



Thrift Television: Narratives of Enduring, Saving, and Living Well. A Thematic Introduction.

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Abstract

Concepts of thrift and dwelling are central to how societies live together. Thrift refers to a complex and morally-loaded set of economic practices that people engage with out of necessity, choice, or both. Whilst home-making or dwelling refers to social integration and self-representation. The ways in which social realms of thrift and dwelling relate to each other are historically and culturally specific, and media representations are an important intersection for reflecting and putting forward specific ‘imaginaries’ of thrift and dwelling. In this special issue, depictions of thrift in popular television are treated inclusively and span makeover reality TV, comedy-drama and documentaries, and target different national and international audiences. Contributions by researchers from the US, France, Germany and Australia examine how ‘appropriate’ ways of dwelling, involving thrift are negotiated in situations marked by material scarcity, precarity and aspirational lifestyles. These include: negotiating the harsh realities of housing in expensive cities such as New York in *Insecure* or *Broad City* (Perkins; Kanai & Dobson), make-over through decluttering and controlling debt in *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* (Ouellette), *Life or Debt* and *Raus aus den Schulden* (Meyer), and are linked to specific historical and social circumstances in different national contexts. Suburban areas of post-war France are represented in 1967–1981 TV documentaries (Overney), gentrified British rural areas in *Midsomer Murders* (Zahlmann) and post-recessional New York City after the 2007–8 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in *Broad City*. Drawing on recent thrift scholarship and analyses of televised thrift in this special issue, we demonstrate how thrift and dwelling are articulated largely as a middle-class concern and a disciplining discourse. Positive incidents of thrift are also revealed for example, in the comedy form, environmental and DIY practices and female voice in French post-war women’s documentaries. In other discussions there is scepticism over the possibilities for protagonists to self-fashion themselves within the system of television series. This raises the question of whether alternative forms of imagining subjectivities and social relations in neo-liberal economies of dwelling can occur in entertainment television, or whether thrift imagined as what we call ‘televised endurance’ merely serves to reproduce the status quo as an irreversible condition.

Keywords: Thrift, television, thriving, home, austerity, TV series, dwelling, endurance

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Introduction

Thrift is no longer a concept associated with the distant past from post-war welfare countries in the global North. The 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and its lingering economic and social effects ensured that ideas of thrift, broadly defined as considerate, non-wasteful consumption behaviour, have re-entered the political discourse and everyday vernacular. Demands of everyday economising or aspirations of middle-class consumers who balance expenditure with moral values might not always evoke the concept of 'thrift'. Nonetheless these notions are addressed, especially in recurrent accounts related to austerity measures introduced in many countries in the wake of the economic downturn (Basu, Schifferes & Knowles 2018; Triliva, Varvantakis & Dafermos 2015), as well as in lifestyle politics. Although today's media discourse is dominated by the current commentaries on how to save resources in the context of ecological crisis, thrift looms large in media discussions about stagnating wages or growing wealth disparities in advanced Western economies such as the UK or Australia. For example, a Guardian article about 2019 OECD findings, reported that intergenerational inequalities existed, particularly millennials who experienced diminished life opportunities compared with baby boomers, and the general shrinking of the middle-class, appeared 'increasingly like a boat in rocky waters' (Gurría in Partington 2019).

Existing academic literature has examined the role of mainstream media in framing and normalising the discourses of 'austerity' (Basu, Schifferes & Knowles 2018; Schlosberg 2016), and documented specifically how fictional and reality television responded to the downturn by labelling this moment and media sub-set as 'austerity media' (Petro 2016). There are studies too that have discussed the coverage of the GFC and austerity in the broadcast news and press (e.g. Berry 2016 in the UK), and generally the gendered impacts of 'recessionary culture' on media content (Negra & Tasker 2014). Furthermore, diverse scholarship has investigated a broad variety of thrift applications in popular media ranging from online forums designed to help debtors (Stanley, Deville & Montgomerie 2016) to TV make-over tips for aspiring on-a-budget renovators (Rosenberg 2008). Media as a site for reflecting and shaping the discourse of thrift, and generally consumption, reveal the tension between necessity and lifestyle choices, and the ways thrift is being re-worked in performative ways.

In this thematic introduction, we seek to make sense of media representations of thrift inclusively and over a long-term period by including examples of documentaries broadcast in the post-war period. These examples sit alongside long-running drama series from the 1990s and recent lifestyle TV programming which target different national and international audience markets. This approach decouples studies of thrift from the immediate context of the 2008 GFC, which much of the literature centres on, while continuing to insist on the cultu-

ral specificity and normativity of those representations. Everyday thrift practices and home-making are pursued through interdisciplinary exploration and textual analyses of different popular television series to examine how 'appropriate' ways of dwelling are negotiated in varied television formats. Although the majority of contributions focus on contemporary examples such as scripted reality programs showcasing tips for debt-counsellors (Meyer, *Life or Debt*), lifestyle shows on home management and decluttering practices (Ouellette, *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo*), or American women dramedies about the dynamics of thriving in large cities (Perkins, *Insecure, Girls*; Kanai & Dobson, *Broad City*), the discussion is grounded historically through French televised documentaries from the 1960s-70s (Overney), and long-standing British crime series such as *Midsomer Murders* (Zahlmann).

