

# Psychoanalytic Seriality as Media Theory: From Freud's Couch to Yours

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It might pass as either a trite or trivializing observation to say that serial narratives cause trauma. The fact of the matter is, they do. At the time of this writing, one need only to think back at the audience uproar that the final season of HBO's *Game of Thrones* incurred.<sup>1</sup> In fact, to celebrate the series' 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, HBO released a trailer celebrating its divisive eighth season. The initial announcement and release of the trailer was covered by *The Hollywood Reporter*, which had to shut down the comments section within 24 hours as the two-minute summary clip "seem[s] to have re-traumatized fans" who, again, demanded HBO remake the final season of the hugely popular show.<sup>2</sup> Viewed this way, the series finale to *Game of Thrones* is less a definitive conclusion and more the designated site of an opened wound.

Seriality names a relationship between parts and wholes, the study of which tends to break down into three main approaches: the study of narrative, the study of audiences, and the study of social or group formation.<sup>3</sup> Psychoanalysis brings each of these three areas of concern together. The serial, as we can see most evidently in its narrative form, is cut—the hole in the whole. There is a material cut to the narrative, as it is clearly segmented and delivered in pieces over time. When we spot a gap in these material cuts of a series—an empty space of time, a temporal interval between television episodes, let's say—it seems as though nothing is there, or it is a

blankness that can be filled *ad hoc* with audience activity (writing fan fiction, discussing a series with friends, demanding HBO redo the last season of *Game of Thrones*, etc.). But this seeming blankness is the most important thing to see. Where there is gap, there is cut. Rather than breaking the narrative, this cut binds it. But this is not just a material cut—it is a psychological cut as well. Interrogating the serial cut enables us to advance a psychoanalytic theory of seriality. The structure of trauma, as understood by Freud, is serial. This essay argues that the opposite is also true—that seriality is inherently traumatic.

My move in linking psychoanalysis and narrative through seriality explores aspects of psychoanalytic texts that have received less treatment than others, and it brings this theory to bear on media studies which has not fully developed a theory of seriality or the serial form as such. Taking as point of departure two moments in the development of serial media that align with developments in psychoanalytic theory, this essay snaps into relation a theory of seriality dormant in the text of Freud and Lacan. The first moment is near the end of the literary serial's peak and at psychoanalysis's beginnings, from the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth century. In two of Freud's writings from 1895, *The Project for a Scientific Psychology* and *Studies on Hysteria*, seriality appears as a way to conceptualize trauma and the consequences of the clinical practice of analysis itself. The second moment is in the mid-to-late twentieth century—the initial boom period of televisual seriality—through the work of Jacques Lacan and Jean-Paul Sartre. For Sartre, seriality names a structure of oppression that must be erased through the formation of a genuine collective or “group-in-fusion.” For Lacan, seriality shows how the symbolic order is structured by an impossible hole—a gap—which he calls the real. The encounter with the real is most closely associated with trauma in Lacan. Paying attention to seriality in Lacan, however, shows us that what's most traumatic is the arrival and arising of the symbolic order. The cut of the real within the symbolic order allows Lacan to apprehend a radicality that Sartre forecloses.

Rather than simply presenting two novel approaches to the overlooked notion of seriality pervading each psychoanalyst's thought, this reading of Freud and Lacan together enables us to articulate what I am calling psychoanalytic seriality. I do not propose this as a new “kind” of seriality, but a way to see the serial form that emphasizes the homology between it and the psyche. Reading Freud's emphasis on the inherent trauma to the serial and Lacan on the structuring role the serial gap plays in the symbolic order, allows us to see that the formation of subject in psychoanalysis occurs against the cut of seriality. The serial gap is the hole in the whole that paradoxically introduces a break at the moment it binds a series and the subject.

## Part I: Serial Trauma

In Freud's *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, he first outlines how trauma is—in a meaningful way—serial. “We invariably find,” Freud writes, “that a memory is repressed which has only become a trauma by *deferred action* [*Nachträglichkeit*].”<sup>4</sup> Freud concludes this only after recounting the story of a patient, Emma, who is “subject at the present time to a compulsion of not being able to go into shops *alone*.”<sup>5</sup> Emma attempts to explain her behavior by reference to an incident which occurred at a shop when she was twelve. As Freud recounts, “[Emma] went into a shop to buy something, saw the two shop-assistants . . . laughing together, and ran away in some kind of *affect of fright*.”<sup>6</sup> The patient explains her symptom—not being able to enter shops alone—by reference to this singular event.

