

## Serial Narratives and Viewing Demands II

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If serialization is ubiquitous in media culture one possible question we could ask is, does it function in the same way across media? How can we differentiate between serialization on television and other mediums and why might we want to? Serialization can teach us what's specific about television as a narrative form since most series use it in some capacity. Perhaps we can begin to glean how audiences engage with television by understanding the specific demands serialized narratives place on the viewer by looking specifically at the issue of closure.

Closure is not new on television. Episodic programs have always offered the promise of weekly closure. The bad guys are caught. The status quo is regained. Indeed, this is often cited as part of their appeal. However, the expectation of long-term serial closure is a recent development within the U.S. TV landscape. Longer story arcs that can span from across just a few episodes to longer season and even series long arcs are no longer the purview of the television serial. There are few programs that don't utilize some level of serialization in flexi-narrative form. Sitcoms like *How I Met Your Mother* have the promise of long-term closure built into the premise.

Audience engagement with serialized narratives is predicated on the promise of reward. If the viewer is patient, tunes in from week to week, she will be rewarded with sense of narrative completion. Serial narratives ask, even require, their viewers to participate in careful and sustained viewing often over a period of years. In return viewers' dedication will payoff in some kind of satisfying narrative closure. A definitive ending gives a television series a sense of completion and a feeling of unity. The more an audience feels there will be a satisfying conclusion, the more apt they are to keep tuning in, therefore serialization also serves an obvious economic function. In itself, this isn't new; television has always relied on the cliffhanger to keep audiences coming back week-to-week. What does appear to be new is the expectation of overall narrative cohesion.

In response, viewer anxiety often emerges around the specter of cancellation, or worse still, the possibility of narrative dissatisfaction culminating in the feeling that one has "wasted time" following the series through to its end. This seems to be particularly important for viewers who watch a series as it airs from week to week. In the past, a viewer might have given up on a series when it was no longer satisfying, but the expectation that there will be an end ups the ante. Viewers may be reluctant to drop the show in the hope that eventually, it will all come together. This was made apparent in the recent ends of *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica*. Viewers who were disappointed with how these two series ended often cited a lack of fulfillment. Some feel, and I include myself in this some, that these series did not live up to their end of the contract. So, while serialization may offer a way to maintain audience engagement, if shows can't end well then audiences may eventually choose not to engage with them at all.

The importance of serialization as a narrative strategy isn't confined to "quality" or "cult" series, though discussions of serialization tend to focus on that genre.

We should expand the analysis of serialized elements to other genres. Addressing how other shows incorporate serialized arcs can teach us about the narrative structures specific to television and how television audiences engage with them.

For example most reality competition series rely on serialized narratives. The appeal of series like *American Idol* or *So You Think You Can Dance* has been attributed to the participatory element of voting which gives the audience a sense of authorial control. However, these series also include highly serialized narratives of growth that cultivate an expectation of a satisfying conclusion. The weekly packages reveal new information about contestants and comments often highlight a successful contestant's ability to grow and mature across the season. Like serials, satisfaction is predicated on high level of audience engagement that is cultivated through serialized arcs, but the associated anxiety of cancellation does not seem to occur. Unlike fictional television, the audience knows for certain that, at the very least, the season will end with a winner regardless of whether or not the series is cancelled, therefore eliminating anxiety over the possibility that it might not end. We might not like who wins, but there will be a winner and some sense of closure will be achieved.

The question of serialization continues to remain relevant, even central, to discussions about television narratives. Examining the issue of closure and how expectations of it are cultivated and/or satisfied through the use of serialization, can give us insight into the specificity of television narrative forms.