What cuts across the diversity of how thrift is represented and made meaningful is the inherent tension between choice and necessity and moral reverberances that define the concept. Thrifty practices of dwelling may be encouraged as a morally-loaded ambition to save, for instance, natural resources for future generations or as a necessary form of economising when on a tight budget. This speaks to the theoretisation of thrift as an inclusive concept denoting 'a compound practice of economic behaviour and cultural lifestyle' (Podkalicka & Potts 2014: 3). Thrift, as the contributions in this special issue show, is also understood as practised at different and intertwined spaces or scales. The domestic and public spaces refer to a practice that performatively articulates social relations vis-a-vis the neo-liberal consumer society.

Our contribution in this thematic introduction is three-fold. Firstly we situate thrift in relation to the existing scholarship on austerity, media and dwelling, and argue the value of focusing on the cultural logic of television as a useful analytic site for examining thrift as a social practice in the pursuit of the 'good life' (Lehtonen & Pantzar 2002: 228), anchored within the moral economies in 'thrift/thriving' (Yates & Hunter 2011). In our account, we identify four aspects of thrift as present in the literature: thrift as an individual technique of subject formation; thrift as a home-making/house-keeping practice; thrift as a spatial practice organising the urban; and thrift addressing the city as a whole, i.e. as a social entity at a specific time and space. This grouping helps organise the recent thrift literature, leading us to define a specific focus on the concept of 'endurance' as attached to thrift.

Secondly, drawing on the contributions in this special issue, we discuss cultural narratives of thrift across different TV programs, including those that proceed the 'moment' of 'austerity' or 'recessionary media' (Petro 2016; Hamad 2014; McElroy 2017) associated with the 2008 GFC. These programs contain narratives of thrift, referencing its inherent ambiguity as an economic practice that expresses

morality (lifestyle/choice) and responds to everyday circumstances (need/necessity). By analysing pre-and post-GFC programs collectively, across different TV genres and in different viewing contexts, we adopt an inclusive (if necessarily selective, non-exhaustive) approach to thrift that goes beyond the national frames commonly applied to thrift and also mediated thrift.

Thirdly, we synthesize our observations of thrift in popular television, including the problematization of social relations that mediated thrift practices reveal and the cultural analyses of the social under conditions of neo-liberal austerity. In particular, we draw on the notion of endurance (Berlant 2011, Povinelli 2011) that illustrates representations and experiences of precarious lives in the austerity conjuncture (Bramall, Gilbert & Meadway 2016). The notion of ‘endurance’ is a productive way of framing thrift and dwelling in TV in relation to lived experiences and everyday politics. However, it is important to note that endurance is linked to thrift in complicated ways. For example, endurance echoes both aspects of thrift as a choice or necessity, yet can also be thought of as a condition resulting from thrift. Accounting for this complicated relationship allows us to speculate about the extent to which TV serials serve as modes of reflection and as a media form which disrupts the conditions of persistent precarity in a globalised, mediated world.

Thrift and dwelling in cultural studies

Thrift predates the post-2008 GFC austerity moment. Many scholars have approached thrift from a longer historical perspective by locating the understanding of thrift in different cultural contexts. For example, studies in sociology and cultural studies have traced thrift back to the Puritan morality in the Early American Republic (Yates & Hunter 2011) or to the very condition of the welfare state’s promises in post-war UK (Bramall 2013, 2016). In the UK setting, academic interest in thrift, especially during the post-GFC years, has been notable because of introduced public austerity measures. Rebecca Bramall argues that expectations attached to meritocracy, individual risk-taking with regard to credits/mortgages, and weakening social security created the conditions for current aspirations and ideals of thriving:

the fate of the welfare state in the austerity conjuncture needs to be situated in a much longer-term destabilization of the post-war social democratic consensus: it has been subject to processes of “unsettling” and “residualisation” over the last four decades, often as a result of neo-liberal reforms that have delivered new and different expectations for the future. (Bramall 2016: 2)

Allied with the contemporary moment, the connections between neoliberalism and austerity, or what De Benedictis and Gill (2016) term 'austerity neoliberalism', have become a new 'discursive formation' (Peck et al 2009). Peck argues that austerity can be understood as a localising project of 'actually existing neoliberalisms' (Peck et al 2009: 54). 'Austerity urbanism', with its insistence on re-arranging the relations between the state, citizens and companies, re-centralise for instance local power in mayors, and highlight the multiplicity of national or municipal austerity measures and civic responses to the global economic and financial crisis.

Against the background of these historically sensitive analyses, which stress structural social and economic conditions, the four aspects of thrift and dwelling that we have identified in thrift studies can be grouped as follows: thrift as an individually articulated technique of subjectivation; thrift as a set of domestic, home-making / house-keeping practices; thrift referring to spatial practices organising the urban; and thrift that addresses the city as a space- and time-specific social entity.

The literature emphasising individualised thrift points to historically and culturally embedded practices of subjectivation, related to 'making savings, economizing, and being parsimonious, frugal or sparing' (Gudeman 2008: 114). Rebecca Coleman, who interpreted data generated post-GFC (including a representative population survey), described the 'new' austerity in terms of 'mood' (2016). Coleman proposed the unsettling idea of 'hopeful pessimism' to describe potential futures related to debt and a non-linear, gendered experience. New austerity as mood is 'an orchestration of affects, feelings and emotions' (Coleman 2016: 90), or as Ben Anderson states referring to 'structures of feeling', it is an 'environment within which people dwell' (Anderson 2014: 105). The notion of austerity as 'mood' highlights an overall atmosphere that offers an affective realm of reference for individualised practices of thrift. How such an affective incorporation of thrift is expressed as a mode of subjectivation has mostly been studied with regard to self-disciplining and self-management techniques.

