and crisis is something perceived rather than grounded in real social conditions (Kimmel 2003, p.xii). Savran notes that, in reaction to these supposed threats, white men have been increasingly painting themselves in the role of 'disenfranchised other' through displays of victimhood (Savran 1996, p. 128).

Nip/Tuck expresses this sense of victimhood through melodrama centred on the body. A phrase used by Vivian Sobchack to describe the expression of patriarchal crisis in horror and science fiction films from the 1970s and '80s provides a useful way of summarising the complaint at the centre of *Nip/Tuck*. She describes 'the rage of paternal responsibility denied the economic and political benefits of patriarchal power' (1996 [1987], p.152). *Nip/Tuck* handles a similar dilemma but, more than expressing anger, the show works to produce a sense that its patriarchs are, in line with Savran's argument, the disempowered victims of their masculine responsibilities. The occasion of surgery provides an economical way

of addressing the pressures of patriarchal power because it necessarily entails a struggle for mastery of the body of another, along with the responsibility that this implies. In the analysis that follows I consider how the show harnesses shocking, affective visuals to dramatize a sense of perceived white male crisis on the body. I will go on to consider the affective excess of these scenes as a function of melodrama.

Tremors and Tummy Tucks

In a telling sequence from episode 1.03 of *Nip/Tuck*, Sean McNamara is poised to perform a circumcision on his own son, Matt. At this point in the narrative Sean's state of mind is fragile. His marriage is in crisis and he is struggling to keep control at work. The surgical scenes in this episode dramatize, in visceral terms, both the pressure on Sean and his battle to maintain a sense of control. As Sean lowers his scalpel to begin the procedure his fingers tremble. Noting this tremor, Christian tries to persuade Sean to swap surgeries with him. Sean reluctantly answers his partner's pleas by passing the scalpel into Christian's hands. This exchange is illustrated in an extreme close-up of the instrument.

This carefully observed moment foregrounds the burden of patriarchal pressure on Sean. The violence implied by a scalpel poised to slice the skin off a penis also suggests a particularly vulnerable masculinity. Sean's sense of failure with regard to his son's surgery is carried into the next surgical sequence in which he performs a tummy tuck on Christian's patient, Mrs Grubman. The impotence Sean felt in the previous scene finds a melodramatic expression in the excesses of welling blood that emanates from Mrs Grubman's body.

A seamless cut takes us directly into Sean's next surgery. Sean moves his skilful surgeon's hand in perfect time to the rhythms of *The Blue Danube*, which plays on the audiotrack as he glides a scalpel into the flesh above his patient's hip. We see the torso from Sean's point of view as a thin trickle of blood streams from the incision. At first, this sequence seems to depict a sense of regained control and mastery as Sean conducts his skilful work upon the inert female body. However, the orchestration to music lends a sense of compulsion to Sean's movements.

As the sequence continues, it becomes evident that Sean is less in control than he seems and this sense of disorder and despair is expressed through increasingly bloody imagery. The scene engages the viewer in Sean's struggle to contain Mrs Grubman's unbounded and welling bodily fluids. This device dramatizes an analogous battle, Sean's own attempts to contain his emotions in the face of the pressures he faces at home and at work. In these images we are given more than a metaphor for Sean's personal suffering. His sense of crisis is illustrated through explicit images of the bodily interior that have the potential to arouse shock and discomfort.

This scene repeats a shot set-up from Sean's point of view, each time showing the abdomen marked with more blood and gore. Sean is still working in time to the waltz, but the images suggest an increasing dissonance between the smooth, clean, upbeat tone of the music and the growing messiness of his surgery. Shots of Sean's face, deep in concentration, are intercut with images of his hands wiping away increasing amounts of pooling blood. Swabs are strewn around the wound to absorb the excess blood and red streams trail down Mrs Grubman's sides, dripping onto the surgical sheets.

Finally, after yet another shot of Sean's knotted brow, we are granted a close-up view of a piece of removed fatty tissue on the end of Sean's scalpel. As the music reaches its climactic notes, Sean thrusts the chunk of flesh into a basin of water. It splash-lands in time to the swelling music. This vigorous gesture suggests a degree of disgust on Sean's part. Through this final motion Sean appears to be casting away the bodily material that is so invested with his sense of burden. This also implies a separation of self from the affective excesses that this scene has opened up through Mrs Grubman's body. Sean's struggle is over and the triumphant final notes of the waltz sound as Sean stitches the wound closed with a surgical staple, containing Mrs Grubman's 'out-of-control' bodily fluids . A lingering head-shot of the unconscious Mrs Grubman closes the scene.

