

## Serial Narratives and Viewing Demands II

### Janet Staiger

My proposal for a panel on “Serial Narratives and Viewing Demands” stated: “Serialization is ubiquitous in our culture. However, serialization makes the viewing experience different from watching something in its entirety. For one thing, the amount of information to be organized increases dramatically as length expands. Not only the length but also the inter-episode gap matters. Retaining narrative content for interruptions is different when the gap is one day versus a gap of one week or six months. Additionally, anecdotal evidence indicates that both the slow episodic release of narrative and the desire for more affect spectators in not only a cognitive but also an affective manner: anxiety seems to develop. What are the questions to ask about serialization and viewing? What does research in serialization offer to explaining watching media?”

For my response, I want to emphasize research on serialization and affectivity (although I will mention briefly cognition as well). I am violating the “Flow Response” rule against referencing other scholarship because I believe the rule is anti-collegial, unintentionally promotes plagiarism, and, in this case, contradicts the purpose of the panel.

Serialization is ubiquitous in our culture and makes the viewing experience different from watching something in its entirety. For one thing, the amount of information to be organized increases dramatically as length expands. As well, length almost invariably produces complexity as well. So cognitive demands are important to consider.

However, we have anecdotal evidence that both the slow release of the story and the desire for more information affects spectators in more than a cognitive manner. Jennifer Haywood observes that within one year of the appearance of *Pickwick Papers*, Thomas Arnold was warning against the story. Arnold described it as “a laudanum-like drug, one distilled drop by drop into the brain. It is this slow, steady addictive process of textual progression, not the reading itself [or its content], which is perceived as particularly insidious” (6). Hayward also recounts that readers in the 1800s expressed “anxiety” over waiting for episodes of a story to appear. This affective reaction to serial installments also seems to exist in the 1900s. Herbert Blumer in one of the Payne Fund studies warns in 1933 of the dangers of serials in which young spectators are left on the cliff, week after week, with no catharsis. He writes:

Instead of leading the excited feelings of the child to a state of quiescence or satisfaction, the serial ends at the point where they are keyed up to the highest pitch. The result is to put the youthful spectator under the spell of suspense, sometimes in frenzy or panic, which persists for a week, only to be renewed at the next installment. . . . [I]n short, [he has difficulty] in freeing his mind from the thoughts of the picture. (121)

With DVD technology, contemporary spectators can overcome to some degree this anxious affective experience by waiting for the full-season’s DVD to be released, but the alternative is what Ivan Askwith labels “binge viewing” (176). Will Brooker (59) describes fans debating the pros and cons of weekly viewing versus saving up episodes to watch in a concentrated form.

Such a demand for filling in narrative gaps and resolving mysteries leads to what is considered one of the major pleasures that occurs between episodes: speculating amongst viewers about what will happen next. Some fans troll for advance information about

forthcoming plot developments (Jonathan Gray and Jason Mittell), something that would not happen if the entire narrative were available in one gigantic helping. Gray speculates that this trolling is a way to compensate for the anxiety of the wait: “Spoiler fans attempt to eliminate their undesirable anticipation for the next episode by reading spoilers, thereby creating a new form of anticipation for the pre-viewed events” (153). Of course, they share what they learn with other fans. Thus, serial distribution opens up conversations and reading groups which may accelerate fan community pleasure.

It may be that serialization accentuates focus on narration. Allan Cameron argues that films which use a complex narrative form necessarily open up narrational awareness, specifically about use of archival materials, the process of remembering, the vulnerability of the subject to chance, and the ability to represent (1-3). He writes: “audiences are . . . hypersensitized to the rules and forms of narrative” (22). M. J. Clarke agrees. Another outcome is viewers’ creation of a “central mastermind” (124) both within the narrative and external to it. In the case of *Lost*, Clarke notes the fans’ “anxiety” (124) about whether the program’s showrunners as those external masterminds would eventually be able to handle its narrative complexity.

Thus, the questions of serialization do involve cognitive demands, but the commingling of cognition and affect needs to be studied in order to understand the reception and pleasures of this sort of storytelling.