

Serial Narratives and Viewing Demands I

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In 1967, Minimalist artist Donald Judd asserted that, in his artwork, “The order is not rationalistic and underlying but is simply order, like that of continuity, one thing after another.” Far from just describing a certain form of art experience, this “one thing after another” also epitomizes narrative television's serial imperative. Let’s consider, for example, the immensely popular show *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004), a serial narrative *par excellence* in the way it explicitly favors repetition over closure. Relationships operate in a cyclical progression on the show; the women meet men, they date, the relationships eventually dissolve, and, soon enough, the characters seek out new men and the cycle begins again. Judd’s dictum “one thing after another,” then, rings true for *Sex and the City* and, indeed, episodic television in general. After all, “one thing after another” signifies not only that where each object/episode/relationship ends another is ready to take its place, but also that this repetition begets an apparently infinite progression, a sense of endlessness.

Sex and the City’s distillation of the trials and tribulations of everyday life down to its most salacious elements—which viewers were able to experience vicariously (and voyeuristically) week after week—serves as a fairly obvious example of the potential correlation between seriality, pleasure and desire. As a medium, television privileges distention over resolution; thus, the pleasure of watching television stems from its continual delay of satisfaction and fulfillment. Television relies on both the semblance of narrative structure (in its blocked-off slots of programming, progression of events and episodes, etc.) and the actuality of its lack of closure. It creates a lack and then fills it, but incompletely. The continued necessity of seriality becomes clear through this mechanism of incomplete satisfaction—the desire for a resolution that will never come—because it is out of this desire that our viewing pleasure emerges.

Part of the narrative drive of the serial/episodic form is to keep us coming back. And what better way to keep us coming back than to refuse closure? Closing off television’s perpetuity would degrade its very conception as a medium: its episodic structure and serialized expectations. What is television if not a medium of profligate reiterations? It courts desire by insinuating fulfillment and offers a litany of half-resolutions and “until next times” to the questing viewer. I argue that television continuously and willfully (one might even say gleefully) circles back on itself. Televisual pleasure, then, emerges not from fulfilled desire, but from its perpetual build and eternal revision—not in spite of a lack of definitive satisfaction, but because of it.

The average viewer confronts many gaps when watching television; these gaps are both literal and figurative—from commercials, which break up the narrative continuity of a show, to the day- or week-long lulls between episodes. These gaps also relate closely to television’s seriality (and its pleasures). Gaps between episodes, for example, simultaneously attract and distance the viewer, impersonating reality while willfully failing to reproduce it. Due to the serial nature of the medium, characters, settings, and plots may seem fully-formed by the binding power of narrative and the incredible distension possible on television (events can take place over months and years, which allows for both realistic storytelling and world-building). And yet, no one mistakes television for real life.

Any given viewer may use television as an escape, to relax after a difficult day or as a way of forgetting an uncomfortable situation, and watching may be gratifying both because of television's realism and its lack thereof. A viewer can take part without having to be part (of the narrative). By admitting that she is not part of the televisual world, the viewer gains access to an immense field of potential play and production, but she also loses the possibility of the utopian narrative, of the satisfactory resolution to the story, the "happily ever after." This apparent loss is also the viewer's gain. By not foreclosing on its narratives, television offers a space for pleasure in repetition as such, a space in which the viewer sees herself endlessly reflected and embraced by the image. This, I argue, explicates, in part, the continual pleasure of and desire for serial narratives. The end is always just another beginning.