But Sean's triumph is short-lived and the feelings of victimhood set up in this scene dramatically foreground events in the remainder of the episode. It is later revealed that Sean has inadvertently left a surgical implement in Mrs Grubman's stomach. This allows Mrs Grubman to blackmail the surgeons into providing her with limitless cosmetic procedures. The mastery and power associated with surgery is hereby rendered as a form of enslavement to the responsibilities implied by this power.

The scene described above is notable for the sheer violence of its images and their potential to effect shock, queasiness and extreme discomfort for viewers. It is one of many examples of *Nip/Tuck's* 'excessively' violent depictions of its protagonists exerting power over the bodies of extremely passive, indeed unconscious, and predominantly female patients. This scene features sadism of the kind Laura Mulvey describes with reference to the film noir (Mulvey

1989 [1975], p.21). We are presented with a violent investigation of the female bodily interior and the drama of the scene hinges on Sean's attempts to contain this 'guilty object' (Mulvey 1989 [1975], p.21) because of the threat it carries. But the surgical sequences on *Nip/Tuck* are not merely exclusively expressions of sadism. Addressing the scene with a consideration for the affective appeal to viewers allows for the consideration of another, no less problematic, operation at play here. The images of pain and exposed tissue, despite their diegetic attachment to Mrs Grubman's body, work to produce a strange mixture of affects that cultivate sympathy not so much for Mrs Grubman as for Sean, who is rendered the victim of an unruly female body.

The person whose body is subject to all this slicing remains unconscious, blissfully unaware of the 'horror show' taking place on her abdomen. Mrs Grubman's face only becomes a point of attention at the end of the surgery while throughout the procedure parallel cutting works to relate Sean's troubled face with images of gushing blood and bodily disorder. The cutting directly between Sean's concentrating eyes, his surgical implements and the bloody abdomen indicate his struggle to contain the unruly bodily fluids much as he must fight to control his own sense of vulnerability in everyday life. The shots of Mrs Grubman's face in the tummy tuck sequence not only stress her lack of awareness but also suggest the pressure on Sean not to fail his passive, trusting patient. The slightly protracted closing shot of her face also foreshadows the threat her character will pose when Sean's mistake is uncovered later in the episode. Sean is rendered here not as a masterful flesh-slicing brute but as a victim of his own labours.

Why is *Nip/Tuck* Male Melodrama?

On *Nip/Tuck* the use of surgical devices produces two contrasting kinds of bodies. There is the surgeon's body, an active, bounded body that engages with and directs surgical technologies. In opposition to this we have the inert, unbounded, fragmented and, ultimately, depersonalized body constituted by the analytical gaze of medical science and surgical manipulation. Through scalpel, ten blade and forceps, the first kind of body is brought into a relationship of melodramatic displacement with the second. The occasion of surgery, in this instance, allows for the construction of inert and depersonalized bodily territory upon which the sufferings and struggles of *Nip/Tuck*'s white male surgeons are expressed through battles between these men, their instruments and unruly female flesh.

I describe this process as melodrama partly because it involves the orchestration of affective excess to communicate meaning. Thomas Elsaesser finds it useful to consider the meaning of the term melodrama in the 'dictionary sense' as 'a dramatic narrative in which musical accompaniment marks the emotional effects' (1987, p.50). If we extend the emotional punctuation by music to other devices, melodrama can be seen as describing the heightened 'ways "melos" is given to "drama" by means of lighting, montage, visual rhythm, décor, style of acting, music' (1987, p.55). As demonstrated in the scene analysed above, in *Nip/Tuck*'s surgeries musical accompaniment and expressive parallel cutting serve to underscore the emotional themes of each episode. This show has also added another device to its repertoire; *Nip/Tuck* harnesses the affective potential of the exposed and manipulated bodily interior as yet another melodramatic tool.

Features such as the centrality of male suffering in *Nip/Tuck* and its focus on managing the body place the series within the category of ‘male melodrama’ as opposed to more ‘feminine’ manifestations of the melodramatic mode such as the soap opera and the woman’s ‘weepie’. The term ‘male melodrama’ has been adopted by a range of theorists to describe traditionally male genres like action films (Williams 2001, p.21), male epics (Hunt 1993, p. 81) and film noir (Jacobowitz 1992, p.152). In each of these genres the body is an important site at which struggles for control are waged.