Freud, however, is unconvinced of this singular explanation for the symptom. Referring to the initial event as “Scene 1,” analysis unearths *another* “Scene,” an even earlier one, which better explains the symptom but only by thinking the two Scenes together. Through analysis, Emma recollects that, when, she was just eight years old, she was sexually assaulted by a shopkeeper who laughed as he grabbed at her through her clothes.<sup>7</sup> What Freud understands is that Emma’s symptom cannot be the result of a one-off occurrence, “We can now understand Scene I (shop-assistants) if we take Scene II (with the shopkeeper) along with it. We need an associative link between the two. She herself pointed out that it was provided by the *laughing*: the laughing of the shop-assistants had reminded her of the grin with which the shopkeeper had accompanied his assault.”<sup>8</sup> This trauma can only be understood *as a series* and the series can only be apprehended retroactively.

What Freud engages with here as analyst is a search for coherence in a discontinuous and gapped narrative. Coherence is not on the side of continuity, however, as the analysand's narrative is an interruptive one that can only be made sensible retroactively with careful attention paid precisely to its gapped structure. These two scenes were four years apart. The first scene, being laughed at by shop-assistants, is determined by the analysand as the genesis of her present compulsion to not go into shops alone. To have such an extreme reaction to this laughter suggests to Freud that there must be something else imbuing the laughter with its powerful content. This unearths another memory, again at a shop, but this one far more serious—a sexual assault. What Freud realizes is that the sexual assault suffered by Emma at age eight was not registered *as a sexual assault* until her visit to a shop at age 12. The laughter of the shop-assistants at her clothes felt assaulting in nature and brought to light “an affect which. . . did not arouse as an experience” initially.<sup>9</sup> Put another way, it was the laughter of the shop-assistants in the near

present that retroactively called forth the trauma of the assault from Emma's past which did not—could not—register *as* an experience until the later event.

Trauma, for Freud, relies on this precise understanding of retroactivity: a seemingly innocuous incident calling forth the trauma of a previous event. This is the way for a prior event to even register as a trauma in the first place. What Freud begins to understand here is that trauma does not occur continuous with the subject's linear experience of time. Freud is able to show this through the two scenes of Emma's recollection; a series which shows backwards causality.<sup>10</sup> Seriality as form shares exactly this same structure: it appears continuous and linear but our understanding of it relies, crucially, on *Nachträglichkeit*, or retroactivity.

To think according to the logic of *Nachträglichkeit* enables us to see that meaning emerges not linearly from cause to effect but retroactively from effects that posit their own causality. While trauma studies, particularly the work of Cathy Caruth, has been influential at emphasizing the inarticulability of trauma, a close understanding of Freud's meaning here obliges us to note that he thinks trauma *is* representable *but* only through the necessity of *Nachträglichkeit*. It is not that the first event is inaccessible, it is that access to it is opened up retroactively. Trauma is an impossible hole in our symbolic experience. It cannot be recalled like an innocuous memory, it confronts *us*. It is the *series* that makes trauma apprehensible and *Nachträglichkeit* is Freud's way of understanding it. The registration of this trauma is retroactive, it does not occur continuous with the subject's experience of linear time. This makes trauma a series. We might recall Marx's famous correction of Hegel that history repeats itself, first as tragedy then as farce. We might imagine Hegel's riposte: that one needs the farce to be able to fully register the tragedy.

### Serial Analysis

Following Freud's thread of thought on the retroactivity of the traumatic series takes us to the following claim: the serial is inherent to the structure of our understanding of trauma. If trauma becomes apprehensible serially then the serial is inherently traumatic. Freud does, indirectly, pursue this line of thought in another early publication, 1895's *Studies on Hysteria*, written with Josef Breuer. In that publication's fourth section, "The Psychotherapy of Hysteria," written by Freud alone, he notes that analysis has a serial problem. While the talking cure requires the analysand's narrative to form free of interruption, the analytic session itself has to end at some point. It is these "interruptions . . . imperatively prescribed by incidental circumstances in the treatment, such as the lateness of the hour," which occur "at the most inconvenient points, just as one may be approaching a decision or just as a new topic emerges," Freud writes.<sup>11</sup> In short, the purely practical endpoint to a session

means that an analyst and analysand cannot talk about everything in a single session. The interruption, the end of the session, confronts the analysand with an ending that occurs before the analysand is really ready to leave. Freud is compelled to liken this to the experience of reading serial fiction:

