

Shape Shifting for Time Shifting: Weight Loss in the Transmediation of *This Is Us*

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Successfully competing in Peak TV requires savvy promotions. Generally, “Peak TV” refers to the saturation of scripted television in this alleged new “Golden Age of Television,” with broadcast networks, cable channels, and stand-alone streaming services competing for ever more elusive viewers. Following the Pearson family and its unconventional triplets, NBC’s hit *This Is Us* (2016 to current) has distinguished itself in Peak TV by updating the generic conventions of a family soap with a mobile narrative temporality, constantly moving from present to past and, as season two glimpses suggest, into the future, in ways that create experiential and affective convergences between characters.

This has given the show an edge in an era when network television has struggled with changing televisual viewing practices marked by both time- and platform-shifting. These relate to another significant aspect, body size: a main storyline involves the corpulence and weight loss of sister Kate, which has likewise necessitated body shaping in the contract of actress Chrissy Metz. The vicissitudes of Metz’s body extend Kate’s story, thus creating textual convergences through the body as a platform for transmediation. This response will consider how Metz’s appearances in mainstream television talk shows contribute to this phenomenon.

Metz claims that she “committed to Kate’s evolution” in her audition process knowing that it would involve body shaping.¹ “Body shaping” refers to any activity meant to transform the body, whether through diet, exercise, prosthetics, surgery, or cosmetology. Metz has wavered on the details of her contract since her first disclosures during show promotions in fall 2016. Initially claiming that it required weight loss, Metz soon corrected herself and now claims there is no specific size or weight it stipulates she reach but she must be willing to undertake a health journey like Kate. Following the show and Metz’s promotions, this has meant weight loss. Metz has reportedly lost weight since she started the show, and though numbers are hard to verify, comparisons between images suggest a smaller size.

Weight loss is an interesting strategy in the transmediation of a scripted series in Peak TV. One reason is temporality. Weight loss is a makeover, which has a temporal trajectory through its presentations of Befores and Afters. Though most televisual makeovers are “teleological and unidirectional” toward the Future After,² transmediation through social media shows that many Afters become Befores.³ As such, the temporal mobility of the makeover parallels the temporal mobility of *This Is Us*. A second reason involves prestige. Makeovers are most commonly associated with what many consider lower prestige forms of television like reality TV. Primetime network dramas that experiment with a mobile narrative temporality would more likely be considered higher prestige. The sentimental elements in the generic conventions of the family soap help to mediate between these two prestige levels. The makeover elements also create a connection between scripted and unscripted series, a neglected but significant part of the Peak TV landscape.

1. Metz, Chrissy. *This Is Me: Loving the Person You Are Today*. Narrated by Chrissy Metz, Dey Street Books, 2018. Audiobook, 5 compact discs.

2. Weber, Brenda. *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity*. Duke University Press, 2009.

3. Hass, Margaret. “After the After: The Biggest Loser and Post-Makeover Narrative Trajectories in Digital Media.” *Fat Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 135-151.

Considering this link with unscripted series, I examined the appearances of the actors who play the “Big 3” siblings--Justin Hartley, Sterling K. Brown, and Metz--on prominent television talk shows to gauge differences in Metz’s appearances. The main differences are Metz’s increased appearances on women-themed talk shows like *The Talk*, which she has co-hosted three times; on general entertainment magazines like *Access Hollywood Live*; and on food-themed shows like *The Chew* and *The Rachael Ray Show*. The primary form of transmediation is Metz’s body, which incorporates Kate’s storyline and thus functions as a mobile permalink to the show. As such, Metz’s increased appearances on food-themed shows is also significant. All of the “Big 3” actors have appeared on both *The Chew* and *The Rachael Ray Show*. However, Metz is the only one to have appeared twice on each. Furthermore, Metz’s recipes distinctly differ from her co-stars and fellow guests: while all the others make desserts, Metz’s recipes cooked with chef Carla Hall are more salutary fare: mini bean tostadas and jicama skewers on her first appearance, and chicken noodle soup on her second. Although Metz’s size is only a brief point of discussion in one episode, her size obviously shapes the food associated with her appearance. This also acts as a reminder of Kate’s storyline on *This Is Us*, especially the ways that her parents surreptitiously police her food intake.

The second of Metz’s appearances on *The Chew* is a promotion for her autobiography, *This Is Me*, released in March 2018. The nonfiction elements in both Metz’s book and her talk show appearances add to the transmediation her body performs: increased knowledge of her life and bodily transformations through these other sources also acts back on *This Is Us*, mixing elements of reality TV into the show as signs of the actress Metz reflect in the character Kate. This somatic convergence between actress and character is just another way that *This Is Us* has distinguished itself during Peak TV, a period of significant development and change in American television.