Inspired by social and technological studies perspectives, Liz McFall (2015) views thrift as a cultural form of morally charged economic activity that is inconceivable without recognising the role that disseminated instruments, guidebooks and deliberate institutional measures play in enabling the practice of thrift and saving. The academic literature is replete with examples of thrift-related instruments, ranging from advice literature of the early modern period in Western Europe addressed specifically to the male head of the household and concerned with moral guidance and 'management' (Rulffes 2013). The literature also includes analogues of book-keeping techniques as technologies of the modernising self (Maß 2017a, 2017b, Büschel 2011) through to contemporary advisory actors such as debt consultants (Meyer 2012, 2017) and calculative actants such as shopping carts (Cochoy 2008).

In framing thrift as a set of self-disciplining and self-management techniques, cultural studies of thrift have focused on the home as a key site where economic life - and thrifting - is practised and made sense of. The home-based thrift is shaped by a crux of emotions, moral values and market imperatives. For example, sociological studies about household consumption (including energy consumption), have pointed to the strong (class/generation-marked) presence of thrift as a habit, prompting Gordon Waitt and colleagues in Australia to refer to the 'tyranny of thrift' (Waitt et al 2016: 37). Other empirical studies post- 2007–8 recession, have documented shifts in household consumption more generally, such as the rise in necessity-motivated thrift such as secondhand shopping (Murphy 2017). Others have highlighted the deliberate and emancipatory aspects of 'new' or ethical consumption by communities seeking 'alternatives of what it means to live in joy and to a high standard' and in accord with environmental values within consumer cultures (Moraes, Szmigin & Carrigan 2010: 293). In this respect, important contributions have been made by scholars who bring out the individual everyday experiences of austerity (or thrift) into sharp focus. Esther Hitchen argues:

austerity is more than an economic policy; it is a phenomenon that is understood through individuals' lived and felt realities that are often experienced through fluctuating, non-coherent and sometimes conflicting affective relations that come to shape how people feel and act in the everyday. (Hitchen 2016: 102)

Connections between thrift and dwelling also emerge from the studies of urban spatial practices. Against the backdrop of neoliberal austerity, instances of how to confront inequality or how to avoid waste (of money and other resources) has been captured in social research that highlights 'voluntary work by redistributing, reusing or preserving items within the metabolism of the cities' (Derwanz & Vollmer 2015: 229; Grubbauer 2015). The term "low-budget urbanity" (Färber 2014) denotes the production of urban space through individual everyday saving practices. An example of this is explored in the commuting practice of ticket sharing on German regional inter-city trains, *Schönes Wochenende Ticket*, which demonstrated the notion of how 'calculative assemblages' encompassed the ambiguity of thrift-as-necessity and thrift-as-lifestyle (Färber & Otto 2016: 37). One specific commuting practice demonstrated the fragile assemblage of a shared single train ticket by an opportunistic and temporarily formed group of train passengers. The group engaged in calculative work and dwelled within a regional transport system. The ticket sharing was about saving money for some and earning money for others, with all involved taking different risks (Färber & Otto 2016: 31). These calculative assemblages illustrate normative ideas of the relationship between self

and society (Maß et al 2011, Möhring et al 2011, Scholl 2015). Therefore, the spatial dimensions of thrift relate to urban spaces and to specific socialities. In the case of ticket sharing and the temporary transgressive spatial context, thrift can be interpreted as a necessity based on the scarcity of money which mobilises other resources. One example is the use of social skills and the ability to relate to and get on with strangers to form a temporary group and share a ticket to get to the same destination despite different interests.

Finally, the dimension of the city as a social entity brings forward the term scarcity. With scarcity, thrift and dwelling is addressed when resources are perceived as limited if not absent. In recent years much of the studies of scarcity have integrated the analysis of the self focussing on the characteristics of self-management and discipline (De Vries 2008, Möhring et al 2011, Tauschek & Grewe 2015, Streinzer 2016). One way of investigating these subjectifying techniques of scarcity, beyond their spatial dimension, is the examination of the city as a social entity. The city of Berlin serves as an example to demonstrate how, since the late 1990s to the 2010s, the 'urban imagineering' of the city as a social entity was premised on the tension between the experience of economic crisis and the city's attractiveness. According to Färber, frictions between the two epitomised the dual imaginary of 'economic wasteland' and 'flourishing cultural production' (Färber 2014: 129). Scarcity and affluence were assembled in different ways and embedded in everyday low-budget practices. These practices included do-it-yourself (DIY) cultures, co-housing and entrepreneurial projects. In this specific historical era the city Berlin was imagined and addressed as a social entity through thrift where the ambiguity of thrift was transformed into a place where necessity equalled lifestyle (Stahl 2014).