Every newspaper reader suffers from the same drawback in reading the daily instalment of his serial story, when immediately after the heroine's decisive speech or after the shot has rung out, he comes upon the words: 'To be continued.' In our own case the topic that has been raised but not dealt with, the symptom that has become temporarily intensified and has not yet been explained, persists in the patient's mind and may perhaps be more troublesome to him than it has otherwise been . . . since by themselves they cannot take any steps towards getting rid of it, they suffer more, to begin with, than they did before the treatment.<sup>12</sup>

Contrasted with what Freud discusses in *The Project for a Scientific Psychology*, this is a far more quotidian example of trauma. Where the assault Emma recounts pushes Freud to see the retroactive aetiology of trauma, we might be moved to consider the "To be continued" a trauma of the everyday. This, however, is precisely what Freud discovers when treating Emma: it is the quotidian everyday event that registers as traumatic. Here he sees the same (serial) structure at work in analysis itself. The phrase "to be continued" interrupts the narrative in a serial story, as Freud says. It announces that continuation is *not* forthcoming at the moment and this is what makes the serial interruption so fascinating: it imposes an ending while announcing itself as a link to the next installment. The interruption cuts the narrative—"To be continued" makes the reader aware of the serial form, breaking the continuous fictive world—but also binds it to the next installment. Freud draws a corollary between the patient who "suffers more" as a result of the psychoanalytic session ending abruptly and the newspaper reader who is confronted by "To be continued." Freud here is effectively describing the effect of a cliffhanger on a reader—one of serial storytelling's trademark narrative tools. By interrupting a narrative scene before its resolution, a cliffhanger holds the audience in suspense, causing them to "suffer more" than if the tense situation had simply reached its conclusion. What both serial narrative and analytic experiences share, as Freud shows here, is a gap that breaks continuity at the same moment that it binds it. Just as we feel we are on the verge of some knowledge—knowing who the killer is in a serial story or realizing why we acted with unexpected hostility towards a family

member the week before in analysis—time is up, the narrative suspended. We have to get off the couch and wait a week to take up the same topic again.

There is something *felt* about the cliffhanger that is an integral part of its functioning. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld summarizes this aspect of the cliffhanger succinctly in the opening of *Seinfeld's* "The Wallet":

Don't you hate the "To Be Continued" on TV? It's horrible when you sense the "to be continued" coming. You know, you're watching the show, you're into the story. You know, there's like 5 minutes left and you realize, "Hey! They can't make it! Timmy's still stuck in the cave. There's no way they wrap this up in 5 minutes!" I mean, the whole reason you watch a TV show is because it ends. If I want a long, boring story with no point to it, I have my life.

Crucial to the cliffhanger, as noted by Jewish comedians Jerry Seinfeld and Sigmund Freud, is that the cut manufactures feelings of urgency and anticipation. It is castrating. Seinfeld, making a Freudian point, shows us that cliffhangers work through disavowal: "I know very well that the characters don't have 5 minutes to save Timmy, but even still, I won't really believe it until it happens." The television viewer in Seinfeld's example suffers at the anticipation of the "To Be Continued." This is why Freud's reader "suffers more": the cliffhanger feels like a betrayal. Here the materiality of the cut in the narrative text here is homologous to the immateriality of the reader's experience of a cut-narrative. This is Freud's point: the whole feeling of urgency produced by a cliffhanger is rooted in a collision with the serial gap. By interrupting a narrative scene before its resolution, a cliffhanger holds the reader/ viewer/ listener in suspense, causing them to "suffer more" than if the tense situation had simply reached its conclusion.

As Seinfeld observes in his joke, the impending cut of the "To Be Continued" changes one's relation to the narrative content. It is an end which does not. That sense of an unending lingers in the psyche, which is why the punchline—"if I want a long boring story with no point to it, I have my life"—says more than it would appear at first glance. The psychic life of the serial far exceeds the tangible and material life of the serial. Put another way, one lives much longer in the gaps of the serial than they do in the presence of an installment.

On this point, Freud has theoretical support from an unlikely source. The French edition of the first volume of Marx's *Capital* appeared in installments between 1872 and 1875. Marx was convinced to publish the translation serially, as opposed to the full volume treatments it received in its initial publication and later English translation, as "In this form the book will be more accessible to the working class,

which to me outweighs everything else.”<sup>13</sup> When Marx writes that it “outweighs everything else” he is referring to one of seriality’s central obstacles and impetuses: the deferral of meaning. As Marx writes, “[due to serialization] it is to be feared that the French public, always impatient to come to a conclusion, eager to know the connection between general principles and the immediate questions that have aroused their passions, may be disheartened because they will be unable to move on at once.”<sup>14</sup> Marx realizes that, while a serialized version of *Capital* will increase its readership, it will also cut off its readers from the conclusions he is painstakingly building toward.<sup>15</sup> The passions of French readers, the desire to get to the end (something the fiction of Balzac and Eugene Sue inspired to great effect), is something Marx would prefer not to arouse. Marx wants the serial—in his case, widespread accessibility—*without* the serial—the complication of desire and the deferral of the end.