Under patriarchy, men are expected to exhibit control and mastery both of themselves and of their environments. For this reason, the struggles of masculinity evidenced in male melodramas are expressed through dynamics of action and passivity, control and loss of control (Kirkham and Thumim 1993, p.25). This tension between action and passivity, self-control and subjection to affect informs the surgical sequences in *Nip/Tuck*, and is vividly expressed through the fragile opposition between the surgeon’s bounded, active body and the patient’s passive and spectacularly unbounded body.

Insensible Bodies and Melodramatic Sentiment

In *Nip/Tuck* the body is not just a trope or a sign but a device for producing ‘gut’ responses in viewers. Vivian Sobchack reserves a central place for the body in her account of affect in visual media. She argues that onscreen bodies operate on the viewer in two ways ‘both figuratively and literally’ (2004, p.67). We understand bodies through their representational or symbolic meanings in the narrative of a film or television shows. In addition to this, the body, especially when exposed, endangered or eroticized, has the potential to affect

us ‘literally’ in an immediate physical sense so that our own bodies mimic the physical excitations represented onscreen (2004, p.67).

Of course we cannot literally feel the pain of a flesh wound or an injection represented onscreen. But Sobchack uses the term ‘*sensual catechesis*’ (2004, p.82) to describe the way in which viewers’ bodies make up for the senses that are missing from the cinematic or, in this case, the televisual experience. In catachretic expression the literal and the figural are conflated because of a gap in language or a failure of words (2004, p.82). Similarly, in cinema, the gap in experience is filled with a bodily response that ‘applies a figurative sense as a literal one, while yet retaining the look and feel of figurality’ (Schiff, cited in Sobchack 2004, p.82). So, Sobchack argues, we make up for the sensory gaps in the cinematic experience by substituting them with our own bodily responses. We recognize the images on screen as at once separate from our sensory grasp and as actually affecting our own sensorium as we move between the literal and the figurative senses of our own embodied experience.

Sobchack asserts that this process is ‘pre-reflective’ (2004, p. 63). We can respond in a physical way to images before we start interpreting their denotative and linguistic messages. Her arguments in this regard are based on her own embodied experience of the indistinct opening images of *The Piano* (Campion 1993). Sobchack claims that while her eyes could not initially determine the forms onscreen, ‘*her fingers knew*’ (2004, p.63) what she was seeing. Thus, for Sobchack, our embodied response to certain stimulus is not mediated by conscious thought but is derived from bodily habituation which is conditioned by memory.

These ideas help explain how viewers might recoil or experience discomfort at the image of incised flesh on *Nip/Tuck* even

though the bodies subject to this slicing are anaesthetized. Sobchack does not suggest that viewers copy bodily excitations onscreen with absolute fidelity. Rather, our bodies respond with a form of embodied conjecture to 'fill in the gaps' by drawing on our own embodied knowledge just as Sobchack's fingers did when she watched *The Piano*. Anaesthesia entails a lack of experience that is virtually impossible to imagine. In response to visual stimulus such as a ten blade slicing through skin, or a wound pulled open by clamps, viewers are more likely to draw on their experiences of pain in a way that is 'pre-reflective', immediate and embodied.

While the anaesthesia featured on *Nip/Tuck* does not necessarily neutralize our response to the grotesquery of the images, it does effect a separation of the body from the subjective awareness of the patient. This is achieved not so much because viewers are aware that the patient is insensible but because the patients onscreen cannot respond the implied pain of the surgery. The camera is able to isolate body parts with close-ups. In the case of Mrs Grubman's surgery, shots of surgical gore are juxtaposed with the doctors' reactions while the patient's personality can be forgotten during the course of the surgery. This detachment from character, and the medical focus on specific body parts, produces the surgical body as a fragmented set of affective nodes, a terrain for the expression of pain that could belong to any character.

Melodrama and Meaning

While melodrama has often been dismissed for its culturally low status and its traditional alignment with femininity (Williams 1991: 2 – 3), theorists such as Thomas Elsaesser (1987), Christine Gledhill ((1987) [1972]) and Linda Williams (1991, 2001) have discussed

melodrama as a broad mode in Western culture, and as a particularly pervasive form in the United States. Williams calls for a serious consideration of melodramatic 'excess'. She argues that it is through the emotional and affective registers of melodrama that arguments about gender and race have been most persuasively voiced in American culture. In the case of *Nip/Tuck* and many other 'male melodramas' it is the suffering of privileged white males that take a central place.