Drawing on these conceptualisations of thrift, we position thrift as an ambivalent practice of saving, driven by necessity or aspirational lifestyle values. Thrift is an everyday subjectivity-building practice involved in Coleman's (2016) orchestration of affects and emotions, and strongly linked to conflictual moral dimensions. 'Austerity' refers more broadly to a governing or regulatory regime. While everyday practice and today's austerity regimes implicate thrift in what is an interrelated and mutually constitutive type of 'assemblage' (Coleman 2016), in this work we have chosen to emphasise thrift's meaning as related to social positioning and aspirations for a good life. To study thrift in relation to dwelling, as an affective and subjectifying realm, leads us to better understand the contradictory and unequal spatial workings and effects of 'thrifty' home-making. Thrift is not only confined to a domestic space but extends to urban settings and impacts meaning making through images and imaginaries of cities as a social entity. This 'multi-dimensional' perspective takes the ambiguity of thrift and dwelling seriously, considers what holds thrift and dwelling together, and how they are experienced

and represented. Furthermore, the notion of endurance is formulated as a question about the agency of thrift in dwelling. We can now turn our attention to how thrift endures, and how enduring thrift becomes televised endurance.

Dwelling and home-making: imagining thrift in television

Television remains an important platform for reflecting and shaping the cultural ideas and discourses about social and political life. This includes values and aspirations that guide consumption and the processes of home-making. As Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker put it, 'our economic lives are both shaped by and embedded within popular and representational culture' (2014: 1). Representations of thrift and home-making, in various forms and guises, can be traced through the history of television. Representations have ranged from post-war home-economics programs to contemporary drama series set against the backdrop of the Great Depressions of the 1930s (as in *Mildred Pierce*, HBO, 2011), news items on how to save on electricity bills, and property and reality TV programming. Today's television screens around the world, including in web-based permutations, burst with lifestyle shows consumer journeys and practices associated with home-making and ideas of how to lead good lives. Magazine-type shows including instructional DIY/thrift segments (e.g. *The Living Room*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, Australia) to entire series built on the premise of improvement and ingenuity. The broad category of lifestyle and property TV uses narrative, entertainment and drama to pull audiences in and guide viewers through the complex terrain of the real estate market, urban space and the minutiae of everyday choices.

Lifestyle and reality programming is prevalent. In response, significant strands of scholarship within the cultural and media studies field have examined popular television and consumption in relation to home and property entertainment. Studies found that many shows are premised on the educational, normative and value-judgment logic of expert advice fixated onto and integral to depicted transformations and the project of self-making. This logic has been articulated in a recurrent slogan of 'what modern houses should look like', and explored within the critiques of the neo-liberal mandate of individualised entrepreneurship and constant improvement (Meyer 2017: 263-275, Ouellette & Hay 2008).

Reality television is often organised around consumption - or hyperconsumption - 'to create the impression that one can "buy" whatever one wants; a new life, a new future, an entirely new "self"' (Dixon 2007: 52). Therefore, thrift may appear at odds with this popular genre's ethos - especially given excessive amounts of waste displayed or implied in many popular make-over or property TV shows. In US series, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, Wheeler Dixon argues that 'nothing else will suffice to satiate the viewer's appetite for spectacle than to completely

destroy the existing home, and then “magically” replace it with a Trump-esque McMansion created in a mere seven days’ (Dixon 2007: 53). This wastefulness (in opposition to thrift) is documented by first-hand experience of working on an Australian version of the British make-over *Changing Rooms* program that first screened in Australia in 1995 and aired in a new incarnation on commercial station Channel 10 in 2019. The host of the Australian version, Suzi Wilks, commented:

we did go back and do a couple of shows about what people had done to their rooms. A lot of the people had reverted back to their old taste. One couple, as we were leaving, were literally pulling out everything and throwing it over the balcony into the front yard. (Wilks cited in Bucklow 2018)

And yet, despite the ‘profligate’ lifestyle make-over genre, thrift has been identified as a discursive strategy, including in *Changing Rooms*, where participants do work on a limited budget (Rosenberg 2008). Buck Rosenberg argues:

Most home-related programmes work not within a sphere of uncontrolled consumption but within a discourse of thrift. Hence they promote consumption as a key ingredient for self-construction and upward social mobility, as witnessed by Redden’s [work] regarding appropriate consumption. Yet, paradoxically, they also offer suggestions for controlling consumption, for employing thrift. (Rosenberg 2008: 508)

Lifestyle, property television series *Grand Designs* also delves into thrift. The programme, which has aired in the UK since 1999, has portrayed its different dimensions and purposes over time. But notions of thrift seem contradictory on occasion - given the self-referential invocation of ‘grandeur’ in the series’ title and the common instances of excessive consumption and spectacular waste of material, financial and emotional resources that occur when building a dream house (Podkalicka, Milne, Kennedy 2018). In the Australian franchise of the series, broadcast on subscription television Foxtel and also on public service channel Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) (earlier seasons), thrift, to some owner-builders, pertains to economising through making and building as empowering practices that run deep in the family. For example, after Chris Clarke, a carpenter (like his dad), lost his new house in Australia’s deadly 2009 bushfires, Chris is shown determined to rebuild on a moderate, approximately 400k (AUD) budget (Season 1 Episode 1 ‘Bushfire House’, Callignee, Victoria). Clarke uses materials that survived the fire and repurposed abandoned or unused ones. The commitment to cost saving, linked to environmental philosophy and the financial situation, drove the

project from start to finish, luring the viewer into the aesthetic world of creativity based on respect of history, recycling, DIY and morality of ethical/sustainable build/consumption. In other episodes, thrift was also portrayed as a mundane tactic adopted during the build, out of necessity, when the budget is blown (as it almost always is!) rather than a life philosophy, forcing some protagonists to buy secondhand, draw on friends and relatives for labour or scale down ambitious designs or finishes (Podkalicka, Milne & Kennedy 2018).