Episodic meaning in seriality is, of course, possible, but it is the lingering questions and the lack of *totality* of meaning that stokes interest in serials, as Freud explains nicely above. Serials are premised on saying too much and not enough, producing a gap in meaning. It is this tension between the demand of episodic totality and the necessity of retroactive serial meaning that propels seriality. In a very meaningful sense, something like the cliffhanger radically refuses totality. It seems to be a blaring signal that *there is more to the story*. And yet, a sufficient amount of storytelling *must* be accomplished for a cliffhanger to have any meaning at all. With a serial television show, novel, or podcast, it is the impossibility of communicating *all* possible meaning in a single episode that drives the interest in the episodes themselves. It is this lack, or gap, in the individual units of meaning that propels the audience to take an interest in the series.

Freud, by focusing on the “felt dimension” of the cliffhanger that Marx alludes to, shows that a cliffhanger—experienced as a reader of fiction or a patient in analysis—cuts the psyche. The kind of interruptions Freud is writing about are “incidental” to the treatment. It is precisely this incidental interruption that causes the psychic suffering Freud details. Whereas a perhaps strictly narratological understanding of the cliffhanger might look at how a text signaled the coming cliffhanger and the sense of urgency it built up to that point, as Seinfeld noted, Freud observes that the cut *itself* provides this urgency. The inability to continue the session (or continue reading the story or watching the television episode) is what engenders a quality of urgency—the sense of the “To Be Continued.” The cliffhanger is a refusal of closure that, nonetheless, acts as closure. It matters not whether this urgent feeling is narratively earned or not; the mere presence of the interruptive closure of

the cliffhanger—not “interruption *of* closure” but *interruptive closure*—is what generates urgency and distress.

Paying close attention to the function of the cliffhanger in both narrative storytelling and psychoanalysis enables us to see a potentially universal dimension of seriality: action occurring within a gap. A cliffhanger does not just pause a narrative, suspending its action. The cliffhanger cuts a whole into pieces. The gaps—the holes in the whole—have action in them. While, yes, an overarching narrative is paused, action continues to be generated by these serial gaps. Importantly, this is not just a temporal gap but a psychic gap. What Freud emphasizes is how the gap itself—the mere presence of this cut—causes tension and distress, as though this psychic torsion is just lying-in wait for the subject. It is always acting on us regardless of our participation in it. Interruptions give weight to whatever it is that precede them. When Freud writes, “the topic that has been raised but not dealt with . . . persists in the patient’s mind and may perhaps be more troublesome to him that it has otherwise been,” he acknowledges what serial interruptions do to the psyche.<sup>16</sup> Whatever “topic” the patient brought up may have been innocuous, but because that discussion could not end of its own volition (through a formal interruption), the spectre of it “persists” and becomes more “troublesome” than it would be otherwise.

## Part II: The Symbolic Trauma of the Serial: Seeming Chance and Serial Order

Freud introduces two ideas relative to the serial: the traumatic series and the suffering that interruptive closure causes. Jacques Lacan takes up Freud’s insight and expands it by emphasizing, as in the “To be continued” example, how everyday and quotidian this phenomenon is. He furthers it by putting the logic of the traumatic serial at the centre of the symbolic order. By integrating Freud’s understanding of trauma into his conception of the symbolic order, Lacan brings together these two apparently disparate appearances of seriality in Freud’s thought.

As part of Lacan’s return to Freud, the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* is threaded through his own notion of *le point de capiton*, or “the quilting point.” It was no longer the retroactive emergence of a prior trauma that a neurotic subject had. Instead, it became the structure of signification as such. Lacan sees that punctuation has determinative effect on signification. The quilting point acts like the period at the end of a sentence, or in Lacan’s example from *Seminar III*, the button in an upholstered chair. The button keeps the fabric inside the chair and also works to provide a level of design coherence for the chair itself, just as the period creates a single unit of meaning—the sentence—which can itself have multiple meanings, but the period needs to be there to conceive of meaning at all. *Le point de capiton* is the meaning making signifier of a given chain of signifiers.