According to Williams (2001, p.16), melodrama, as a mode, is centrally concerned with displays of suffering and virtue. Williams argues that 'sympathy for another grounded in the manifestation of that person's suffering is arguably a key feature of all melodrama' (2001, p.16). The displays of suffering, 'pathos and action' (2001, p.17) central to melodrama are related to a need to establish what she describes as 'a viscerally felt moral legibility' (2001, p.300). The sensational features of melodrama, Williams contends, : 'are the means to something more important: the achievement of a felt good, the merger ...of morality and feeling into empathetically imagined communities forged in the pain and suffering of innocent victims, and in the actions of those who seek to rescue them' (2001, p.21).

Because of melodrama's tendency to favour victims, the mode can be used to demonstrate the suffering and thereby the virtue and humanity of people oppressed on the grounds of race (2001, p. 300). However, Williams cautions, this feature can also be used by 'resentful whites' to dramatize 'the perception of a black threat to white hegemony' (2001, p.300).

I have discussed how *Nip/Tuck* adopts a thin veneer of political correctness in order to appeal to the 'sophisticated viewers' of

‘quality’ television. There are certain sentiments that the show cannot express outright. However, if we pay attention to the visceral appeal that the show’s grotesque imagery makes *to the gut* it becomes clear that the most powerful resonances of *Nip/Tuck* are generated in relation to a highly reactionary sentiment.

For Peter Brooks, melodrama operates as a ‘text of muteness’ (Brooks 1976, p.48) in which sentiments that cannot be voiced through official or everyday discourse find their expression. Often this process involves the displacement of inner feelings onto what Elsaesser calls “‘overdetermined” objects’ (1987, p.56). Melodramas feature the ‘intensified symbolisation of everyday actions, the heightening of the ordinary gesture and the use of setting and décor so as to reflect the characters’ fetishist fixations’ (Elsaesser 1987, p.56). As noted by Brooks, these mute feelings often use the body as their mode of expression. He describes how melodrama presents us with ‘a body seized by meaning’ (Brooks 1994, p.18) and notes that in melodrama ‘the use of the body itself, its actions, gestures, its sites of excitation, to represent meanings that may be otherwise unavailable to representation because they are somehow under the bar of repression’ (1994, p.19). The body in *Nip/Tuck* is a site upon which both heroic action and suffering are expressed. The bodily viscera revealed in surgery become the ‘overdetermined objects’ for the ‘mute’ expression of pain and anxiety which ultimately establish a reactionary sense of white male victimhood, where *Nip/Tuck*’s surface address of ‘sophistication’ voices a different set of sentiments.

Nip/Tuck encourages us to share the pain of the show’s ‘beleaguered’ white male protagonists through affective provocations of oozing and gaping surgical bodies. If, as Williams argues,

melodramatic expression is by definition a device for creating empathy through displays of suffering, then we might understand visceral affect of the kind produced on *Nip/Tuck* as a particularly powerful tool for melodrama. Because of the 'literalness' of affect, the represented is shared to a certain degree by the viewer whose body responds to the onscreen violence. In the case of Mrs Grubman's surgery, bodily gore dramatizes the burden of patriarchal responsibility in physical terms.

Technology, Agency and Moral Responsibility

In my next analysis I will focus more attention on the mediating role of technology in *Nip/Tuck*'s surgical melodramas. What does it mean for a sense of white male victimhood to be expressed in relation to a technological skill such as surgery? For Christian Troy and Sean McNamara, repeated violence on the bodies of others is *work*. This is something that has been touched on in my analysis of Mrs Grubman's tummy tuck and the 'patriarchal burden' it dramatizes but I will now bring into focus the way in which this device complicates questions of agency. Through a consideration of two surgical scenes from the series pilot, I will consider how an emphasis on technology as mediation shifts ethical responsibility away from the show's white central characters and how, instead, *Nip/Tuck*'s visceral imagery is used to locate corruption at the site of the 'raced' body.