Grand Designs has also addressed the challenges and anxieties which some aspiring grand-designers had to confront because of the 2008 GFC (both in the UK and Australia), where deteriorating job prospects and housing affordability was a widespread concern (Ibid). Some episodes depicted how thrift emerged from calculative assemblages that drew together diverse and contradictory spatial dimensions with regard to location – for example, inner city (expensive) and house design (small / creative) alongside individual skills and cultural capital (architectural background). This is illustrated in an episode about Sydney-based professional couple, Domenic Alvaro and Sue Bassnett, who built a tiny but very well-designed house in the expensive inner-city suburb of Surry Hills. The couple explicitly distanced themselves from the mainstream expectation of owning a large house in Australia's sprawling suburbs, and invoked the need to maximise existing resources according to the motto 'less can be more' (Season 1 Episode 2 'Very Small House', Sydney).

In the wake of the 2008 GFC academic research has discussed 'the recessionary turn in cultures of reality TV', documenting responses of the genre to the worsened economic conditions and public anxieties they have produced (Hamad 2014: 225). Property television for example, while originally focused on aspirations for property and home-ownership, has shifted to reflect the new precarity in the real estate market and capitalist economy more broadly (Bruce & Druick 2017). Jean Bruce and Zoe Druick argue that 'post-crisis series increasingly highlighted ways to find economic value', bringing to the fore 'strategies for fixing up properties, such as DIY repairs and crafting', 'finding treasure amidst the trash' – and generally revealing:

the tension between using homes as a stage for the domestic dramas of intimacy – long a feature of so-called “women’s genres” – and thinking about houses and property as a means for shoring up financial security (...). The home – intimate space and financial asset – becomes uncanny, at once homely and unheimlich, familiar and strange, private and public. (Bruce & Druick 2017: 484-5)

British property TV exemplifies this transformation. Ruth McElroy suggests that

recessionary times provided TV experts with additional authority and licence to advise on and influence individual citizen-consumers' choices. McElroy argues that even though 'house buying and selling have become even more fraught and inaccessible', property TV abstained from the critique of structural challenges and inequalities underpinning the crisis (McElroy 2017: 527). McElroy further recognises a return of television programming focused on 'the display of home', gendered domesticity and crafting – harking back to Britain's post-war 'make do and mend' philosophy, which acquires a contemporary anti-consumerist meaning (McElroy 2017: 539) related to thrift.

Friendship in and against the real estate market: imagining the conditions for enduring thrift

Nonetheless this renewed attention to thrift prominent in the studies of reality TV genre, shows that representations of thrift are found across *different* TV formats, targeting different national and international audiences, at different points in time. A great variety of television series have depicted the lives of protagonists through the central location of combined kitchen-living room (*Roseanne*, *Friends*) in small apartments (*Seinfeld*, see below), imagining thrift and dwelling as framed through ideas of friendship as a social practice. This in turn creates the possibility of confronting the inequalities of consumerist capitalist societies. The proliferation of thrift on television can be explained by its connection to norms and values around consumption, grounded in the everyday, and playing out in different economic scenarios. Representations of thrift and dwelling therefore allow for multiple slippages and escaping an easy pigeonholing.

It is typical for the 'apartment plot' (Wojcik 2010, see also Perkins this issue), which is in itself a low-cost studio setting, for the private space of the home to be shared by all characters. The setting provides a backdrop for narrative construction, recurring gags and the transgression of cultural norms, which we argue is connected to thrift. Friendship as a common motif, is developed in the context of these apartment plots and is set against the challenges of the real estate market, which allows protagonists to face its inequalities, though typically this is subtly rather than explicitly portrayed.

American sitcom *Seinfeld* (1989–1998) serves as an illustration of how this well-studied (Pierson 2005, Lavery, Lewis & Dunne 2006, Delaney 2006, Mirzoeffs 2007, Rebhandl 2012, Horn 2015) 'masterpiece' and 'greatest US sitcom ever written' (Raeside 2017) explores friendship as a questionable condition for making thrift endure. The sitcom is set in New York City, after the financial crisis of the early 1970s that fuelled intensive globalisation well into the 1980s based on speculative real estate economy. Lead character Jerry Seinfeld's leased Manhattan

apartment offers a playground for a low-budget life at the end of the 1980s. Thrift is represented as a subversive strategy of making do by the middle-class characters with creative ambitions, most notably through Seinfeld's goal to write a TV script. The characters of the show include Seinfeld's former girlfriend Elaine, childhood friend George, and the turned-into-a-friend neighbour Kramer who constantly transgresses social conventions of sharing, making the spectator wonder (and laugh) about their spontaneous, unintentional and somehow naive lightheartedness in using each others' things and inhabiting private space and conversations. Interactions between these four characters repeatedly consist of constant rushing into Seinfeld's small apartment without notice or sleeping over whenever they need to. Seinfeld's three friends, who can hardly afford to rent an apartment in Manhattan themselves, grab whatever they can find in Seinfeld's fridge, oblivious to everyone else's needs or wants. Their lives jostle between patches of work and unemployment, living together with a partner and separating from him/her, living with parents in Queens/Flushing or choosing to have a sleep-over on the sofa at their friend's place. The run-of-the-mill apartment, furniture and clothing suggest a lower middle-class background. Bert Rebhandl argues that 'the ostentative of wealth, which is often associated with the yuppies, is missing from the series' (2012: 54). Instead, the necessity to share illustrates the character's acquired competence in thrifting and saving. These 'everyday concerns' of the four middle-class single characters in Manhattan muddling through 1980s-90s New York City, amplify the significance of the reality of the property market at the time, when affordable housing was a significant problem and homelessness 'seemed to spiral out of control' (Schwartz 1999: 283).