To return to our earlier example of the traumatic cut of the end of the psychoanalytic session, Lacan's notion of the quilting point justifies and perhaps inspires his move away from the traditional psychoanalytic session established by Freud to his own "short" or "punctuated" sessions. For Lacan, the analytic session should not end because of the incidental and inevitable passage of time as it did for Freud, but because the analysand ends up saying more than they mean, something that exceeds them. In ending the session at precisely this point, the punctuated session has the effect of "speeding up" analysis, allowing the analysand to make the breakthrough on their own, which removes the analyst from the assuming the role of "subject-supposed-to-know." What Lacan does not want is for someone to get bound up in this seeming continuity, seeking the validation of an external end that would grant consistency to their subjectivity. The word narrative comes from the Latin *gnarus*, meaning, in the infinitive, "to know." This makes a narrator *someone who knows*.<sup>17</sup> The overlap and resonance with the Lacanian "subject-supposed-to-know," a position whereby the analyst becomes, effectively, the fixed point of meaning for the subject in analysis, is too tempting to ignore. Put simply, eliminating the role of analyst as narrator—the someone one knows—is Lacan's aim with the punctuated session and the notion of quilting point. The quilting point—in this case the punctuated end to an analytic session—stitches the analysand's narrative together and grants them a point to look back from. Lacan, in this sense, is manufacturing *Nachträglichkeit*, attempting to introduce radical break into a seemingly continuous narrative. While Lacan never acknowledges this directly, the punctuated session seems intended with solving the "To Be Continued" cliffhanger problem of analysis that Freud identified in *Studies on Hysteria*.

Understanding the structural function of punctuated absence is where Lacan begins his inquiry into seriality. To theorize seriality means we must recognize the holes that contribute to this seeming "whole." This is what Lacan gives us in his "Odd or Evens?" lecture from *Seminar II*. While the subsequent lecture on Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" is more famous—and, indeed, Lacan placed a slightly different written version of the "Seminar on the Purloined Letter" at the beginning of his *Écrits*, certifying its importance to his body of thought—the "Odd or even? Beyond intersubjectivity" lecture is more crucial for grounding a psychoanalytic theory of seriality. For Lacan, seriality is in the foundation of the function of the signifier. It is embedded in the structure of how meaning arises in language. Seriality creates the confrontation with contradiction in signification, rather than hiding it.

Broadly speaking, *Seminar II* continues the critique of Ego Psychology begun in *Seminar I* and lays out Lacan's developing notion of the symbolic order and how signification has a determinative effect on the ways in which subjects act and on

what they can or cannot do. To explain his idea, Lacan turns to the fiction of Poe. In “The Purloined Letter” Detective Auguste Dupin is tasked with recovering a sensitive private correspondence between the Queen and a figure of whom her relations she wishes to remain hidden from both her husband and the wider public. Minister D—, an unscrupulous political figure, has taken possession of the letter and is discreetly blackmailing her. The Queen asked the police for their discreet help in recovering the letter. The police, however, are (indiscreetly) stumped. They have turned D—’s house upside down and not been able to procure the purloined letter. Dupin manages to find the letter seemingly without trouble and explains his method to the police, who are baffled at what he has been able to accomplish. The short version is that Dupin realized that D— would know the police would search his home so he hid the letter in plain sight. The long version of how Dupin knew this involves Dupin recounting how an eight-year-old boy made a fortune predicting results in a game of “Odds and Evens.” For Lacan, this is the key to understanding the symbolic. Dupin, Lacan argues, knows how to read his opponent—the corrupt Minister—just like how the eight-year-old boy knew whether his opponent would put an odd or even number of fingers behind his back in the children’s game. The symbolic is not formed through a series of intersubjective exchanges. It does not emerge through a collision of intersubjective situations. It is an alien order formed before we enter into it and develops further as we are a part of it. How does this occur? Lacan answers through exploring the internal logic and rules that emerge through a series of coin tosses.

While the result of each individual toss of the coin is itself arbitrary, if we *group* coin tosses together, certain groupings become impossible. Lacan stages his intervention in the realm of chance to push back on the core Saussurean idea that the relation between signifier and signified itself is arbitrary. If we can observe a signifying and structuring order even in the realm of chance, Lacan wagers, then we can start to “see” the symbolic, which otherwise is akin to trying to “see” the air. Lacan is saying that while the factor of chance does not on its own eliminate symbolic necessity because it is serially structured, the symbolic order takes up chance events and inscribes them in a system of necessity. This necessity enables us to see the way in which the symbolic does not just determine what is possible but also enables points of impossibilities—the real—to emerge.