In his study of serial killing, Mark Seltzer uses the phrase 'Melodramas of endangered agency' (1998, p.70); to explain the effects on the subject of an ever-increasing intimacy with technology. If men's labouring abilities are extended and aided by technology these prostheses necessarily blur the 'boundaries of the body and the boundaries of the self or consciousness or

agency' (1998, p.75). Seltzer argues that this state of affairs produces a pathological yielding of agency to technology (1998, p.75). This transference of agency from man to machine in texts like *Nip/Tuck* has another function - it absolves the white male figure from responsibility. In Seltzer's formulation it is through a confusion about agency in the face of technology that compulsive violence becomes justified in the mind of the serial killers (1998, p.71). In this pathological logic, technology and its ability to complicate matters of agency becomes a kind of scapegoat for violence against the other. A similar logic is operative in the serial violence represented through surgery on *Nip/Tuck* as the protagonists are represented as involuntary victims of their jobs as surgeons unwillingly driven by their instruments to expose and unleash carnal suffering.

In addition, by dramatising a surrender of white male agency to the technologies of labour, *Nip/Tuck* may be expressing anxieties about a perceived economic disempowerment. My next analyses will consider how the need for capital is constantly foregrounded in relation to a portrayal of surgery as involuntary labour.

The Series Pilot: White Innocence and The Hispanic Body

In this first installment of *Nip/Tuck*, Sean and Christian undertake a facial reconstruction on a new Columbian client, Silvio Perez. Christian quickly realises that Perez is a drug trafficker on the run. Unbeknownst to Sean, Christian negotiates to perform the facial reconstruction at a much higher price. After the surgery, it is discovered that Perez is not only a drug trafficker but also a serial child molester and needed the facial reconstruction in order to escape from his boss, Escobar Gallardo, whose daughter Perez has sexually

violated. In the course of the episode Sean and Christian find themselves increasingly entangled in the messy world of this criminal group of Columbians. Ultimately, Christian is held captive and tortured by Gallardo, while Sean's surgery becomes the site of a very gory murder.

I will examine two surgical scenes that feature in this episode in order to consider three main expressive tendencies related to the compromise of agency to technology. With reference to the first surgery in the episode, I will show how a correspondence is set up between the volatile bodies of racial and gendered others and a crisis in control. In addition, I will consider how the yielding of control to technology exonerates these men from responsibility for their actions. In my analysis of the final surgery I consider how the body of the racial 'other' is rendered, through visceral surgical exposures, as potentially contaminating, threatening and ultimately as the 'guilty' for the white male suffering that the show puts on display.

The first major surgery featured in the episode is, like Mrs Grubman's tummy-tuck, an outlet for the surgeons' repressed angst. But this scene also creates the sense that the doctors' will is being compromised, both by their relationship to technology and by a threatening Latino body. As the surgeons enter the operating room and prepare to reconstruct Silvio Perez's face they are bristling with tension from an argument about Sean's desire to quit the practice. Their emotions are underscored by the dramatic orchestration of the surgical sequence.

In line with Sean and Christian's anger and tension about business issues, this surgery is particularly violent, both in terms of style and content. Liz presses the button on the CD player initiating the start of surgery. As the drumbeats of the song begin, the

dialogue-based drama between Sean and Christian gives way to kinetic, musical sequences. From this point onwards the men appear almost compulsively driven by the rhythms of the song.

The choice of music, 'Paint it Black' by the Rolling Stones, is significant not only for the way it voices Sean and Christian's rage, but also because it cultivates the sense that the mastery and skill of these men is being used as the 'devil's plaything'. The unrelenting beats of the music are paired with rhythmic editing to produce a sense of automatism. Extremely brief close-up shots of Perez's face in different stages of the surgery are intercut with shots of a black screen, creating a jarring, mechanical effect. This montage presentation continues with multiple dissolves between extreme close-ups of the minutiae of the surgical transformation. Technology is foregrounded in this montage as the jump-cuts emphasize the movement of hands and instruments around the face. For each gruesome procedure, a shot featuring the surgical tools precedes any shots of the surgeon's faces as they undertake the task. This suggests that the tools are guiding the men instead of the men directing their implements. Sean breaks the patient's nose in time with a climactic beat in the song and blood sprays across his mask. False teeth are screwed into Perez's mouth. The surgeons slice into the skin around his eyes and later cut into the hairline to lift the skin. This violence articulates the undercurrents of emotional rage in this scene but the brutality is also excused by the compulsive automatism that seems to define the men's actions.

Sean and Christian have disguised the true identity of a child molester but, it is suggested, their actions were driven by the machinations of a more powerful force outside of themselves. It is ultimately career demands to which they have become enslaved.