Seinfeld has been labelled as 'antisocial' (Rebahndl 2015: 45) as the quality of the characters' social bond appears at times idiosyncratic. In fact, the friendship between the four characters unfolds in ways that demonstrate connections between friendship, thrift and individuals capacity (or not) to thrive. Friendships are frequently tested and reflexively probed in this sitcom against the fragmentation and persistent everyday scarcity of New York's inner-city urban life. However, one of the few storylines that does not take place in New York, revolves around Seinfeld taking back the spare keys to his apartment from Kramer after the latter used the apartment repeatedly for rendez-vous with his girlfriend (Season 3 Episode 23 'The Keys'). As a consequence, Kramer is so deeply disturbed by losing his friendship with Seinfeld - because for Kramer, access to Seinfeld's dwelling equals friendship - that Kramer reconsiders his options and decides to try his luck in Hollywood.

Addressed in habitualised mundane ways, thrift is an underpinning source of everyday experience, social bonding and subjectivity in *Seinfeld*. Thrift, as it figures in *Seinfeld*, can be interpreted as a not-yet-normalised or legitimate lifestyle,

whereby the protagonists subvert the traditional rationality associated with professional careers by slipping in and out of unemployment. These events challenge the stability of their social bond and their friendship when living frugally. At the same time friendship also makes thrift endure. While displaying the characteristics of middle-class thrift-by-choice pursued in order to fulfil creative ambitions in the testing urban environment, thrift as portrayed in *Seinfeld* resonates with contemporary women-centric apartment-plot-series such as *Insecure*, *Girls*, *Fleabag* (Perkins) or *Broad City* (Kanai & Dobson) analysed in this issue. The authors discuss the fragilities of young women's middle-classness (comfortable upbringing, higher education from a prestigious university) under 'conditions of material and social hardship' (Kanai & Dobson). Women in these series struggle through the 'adulthood' phase, implying the prospect of reaching another stage of maturity (Perkins). In *Broad City*, as in *Seinfeld*, maturity appears always 'out of reach' and is marked by 'inevitable "failures"' (Kanai & Dobson). Equally, friendship offers a narrative ground for getting by and imagining *enduring thrift*.

Thrift as (televised) endurance

The intersection between thrift and home-making, framed through friendship, sheds light on a possible critical approach to and within these programs. Here we draw on the analysis of scholars who have explored thrift as a mode of endurance necessary to cope with precarity in late-capitalist societies (Berlant 2007, 2011; Povinelli 2011). For example, 1990s movies by Belgian filmmakers Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, including *La Promesse* (1996) and *Rosetta* (1999) deal with deeply deprived lives that, as Lauren Berlant (2007) argues, reproduce aspirations that are fundamentally shaped by middle-class cultural values. These values also materialise in the specific settings of TV programs that are set in the 'private' sphere of homes, and the 'public' sphere of urban spaces. These spaces serve as the actual background for what can be described as 'televised endurance', meaning that the representations of characters' thrifty practices are coupled with hopeful (if unachievable) goals in the face of hardship and precarity. While Berlant acknowledges that the existentially precarious and enduring characters in *La Promesse* and *Rosetta* have a certain degree of agency, Elisabeth Povinelli stresses that endurance reproduces the inescapability from precarity. Cultural values of the middle-class are a 'part of the technology of power and the ethics of substance' (Povinelli 2011: 110) which reproduce a fixed idea of (or a fixation on) a good life. Therefore, it is difficult to evaluate whether the capacity to endure thrift (including through friendship) is ultimately empowering – because it contains elements of agency – or whether it is exclusively obstructive and undermining. It is equally difficult to evaluate the specific related subjectivities produced. Endurance then

echoes the ambivalent qualities of thrift – between choice and necessity, between individual and collective – and can be thought of both as a condition of and resulting from thrift.

This special issue groups mediated narratives of thrift under the category of dwelling as pertaining to the aforementioned individualised and spatial dimensions. Narratives of thrift expose values and practices focused on individual consumption under social anxieties of the time, however limiting or problematic they may be. When portrayed through Seinfeld's mundane life revolving around playing host to his thrifty and at times precarious friends in the 1990s or the lives of people seeking help from Japanese home organisation guru, Marie Kondo, in *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo*, thrift as a set of individualised home-making practices (or techniques) 'does little to challenge the logic or consequences of (...) late capitalism' (Ouellette this issue). On the other hand, thrift can offer a sense of self-empowerment by helping characters adjust to a low budget, that provides a feeling of security and fulfilment, or social belonging. Furthermore, in this issue, the social nucleus of friendship is central, such as in *Girls*, *Broad City* or the family such as in the French documentaries from the 1960s-1980s instructing tenants of the new suburbs how to manage a small budget in an 'appropriate way'.