In Lacan’s example, + and – stand in for heads and tails. Through this he generates a rudimentary “language” and “chain of signifiers.” Paying attention to Lacan’s method explicated in the “Odd or even” lecture, Bruce Fink’s *The Lacanian Subject* offers the following instructive chain:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Toss Numbers

+ + - - + - - - + Heads/ Tails Chain

There is, obviously, a 50/50 chance that an unloaded coin will flip either heads or tails on each and every toss. Lacan's point is that, when subjected to signification and serial sequence, what seems to be arbitrary and random is ordered by rules that emerge from the gaps in the serial sequence itself. Such an order can be seen when grouping the tosses. For example, grouping tosses in pair combinations gives us four possible pairs: ++, --, +-, and -+. Fink designates pair ++ as 1, "the first level of coding we are going to introduce, and it marks the origin of the symbolic system we are creating."<sup>18</sup> The two alternating combinations of +- and -+ are given the number 2 and the tails-tails (-- ) pair is given the designation 3. These numeric designations form a signification matrix that changes random coin tosses into a system with memory and order. As Fink shows:

+ + - - + - - - + Heads/ Tails Chain  
 1 2 3 2 2 3 3 2 Numeric Matrix Category

Reading this random set of coin tosses in terms of pairs already produces the kinds of memory and order that Lacan's notion of the serial is premised on. A category 1 series (++) cannot be followed by a category 3 (--), it can only be followed by a category 2 series of +-. As Fink explains, "We have thus already come up with *a way of grouping tosses* (a 'symbolic matrix') *which prohibits certain combinations* . . . We have generated *an impossibility in our signifying chain*, even though we have not determined the outcome of any particular toss."<sup>19</sup> There is no exception to the rule that this string of chance relations demonstrates. Playing the string out with more tosses shows that "the chain prohibits the appearance of a second 1 until an even number of 2s has turned up."<sup>20</sup> This prohibition is Lacan's justification for his claim that the signifying chain "remembers or keeps track of its previous components."<sup>21</sup>

While Fink is indispensable for understanding how Lacan thinks through chance relations in his symbolic system, I want to push an aspect of Lacan that does not appear in Fink's account: the real. Perhaps it is for reasons of clarity and pedagogy that Fink's working through of "Odd or even" appears as a theory of continuity and on this we cannot fault Fink. But understanding psychoanalytic seriality requires attention paid to the traumatic gap. Emphasizing the structural function of the real in Lacan's understanding of how series form shows us that, in seriality, there is always a gap: a publication gap between serial installments, a temporal gap between analytic sessions. The rules that order the chance relation between coin flips emerge in the gaps between them. The presence of a gap is

immanent and inerasable in the serial and, for Lacan, the serial gap is a site to observe the inextricable relation between the symbolic and the real.

While the above is sourced from early Lacan seminars, it cannot be overstated how central seriality and its relation to the symbolic is to Lacan's entire theoretical system throughout his public lectures. Lacan explicitly links this project to the serial in *Seminar XX*. In the "To Jakobson" lecture, Lacan reminds his audience that structural linguistics took root around the idea that the relationship between signifier and signified was arbitrary. Lacan rejects the arbitrariness of the signifier saying that if the meaning effected by signifier and signified "seem[s] to bear no relation to what causes them, that is because we expect what causes them to bear a certain relation to the real. *I'm talking about the serious real. The serious . . . can only be the serial!*"<sup>22</sup> Again, the relation between signifier and signified is not arbitrary, as the signifier "smoke" is to actual smoke. Nor is it indexical, as "smoke" is to fire, but as smoke is to a *smoker*. The first two examples have nothing to do with a series. This is the important point. Just as trauma arises in a series so too does signification. To use Lacan's terms, "smoke" to actual smoke and "smoke" to fire do not form a series and, thus, are not "serious." What is serious is our third example: smoke to smoker. This is not an arbitrary relation between signs and objects in the world; nor is it an existential relation, which implies continuity and contact; rather it introduces a more radical alterity and an interruption.<sup>23</sup> In the examples smoke and fire there is continuity but there can be no "smoker." In smoke and smoker, we see the *discontinuity* that the serial privileges. The only way the smoke and smoker are related as signifier and signified is through a repetition that creates a new rule for signification, forging a serial symbolic relation through the gap. Crucially this rule can only be registered retroactively.

