Serial Narratives and Viewing Demands I

Elliot Panek

Now that the way that broadcast media doles out serial stories cannot be taken for granted (with a significant portion of the audience consuming serialized television content on DVR or DVD schedules, all at once or when they want), it is clear that this mode of storytelling will not necessarily survive merely because it is the way that radio and television stories have always been profitably produced, distributed, and viewed. If this mode of storytelling is to survive, it will do so because there are some inherent virtues to it. It is an appropriate time to ask what one can do, affectively or emotionally, by telling a story over time that evolves in time (if not exactly in "real time") with the audience that one cannot do otherwise.

This mode of storytelling, with characters and narrative worlds that evolve, with gaps, over an extended period of time (i.e. more than two years) can create a kind of bond between the audience and characters/creators/narrative worlds similar to the ones viewers have with people or places that they encounter in real life. The parasocial bond formed between audience and character depends upon the traditional structure of television's serial narrative form. We are designed to take pleasure in being social, in forming bonds with one other. Anything that effectively mimics that experience is also likely to feel pleasurable, even more so if some of the unpleasantness or "rough edges" of real life are done away with. Certainly, all stories bear some resemblance to our real lives and provide us with characters we may form bonds with, but if the stories do not unfold across time the way serials do, they are unlike our real experiences in a fundamental way. Though stories that may be consumed all at once (e.g. a standalone novel or a film) can produce great pleasure, they are incapable of providing the *same* "social-mimicry" pleasure that an evolving serial can produce.

Of course, the same could be said of an extended print or film serial such as the *Harry Potter* story. As Harry grows up and his world ages, so, too, does the world of the audience (at roughly the same pace). However, television serials check in with the audience on a regular basis, again, more accurately mimicking their experiences with other people and the real world around them. The meetings of audiences and television characters, like meetings amongst individuals in real life, were typically regimented by the set scheduling of modern life. What happens, then, when schedules are softened by emerging media technology?

It is of note that schedule-softening is happening both in the consumption of entertainment (e.g. recording a program and watching it when one wants to) and in social interactions (e.g. meeting up "on the fly" rather than at a regularly appointed time each week). This should not be confused with schedule *eradication*. In both entertainment and social cases, media users cannot opt to engage in the experience *whenever* they want but can only shift the experience in time within a frame established by some other entity (in the case of entertainment: when the creator decides to make the content available; in the case of social interaction: when the other individual is available and willing to interact). Here, then, is another crucial similarity between the traditional mode of serial storytelling and the audience's real social experience: the pace at which they consume it is only

partially under their control. This lack of total control over when one encounters the story and characters again is akin to the lack of control one experiences in the social world. One cannot necessarily summon another person when one feels the need the way one can choose to watch another episode of a television program on DVD. It is possible, then, that viewers sense the presence of some potentially resistant entity behind the text (i.e. the creator) and thus the interaction between the audience and the text feels more human and social because of this lack of total control.

Finally, we might contrast this mode of storytelling with one that evolves over time but has *no* gaps. Continuous, evolving narratives (e.g. the online version of *Big Brother*) are certainly as similar to real life as one could get without allowing interaction between the audience and the characters. However, it is possible that such narratives may not be pleasurable for the same reason being around the same people continuously isn't very pleasurable. We like having breaks, even from people or places we adore, if only for variety's sake.