Thrift can have an undesirable effect too. The pursuit of thrift brings about emotions of loss, inadequacy and deprivation. As Kanai and Dobson argue, despite the *Broad City* protagonists' (middle-class) cultural capital and 'high energy striving' deployed to get by, the outcome is not financial wellbeing and security. Equally, analysing women's TV series such as *Girls* or *Insecure*, Claire Perkins argues (this issue) that thrift signifies 'an enduring state of immobility' or being 'stuck'.

We have shown above that as an idea and type of capital, thrift is modelled through a range of instruments and has roots in the historical gendered divisions of labour, with 'home' as its traditional location (see Yates and Hunter's account of gendered thrift in the US context, 2011). However, while we have located thrift within the domestic setting of home (as opposed to institutional contexts such as the financial sector, see Lehtonen & Pantzar 2002), we have also recognised its important connections to urban and public spaces, which come to the fore in the contributions to this issue. For example, Kanai and Dobson observe that thrift, as an affective female friendship-based strategy of making-do in *Broad City*, 'spills across public spaces', beyond the gendered domesticity of home, and into the streets of New York City and its outdoor parks and benches. Similarly, for Perkins, dwelling refers to having a place in the 'city as a whole'.

Thrift is linked to morality, normativity and thriving and is echoed in many storylines of the different TV programs featured in this issue as they are deconstructed to reveal how the 'good' life and society are imagined and represented

in and through thrift. Netflix series *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* demonstrates how TV can become an arena where narratives of thrift and thriving are tested, while having performative and material effects on the reality format's characters as well as inspired spectators. But how exactly are they negotiated? Laurie Ouellette suggests that this is achieved through gendered discourses of female household labour linked to the problematic notion of individual family 'happiness' contingent on tidying (mostly performed by women). The endorsement of the 'joyful' and 'quasi-minimalist' consumer lifestyle that the practices of decluttering supposedly produce (while operating within the standard self-empowerment neo-liberal logic) sits uncomfortably with the actual material impact of the show on the urban fabric of thrift stores, and the reported unmanageable rise of 'decluttered' objects spurred by the Netflix series in the US and UK in early 2019 (Holder 2019). As Ouellette reminds us, consumption is not only historically gendered, but it is also class-based, as throwing away things is afforded by the affluent middle classes as a sign of power. *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* 'perpetuates these class hierarchies' promoting 'a quasi-minimalist lifestyle based on volition, not necessity', with no interest in 'secondhand reuse'. Ouellette argues that tidying-up 'allows privileged consumers to adopt a throwaway ethic with no concern for the social impact'.

The aspirational ideal of an individually appropriate life holds true also for the comparative analysis of moral economies of debt counselling depicted in TV reality shows in Germany and the US. Silke Meyer (this issue) argues that thrift is 'a perfect example of the nexus of economic decisions and moral orders: Thrift means economising appropriately, with an eye to social norms, situations, and interactions'. Meyer demonstrates how these realms of everyday life are entangled differently in the German programme *Raus aus den Schulden* (*Getting Out of Debts*), which 'offers a way out of debt not by following financial rules but by implanting self-technologies and thus optimising the indebted self' and the US program where 'anybody can get out of debt, as long as they clean up their act and try hard enough'. Despite these differences, in both cases the neo-liberal context turns thrift into a question of 'discipline' and 'trying hard enough', irrespective of precarity and persistent inadequacy (or oppression) of structural systems to create social change noted in many contributions. While the individual precariousness described goes beyond class affiliation, social difference primarily results from the social situation of counselling. Beyond the concern of this publication, the question arises as to which audience is addressed by this globalized format of consulting television.

The articulations of 'women and housing' have been central to analyses of thrift, more recently in relation to the so-called 'austerity media texts' (Petro 2016: 89). Many of the contributions in this issue have focused on gendered forms of thrift discourses and women, bringing in novel insights about thrift's scope and

character. Ouellette exposes the ongoing characterisation and reality of household management as ‘a female problem’, as supported by the whole industry of instructional media aimed at women home-makers. The pieces by Kanai and Dobson and Perkins consider thrift as a coping yet choice-based strategy that signals (middle-class) cultural capital of the young female protagonists struggling to get by living in expensive, competitive cities, while pursuing the ‘project of self-discovery’ and creative ambitions (Perkins this issue). As noted above, ‘doing it thriftily’ as an expression of and tactic of women’s labour, is depicted in contemporary American drama series for and by women, replaces a private, domestic space of home/apartment for public spaces of a city and highlights affective investments in female friendship. Importantly, thrift for these protagonists emerges as a normal and permanent state of dwelling in neo-liberal economies. Women are required to be thrifty in order to survive gendered impacts of structural inequality. In contrast, the gendered socialities associated with thrift and dwelling in the rural setting of crime series *Midsomer Murder* have changed during its 20 seasons. Women were mostly confined to the house and garden in the beginning, and later at public fairs and shows and as spectators (not participants) of sport (such as cricket games). In more recent series, the ‘gentrified pub’ has become a place which addresses gender and ethnic diversity (Zahlmann this issue).

The historical analysis of state TV documentaries from France from the late 1960s to early 1980s is equally instructive of complex (and gendered) thrift and relationships between the private and the public. Laetitia Overney (this issue) shows how post-war boom documentaries, set amidst the new housing developments, made visible for the first time domestic reproduction as work. According to Overney, ‘television uses close-ups when filming what the housewives do, just as it filmed, in those times, the detailed work done by workers and artisans.’ Overney argues that ‘housing problems lead to speaking out in public. Television reveals women who on a daily basis adopt political stances that echo the demands of feminist movements. Women do their share to evolve these new towns’. This analysis is important because it bears witness to the emancipatory and educational aspect of TV, which can be appropriated by the represented women to articulate their perspectives on the emerging sub-/urban communities, without exclusively succumbing to the governmentality frame in understanding TV subjectivities.