Reading back from *Seminar XX* to "Odd or even?" in *Seminar II*, we see the role of the real in the serial relation clarified. The real allows for the emergence of the new. It is an impasse of formalization that curves the symbolic around it. To bring into conversation the early Lacan of *Seminar II* and the late Lacan of *Seminar XX* is to see fully how his theory of seriality is central to his thinking in general. We can further explain Lacan's idea by way of a pop culture example: Between books three and four of George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* book series (popularly translated to television by HBO as *Game of Thrones*), Martin wanted to advance the plot by four or five years to age some of his characters. Martin quickly realized that this was not something he could do. He had set far too much in narrative motion to claim that certain key characters and storylines would remain in relative stasis for multiple years. The end of book five, for example, required Martin to put several characters in the same place, a port town named Meereen. The problem of getting all these

different characters from all different corners of Martin's vast fictional world to *all* be in the same place at same time came to be called by Martin "The Meereenese Knot."<sup>24</sup> This knot would take Martin years to untangle and require him to write three separate version of events to see which was the "right answer." While this may, on first glance, appear to be a teleology—a succession of the signifier—it is only possible to apprehend this relation retroactively. As Lacan says in "Odd or even?", "It's not what happens afterwards which is modified, but everything which went before. We have a retroactive effect—*nachträglich*, as Freud calls it—specific to the structure of symbolic memory, in other words to the function of remembering."<sup>25</sup> With the "Meereenese Knot" Martin experienced a traumatic confrontation with seriality, an encounter with the symbolic order. He butted up against how the signifying chain "knew" what he did not. Martin here is demonstrably not the subject-supposed-to-know. The point here is instructive of Lacan's notion of seriality and, indeed, a psychoanalytically informed notion of seriality: the process of segmenting a long-form story (i.e., writing serially) creates rules that one must abide by as though serial storytelling itself is creating rules, not the author. An alien dimension emerges to other the subject and determine what it can or cannot do. A category 3 coin toss cannot follow a category 1. One does not author the relation that emerges through the chain of symbolic signification. The curve of the real in a series does this. As Dr. Yakov Smirnoff might say, in seriality, *book writes you!*

### The Sartrean Objection

Where Lacan links the symbolic appearance of the serial to the radicality of the real, Sartre sees seriality as a structure to be escaped. For Sartre, seriality is the name for how people are ordered by capitalism into inert, disaffected, and disconnected alienated individuality. Seriality, for Sartre, names an oppressive structure, a problem to be solved. The only way out of seriality is the "group-in-fusion," a politically active collective that is needed to throw off the shackles of seriality. Philosophically speaking, the group-in-fusion overcomes the "anti-dialectic" of seriality. As Sartre writes, "This anti-dialectic, or dialectic against the dialectic (dialectic of *passivity*), must reveal *series* to us as a type of human gathering and alienation as a mediated relation to the other and to the objects of labour in the element of seriality and as a serial mode of co-existence."<sup>26</sup> In other words, rather than a dialectic which is driven by the recognition of interdependence of things on their own internal contradiction, as Hegel would have it, this anti-dialectic is premised on inertia and passivity that obscures all contradiction. It turns the way the world works (currency exchanges, let us say) into a kind of magic. Viewed this way, we can see that Sartre's theory of seriality constitutes, for him, a theory of ideological formation. If ideology is that which

eliminates contradiction in the world (as Marx and Althusser have formulated in various ways), seriality, for Sartre, is the prime mover, so to speak, in that formula. Seriality is all about eliminating the appearance of contradiction. It is about grouping people superficially in a way bereft of political potential. It is, in other words, pure continuity. Gapless.

While Sartre sees seriality as a structure that eliminates contradiction and must be done away with, Lacan's seriality is *all about* bringing recognition of impossible contradiction in to the symbolic (i.e. how can order and memory emerge *ex nihilo*—from the gap, the real—when a series forms?). We can link this position to Sartre's disavowal of the unconscious found in *Being and Nothingness*. In proposing his own notion of "existential psychoanalysis," Sartre lays bare the difference between his presuppositions and what he offers as the orthodox psychoanalytic view: "Empirical psychoanalysis in fact is based on the hypothesis of the existence of an unconscious psyche, which on principle escapes the intuition of the subject. Existential psychoanalysis rejects the hypothesis of the unconscious; it makes the psychic act co-extensive with consciousness."<sup>27</sup> Lacan's seriality, explained above, absolutely "escapes the intuition of the subject." It is only something one can register retroactively. This does mark a stark difference between Sartre and Lacan where it is perhaps unfair to criticize Sartre. For Lacan, seriality is in the foundation of the function of the signifier. It is embedded in the structure of how meaning arises in language. Seriality does not travel along similar terrain for Sartre.

