

## The Mass Audience Lives! (Or Does It?) Stephen Groening

Elaborated in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre characterizes seriality as “a plurality of isolations” and the dominant social grouping in contemporary capitalism. Sartre uses the example of a queue for a bus, the radio, and the stock exchange to demonstrate how isolation is the necessary precondition for the creation of a large aggregate of individual strangers. Because seriality addresses the relationship between different members of an audience dispersed over space and time, it provides a compelling theoretical framework for thinking about television’s mass audience.

For Sartre, isolation is a condition of modernity, rather than a byproduct of technology. He begins with a relatively mundane example of the queue of people waiting to board a city bus. This grouping of people, Sartre observes, will have a diverse background, will be taking the bus for different reasons, and will be thinking divergent thoughts. According to Sartre, they are a “plurality of isolations: these people do not care about or speak to each other and, in general, they do not look at one another; they exist side alongside a bus stop” (256). Sartre goes on to show that this relationship of isolation is an active project of the individuals involved rather than unity. The people waiting might turn their backs to each other, or quite deliberately remain only “semi-aware” of the others in the queue. As they board the bus, they do so in a series, one by one, isolated from each other (256).

But the active project of isolation, Sartre notes, has a rational logic underlying it. Because each member of a series treats each member of the series as “Other,” that member recognizes that s/he is also “Other.” As such, each member recognizes that they are part of the group waiting for the bus. The isolation between each member of the queue, then, is not total, for all the other members of the queue are still visible and audible. The recognition of isolation within the grouping of the bus queue and the recognition of seriality among those waiting for the bus is thus also a method of living practically through the arrangement of interchangeability set up by the transportation system where each fare-paying passenger is the same as any other fare-paying passenger (259). Thus, seriality is a consequence of the capitalist system that requires standardization and universal equivalence. As Sartre goes on to examine the market, we can see that seriality arises from the system of objectification inherent in capitalism. Using the example of a commodities trader, Sartre demonstrates that “*he makes himself the other*” (289, italics in original), in order to successfully navigate the market. Seriality is thus dependent on projection: turning one’s self into an object and becoming an interchangeable part, or an image. For Sartre, seriality is a social mechanism used to accommodate the economic structure.

Sartre demonstrates that seriality is without its apparent paradoxes. For instance, the act of reading the newspaper at the bus stop connects the individual to “the national collectivity” – even as it separates the individual from others at the bus stop, it connects the reader to the hundreds and thousands of others reading the newspaper (258). Yet each reader is isolated from each other reader; it is an example of two kinds of seriality at once. Therefore, isolation has a relationship to the process of creating masses, in that it is the necessary precondition for the creation of the large aggregate of individual strangers (258). In order to better demonstrate the relationship between masses and seriality, Sartre turns to the mass of radio listeners.

Radio establishes a serial relationship of absence between listeners. The voice on the radio is “Other,” separated from listeners, but not in the same way that the listeners are separated from each other. The listeners are a series of individuals whose relationship is their isolation from each

other, a relationship that makes them all equal to each other. The voice coming over the radio is a third party, which is separate from the series and yet controls it by bringing the series into being. In other words, the organizing principle of the group of radio listeners is its reciprocal isolation, and yet the reason why the listeners are part of this particular series is the voice on the radio (270-276).

From this brief outline of a rather complex philosophical concept, I think we can draw several conclusions about the mass audience and television. First, the series is a grouping of individuals who share experience even if they are dispersed over space and time. The number of individuals in the series does not matter, which makes the series a useful alternative to the mass vs. niche audience debate. Second, the series is a grouping of individuals characterized by isolation; a characterization which is crucial to understanding television's audience, since it is likewise a large group of individuals isolated from each other (and like many series, the individuals in it recognize their own isolation). Third, each series is structured by forces outside of its members: public transportation, the market, the radio, and (more germane to this forum) television programming. And this brings me to what I feel is the most important quality of seriality as a concept: that it applies to what might be termed "everyday life," media institutions, and the market economy. It seems to me that, since television itself is an amalgam of the quotidian, the means of communication, and the capitalist market economy, we need television studies to mobilize concepts and ways of thinking which account for its many valences and facets.

References:

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume 1*. New York: Verso, 2004.