The underlying understanding of thrift as an articulation of historically specific national, social and cultural circumstances and institutions points to the crucial role of media as an arena to address and put forward specific ‘imaginaries’. Crime series, *Midsomer Murders*, lends itself especially well, as Stefan Zahlmann argues in his contribution, to study such imaginaries with respect to social change. The imagined moral landscapes of thrift and dwelling are spread between the rural crime scene and the urban hinterland, and are culturally embedded into the

historical depth of austerity in the UK beyond its post-2007–8 expression and ‘middle class ideals of the countryside’ (Zahlmann this issue). While the expectations of how gender and ethnic diversity should be articulated have changed in the series over time, the ways in which the culturally accepted thrifty dwelling is narrated suggest that thrift can be understood as a concept ‘that includes or excludes people according to certain features. Gender, age, and ethnicity; being mentally or physically disabled is also something that enables individuals access to public spheres – or not, as the case may be’ (Zahlmann this issue). However, the decisive marker between these features is social difference, repeatedly but not exclusively reproduced in the over-mediated antagonism between decadent aristocratic life and ‘the lives, well-being and struggle of the common people of Midsomer’ (Zahlmann this issue). While thrift can be seen as integrative and as a common ground between cottage and mansion, Zahlmann insists that the program is ‘a battleground of a society struggling for a modern Britishness’. Thrift and class are not reconciled.

Representations of thrift convey, on the one hand, a response to externalities and, on the other, different strains and facets of agency in the everyday. By analysing television series, these imaginaries illuminate the scales, meanings, techniques and practices of thrift. Overall, thrift is crucially shaped by categories of class and gender. In an authoritative account of thrift in the US context, Joshua Yates posits that ‘the full story of thrift can only be told against the changing social and natural imaginaries of Western modernity’ (2011: 556). Referring to Adam Smith:

It is only against the backdrop of material scarcity that thrift makes sense, and only then, when persons understand themselves as having a kind of autonomy from, and agency toward, the world around them. (Yates 2011: 559)

Collectively, the papers in this special issue consider how thrift narratives are implicated in the mediated processes of home making (or un-making) and dwelling, across time and across different cultural contexts. The themes broached in this introduction about historicity, storytelling and the performative effect of representations as they legitimise particular forms of being, remain open to future research. Studies based on a systematic comparison of different TV formats would help unpack these relationships further. For example, in regards to differences between local/national versus international narrations of thrift in shows such as Netflix’s *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo*, which, as Ouellette suggests (this issue), represent ‘a generic makeover template that is presumed to be globally accessible’. If the tendency in popular television series is towards familiarity, ‘seriality and duration’ (Perkins this issue), the generic and international (Ouellette this issue), the ques-

tions of performativity loom particularly large. Therefore, to what extent are TV representations more likely to perpetuate particular (middle-class and western) narratives of 'good life' and individual responsibilities rather than provide alternatives? Can social voices of critique and dissent exist in entertainment television culture, shaped by consumer capitalist imperatives and neo-liberal logic? As Laetitia Overney (this issue) puts it, 'television can be normative just as it can reflect and even encourage the evolution of mores.'

Building on the existing thrift and media studies scholarship, we suggest that it is productive to consider thrift in popular television 'multi-dimensionally' (Podkalicka & Potts 2014). It is possible to consider mediated everyday thrift practices and their cultural meanings beyond the dichotomy of either necessity or lifestyle, and that thrift is not necessarily located exclusively within the intimacy of home, city or nation. These ambivalences are apparent in the analyses of popular representations of thrift on TV included in this issue. The identified themes are not exhaustive. There is a bias towards popular English-language shows, and analyses from researchers working in advanced western economies. We therefore hope the collection offers a useful contribution to thrift studies, particularly through its elaboration of the relationships between thrift representations, aspirations for the good life and endurance. Whether narrated as comedic, practical competence to be learned when living on a budget; a normative version of home-making; identity-producing in precarious neo-liberal societies; or under the impression of crime as a common ground for diversifying society; thrift refers to the fundamental questions of dwelling and thriving, and remains a recurrent motif of many TV stories and aesthetic templates.

Based on the issue's contributions, we have identified 'endurance' as a productive frame for studies of thrift. Thrift is expressed in the life of those who manage to live on a budget. In some situations, people and characters consult experts and are 'encouraged' to employ social techniques of self-/disciplination that essentially represent an adjustment to middle class ideals of thrift and thriving. Others are required to adapt to challenging real estate market circumstances and endure friendships that transgress normative notions of private/shared space or property. In some ways, responses to scarcity through thrifty practices demonstrate tactical resistance and agency, and as such, endurance cuts across different mediated narratives of thrift.

The contributions in this issue suggest that there is little room for truly disruptive ways of imagining subjectivities and social relations in entertainment television in neo-liberal economies of dwelling. While there are positive, empowering representations of thrift – notably expressed in the form of friendships – thrift as 'televised endurance' appears to mostly serve to reproduce the status quo as the irreversible condition.

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