

## Serial Narratives and Viewing Demands

### Ryan Lizardi

Maintaining viewership on serial television narratives is a bit like trying to carry a handful of sand. No matter how much you grab at the beginning, in this case with an intriguing pilot, what you are left with at the end will always be less than what you started with. Some sand, viewers, will fall through the cracks. Dropping the metaphor, adding viewers in the middle can be daunting when the plots are so complex and twisting that there is no simple "entry-point" episode for those who have seen none of the series to date.

There are a few contemporary trends that have made this task of creating a consistently engaging serial television narrative both more desirable and more difficult. More desirable in that good serials make for firmer audiences and "appointment television" and also create a need for more consumption outlets like iTunes or DVD for nostalgia purposes or to catch up and fill in gaps. On the flip side, current serialization practices have made consistent viewing even more difficult to sustain, as viewers are many times forced to endure additional "intra-season" gaps as well as increasingly convoluted mystery divulging techniques. The concept of a separate "fall season" and "spring season" is one that is maddening for those deeply involved in a serial narrative, especially considering that this practice has been marked with effectively two different cliffhanger season finales. This might be tolerable to the average fan if the revelation flow of a serial's inevitable mysteries was consistent and engaging, but many shows either hold back too much and alienate fans or give everything up and disappoint. Fans seem to want the perfect balance of mystery and exposition, which considering the many failed *Lost* clones is closer to alchemy than a known formula. *Lost* suffered from a fan purge as well in the middle of its run, only to right the ship with the marking of its end date. Though this technique helped portion out the revelation of mysteries, it is not a practice that was seen as a trendsetter. How many other successful television shows will be able to "quit while they're ahead" and leave years of money on the table? The constraints of American commercial television do not usually allow for such artistic freedoms.

This political economic concern is just one of the hidden ideological issues implicit within discussions of serialized television narratives. The discourses surrounding these shows are rife with power dynamics involved in gender, race, and sexuality concerns just to name a few. The legitimization of certain genres, tropes, character types, and settings, not to mention the reciprocal de-legitimization of others, set up a situation where the serialized narrative many times stands in for the hegemonic status quo. It is not that the serialized television narrative is inherently patriarchal or homophobic, but what has come to be known as the quintessential type of serial narrative is filtered through these ideologies. Serials have gotten a great deal of attention in the recent time because of their sudden ubiquitous nature on prime time American television. Catalysts for this trend include the wild success of shows like *24* and *Lost*, which in turn inspired networks to flood the market with clones like *Prison Break* and *FlashForward*. But this implies that the serial narrative was somehow invented by these shows, or at the very least they are the best versions to date. The hidden ideological implication is that certain genres that are

traditionally aimed at straight white males, such as the science fiction and action show, are more culturally significant and demanded by audiences, whereas genres traditionally aimed at females and other cultures, like the soap opera and the telenovela, are less important despite the fact that they contain many of the same serialization tropes, character types, and narrative devices. There are some nuanced contemporary examples of serialized shows, like *Grey's Anatomy*, that occupy genres traditionally aimed at audiences other than straight white males, but does the existence of these shows and their treatment by scholars and the popular press in comparison to shows like *Lost* reaffirm ideological hierarchies of a hegemonic nature? These are the kinds of questions that must be asked along side of the challenges of sustaining viewership if an understanding of the cultural impact of serial narratives on television is to be achieved.