

## **Serial Narratives and Viewing Demands II**

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### Queer Pleasures: Negotiating Prime Time's Serial Melodrama and Beyond

My response concerns, but is not limited to, the alternative reading strategies that queer viewers have applied to viewing television's serialized narratives, allowing them to access and derive pleasure from texts and genres that, in their largely heteronormative constructions, would seem otherwise indifferent or even hostile to their engagement as viewers. Concurrently, I suggest that serialization itself, through its emphasis on ambiguity and the deferral of narrative closure, fundamentally informs these strategies. In the 1980s, the prime time serial melodrama and the queer pleasures it afforded commenced the "queering" of prime time television itself, extending across genre and well past the soap opera and its nighttime counterpart. At the content level, the serial melodrama and the television genres that it has impacted have remained conservative in their continued focus upon heterosexual romance and the substantiation of binary notions of gender and the traditional family. As a result, these texts would seem to offer little direct appeal for the queer viewer, beyond the most obvious of "camp" readings. My response, informed by second wave feminist criticism on both melodrama and the soap opera, considers queer reception practices, seeking to answer queer theorist Alexander Doty's question about popular culture: "What's here for queers?" (29).

A close relationship exists between melodrama and serialization: although both had appeared previously in film and radio, as well as in daytime television as the soap opera, neither melodrama nor serialization established a viable presence in prime time television until the late 1970s. Melodrama and serialization developed in tandem during this period, making use of one another, as they became an increasingly common aspect of prime time television. The first serialized programs in prime time were often referred to as "prime time soaps," most notably programs such as *Dallas* (1978-1991, CBS) and *Dynasty* (1981-1989, ABC) and drew heavily upon conventions of the film melodrama of Hollywood's classical period (primarily the "women's pictures" of the 1940s and 1950s). The serial melodrama's popularity in the early 1980s led other genres such as the situation comedy (*Cheers*) and the detective procedural (*Hill Street Blues* and its legal procedural cousin, *L.A. Law*) to start experimenting with conventions of melodrama as well as the serialized format. Having permuted and moved away from its early associations with the daytime soap opera, the prime time serial melodrama has had an indelible impact on how television tells (and sells) its stories and who is able to enjoy them. By the 1990s, programs as diverse in content and form as *Roseanne* (1988-1997, ABC), *Friends* (1994-2004, NBC), *The X-Files* (1993-2002, FOX), *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002, FOX), and even *The Simpsons* (1990-present, FOX) were making use of serialized melodrama in their narratives.

Serialization and conventions of melodrama have proliferated across genres in prime time television, intervening in the queer viewer's ambivalence towards heteronormative narratives and allowing for more oppositional readings than ever before. Queer visibility may be greater, but this is more a function of advertisers and an increasingly valued and targeted queer demographic than any newfound enlightenment on the part of network executives. *Desperate Housewives* and *Ugly Betty* (2006-2010, ABC), in their use of intentional camp, regular gay characters, and arguably "queer aesthetics," suggest an intentional and even progressive targeting of the queer viewer, but even within these purportedly inclusive texts, it can be suggested that previous queer viewing strategies, at the level of form and through "reading against the grain,"

continue to afford the most pleasure to the queer viewer. The serial form and melodramatic elements have also worked to queer programs such as *Supernatural*, *Mad Men* (2007-present, AMC), *True Blood* (2008-present, Showtime) and others across the prime time schedule, including them in the serial melodrama genre and opening them to queer viewers in unexpected ways. The continued validity of oppositional readings contradicts notions of queer assimilation, with the ubiquity of serialization and melodrama also suggesting a subtle and more complex queering of prime time television, one tied to form and reception rather than content, and requiring further consideration and discussion.