Crucially, the capital that they need is in the hands of a Latin American criminal. The quest for financial freedom leads Sean and Christian into this morally dubious behaviour and into the near-fatal, traumatic and ‘contaminating’ relationship with the Latino body that takes place in the show’s climactic final surgery.

In this scene Sean has agreed to do one final liposuction on Silvio Perez. Sean took on this job because, having parted ways with Christian, he is trying to set up his own practice and is in desperate need of money. He even allows Silvio Perez’s brother Alejandro to sit in on the procedure in return for an extra sum of money. In this scene the need for capital forces Sean into a potentially disastrous encounter with Silvio Perez’s body. As it transpires, Alejandro Perez has set this procedure up as an opportunity to kill his brother. At a certain point in the proceedings Alejandro pulls out a gun and forces Liz and Sean to bring Silvio Perez out from anesthesia so that he can say his last words to Silvio before killing him.

Once Silvio has woken up and begins to understand what is going on he grabs desperately at the liposuction cannula in his abdomen, pulling it out and spraying mustard-coloured ooze around the room. In a set of close-ups we see each of the characters in the room being sprayed with fat; first, Alejandro who ducks away, then Liz who screams as her gown and the wall behind her is blotched with yellow. Notably, we see a close-up of Sean’s hands struggling for the cannula before the shot of him being splattered with fat as he struggles to contain his panic. Sean grapples to gain control of the instrument but is unable to stop the squirting of yellow fluid as Silvio tugs the device from his hands.

This moment, in which Sean loses command of his technology, presents a hysterical expression of white male control

compromised by a monstrous ‘other.’ This crisis is dramatized through queasy-making images of gushing abdominal fat. Little attention is paid to Silvio Perez, who must surely be undergoing the most suffering as he is threatened with death and his own fat is squirting out of him in large quantities. In the midst of this chaos, Alejandro moves over to the anesthesia controls with the intention of giving his brother a lethal overdose.

The nightmare represented in this scene is one of the body wildly out of control. Significantly, it is an unregulated Hispanic body that contaminates Sean’s clean surgery, and, as the rest of the season will show, casts a dark shadow over his life from this point onward. The sense of contagion is set up, not merely symbolically but as something that should be viscerally felt. This uncontained, threatening body is rendered in physically revolting terms through the sprayings of yellow goop.

Through the relays between Sean, technology and the ‘raced’ body in this scene two ‘backlash’ concerns are brought intimately into relation; namely, concerns about money and about racial ‘others’. Ultimately, this trauma is endured because Sean and Christian need money that is in the hands of Columbian villains. This, and the show’s melodramatic fetishization of technology as labour, suggests that *Nip/Tuck*’s primary concern is with economic threats to white male dominance. The drive for capital and a servitude to technology as labour leads *Nip/Tuck*’s surgeons to repeatedly open up and explore the bodies of the ‘other’ only to find a range of grotesque and contaminating bodily horrors. The implication made here is that the ‘other’ is somehow to blame for the white man’s loss of agency, for the decline of patriarchal mastery

based on earning power and for various forms of perceived white male economic disempowerment.

In response to television's growing interest in sliced human flesh, this paper makes a case for considering the expressive power of surgical imagery in the production of meaning on television – especially where race, class and gender are concerned. Despite *Nip/Tuck*'s positioning as 'sophisticated' viewing, the show draws on the affective appeal of surgical images to produce a highly regressive melodrama. The surgeries I have examined each use the affective appeal of surgical bodies to portray white men as victims.

In the case of Mrs Grubman's tummy tuck, the pressures of patriarchal responsibility find their displaced expression in grotesque surgical images. Sympathy is aligned with the white male protagonist while femininity is demonized as the source of this suffering. In Silvio Perez's facial reconstruction, a violent surgical scene is invested with Sean and Christian's considerable rage. But a sense of white male innocence is preserved through the deflection of agency from the surgeons to their technological tools. Finally, in the case of Silvio Perez's liposuction, Sean is victimized by an 'out-of-control' Latino body. The affective appeal made by the revolting sprays of fat in this scene aligns sympathies with Sean, who must endure this gore. At the same time the unregulated, 'raced' Hispanic body is produced as a contaminating threat, and ultimately, as the carrier of guilt for imagined white male strife. By considering *Nip/Tuck*'s bodily gore in terms of affect and melodrama, then, it is possible to cut through the 'knowing' or 'politically correct' presentation of white masculinity on this programme to reveal the conservative sentiments *Nip/Tuck* expresses with regard to questions of race and power.

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