

Serial Narratives and Viewing Demands I

Anne Gilbert

Nowhere on the Next *Arrested Development*

Serialization in weekly television programs offers ample opportunity for information to be lost, to fall by the wayside in the time between show airings. With serialized narratives, the importance of watching each week is heightened, as missing one episode can lead to losing some enjoyment – or even comprehension – of subsequent episodes. Thus, serialization can effectively divide viewing audiences into in-groups and out-groups, separating those who watch closely week to week from those who watch more casually and may have gaps in their knowledge of the narrative world. In order to combat the loss of important information, promotions for upcoming episodes and “previously on...” segments preview and recap, respectively, the details integral to understanding and enjoying the narrative.

These strategies can be used to illustrate the tension that serialization presents between industry interests and viewers, and among different audience types. Industry attention is often focused on increasing and maintaining audience size and marketability, and therefore the economic function of promotions and previouslys are fairly obvious: Both cater to the casual or irregular viewer, to clue him in on what he may have missed from an earlier episode, or to whet his appetite to tune in next week to see how the snippets and disjointed scene fragments from the promotion will play out. For regular, invested viewers, however, these same elements can frustrate their ability to enjoy each episode as they intend. Viewers who do not need to be reminded of past events or characters, for instance, might find that the inclusion of these elements in the previouslys effectively ruins the surprise of their reappearance in the narrative. Similarly, promotions for upcoming episodes can unintentionally spoil those regular viewers who prefer to have narrative elements revealed by the show itself, rather than by a paratext.

The serialization in television narratives offers pleasures to invested viewers, those whose keen memory and attention is rewarded when details, characters, and plot points are revived and made relevant rather than being left unimportant and forgotten. On the other hand, overly-inclusive previouslys offer that same reward to those viewers who did not put on the work to watch and remember for themselves, but who simply watched the few moments before the start of the episode. The question then arises as to whether serialization is really worth it for loyal viewing audiences, if the industrial strategies aimed at casual viewers might negate the pleasures it offers?

However, there are a few very select cases in which those same paratextual elements are used as the reward for attentive viewing. *Arrested Development*, for instance, ended each episode of its highly serialized comedy with a brief “On the next *Arrested Development*...” segment. Regular viewers quickly caught on to the fact that these previews featured scenes and storylines that never appeared in subsequent episodes. The false previews, therefore, offered a running gag only to those audiences “in the know,” and subversively used the previews to expand the show’s serialized backstory rather than

clarify it for irregular viewers. In this way, *Arrested Development* was able to both cater to the industrial advantages of previews by offering entertainment with continued viewing, and also reward that continued viewing in an unexpected way.

Though this example is notable, it is a rather singular strategy for negotiating widened gap, created by serialization, between the in crowd of viewers who watch every week and the out-group of more casual viewers. In most cases, promotions and previouslys remain one site at which the tensions between industrial demands and audience pleasures are concentrated, but hardly the only one. These strategies, after all, are only necessary when serialized narratives are spread over multiple weeks, months, and seasons –DVD sets of complete TV seasons often forgo any mention of the last or next episode, as those episodes are immediately accessible in their entirety, and viewers are able to watch in rapid succession rather than waiting a week or longer. Thus DVD releases of television programs further complicate the tensions between viewers who understand a serialized narrative as fragments dispensed slowly to delay gratification, and those who consume it all at once.

As such, serialization presents different challenges for various groups: Industry needs would dictate indefinite serialization that nevertheless provides ample entrance points for new viewers. For regular viewers, heavily serialized narratives offer the pleasure of rediscovery and reward recall of past events, but must balance this with a strong sense of direction to avoid viewer fatigue. And for casual viewers, serialized backstory is an obstacle to fully understanding an individual episode, one that must be overcome to join the in-group. The tensions of serialization, represented in part through previouslys and promotional paratexts, are those that must therefore be constantly weighed against one another, but that can never satisfy all interests at the same time.