While this is firmly the point where psychoanalytic seriality departs from what Sartre may have to offer, it is interesting to push forward along Sartrean lines a little further to show how accepted the idea of seriality as ideological continuity is. If we follow Sartre's ideas to the letter and push them to their conclusion, we are obliged to *reject* seriality wholesale and favour something else in its place (the group-infusion is Sartre's answer). Following Sartre, we would have to acknowledge the insidiousness of seriality and its close ties to the logic of capitalism, perhaps drawing conclusions similar to James H. Wittebols, who makes seriality and capitalist expansion the cornerstone of his analysis in *The Soap Opera Paradigm*. As Wittebols argues "[serial] storytelling has increasingly overtaken other forms of storytelling on television over the last few decades, and that this storytelling form serves well the priorities of media conglomerates."<sup>28</sup> This kind of analysis leads always to its own prior conclusion: we need to get out of seriality. Or, as Wittebols later argues, it is "the emphasis on profit to the diminution of social and aesthetic values has had an effect on the creative process behind television programming and has resulted in a sameness to all television programs regardless of the particular genre."<sup>29</sup> The point is

not that Sartre and Wittebols are wrong, the point is that neither study of seriality can think dialectically as Lacan does. The solution is always to *reject* seriality.

We could say the same of Jonathan Crary's *24/7*, a study of sleep and capitalism, which turns to Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* in the book's final pages. Sartre looks at the role of media, specifically radio, in producing "indirect gatherings" of people in modern life (his example is a disconnected group of people all listening to the same radio program but separated—alienated—from each other). Relevant for this discussion is how Crary marries a suspicion of television with Sartre's notion of seriality. He maybe has reruns in mind when he writes, "Seriality is the numbing and ceaseless production of the same."<sup>30</sup> Further, Crary writes that "it is regrettable that [Sartre's] plan for a study of television in Volume 2 of the *Critique* was never fulfilled."<sup>31</sup> This interests Crary, who has serious misgivings about television and, by extension, seriality. Citing a widely criticized and discredited 2006 Cornell University study on an alleged link between television viewing and autism, Crary lauds the researchers for "bypass[ing] the notion that television is something one *watches* in some attentive manner, and instead . . . [treats] it as a source of light and sound to which one is *exposed*."<sup>32</sup> Rather than emphasize how Crary's claim undermines itself, I want to underline instead that Crary, Wittebols, and Sartre crystallize an important attitude for us: *seriality is dangerous*. In fact, it is so volatile and threatening that we must censor ourselves from it and protect our children from it. We should not overexpose ourselves to something like Netflix, even though we want to immerse ourselves in it. This is a naïve approach to media, particularly serial media forms, but it is important to note the kind of suspicion the serial form has received in these scholarly accounts.

Whatever merits there are in Sartre's notion of seriality as a theory of political formation, it leaves us very little room to continue an investigation of seriality itself as a theoretical form. Seriality, in the view of this short survey of thought from Sartre to Crary, is capitalism made oppressive media form and needs swift rejection. The only conclusion to fully accepting a Sartrean view of seriality is to overthrow seriality, expose the evils of the "Soap Opera Paradigm," and urge for the group-in-fusion to forge a "possible route out of the nightmare of serialization and isolation."<sup>33</sup> It is possible that, though their sense of the insidiousness of seriality differs greatly from mine, Sartre, Wittebols, and Crary see the real of seriality in the symbolic. Seriality is not a neutral or neutered form in these accounts, it is *a priori* filled with manipulative and damaging content. It is a confrontation, as Sartre, Wittebols, and Crary see. It is a confrontation worth grappling with, however, not one in need of rejection in favour of something else. Put another way, where the Sartrean account sees the serial as coercive and limiting, as ceaseless sameness, Lacan shows how serial discontinuity

and repetition are the precondition for the new. The move Lacan's dialectical analysis of seriality helps us to make is precisely this: if we imagine seriality to be totalizing continuity, then, by its very construction, it is oppressive and alienating. However, by foregrounding the gap—the real at the heart of seriality—Lacan allows us to work with and theorize the radicality in seriality's symbolic appearance.

### Part III: Serial Gaps without Serial Gaps: *Stranger Things* against Ideological Continuity

If ideological seriality is on the side of continuity, rather than the gap, then there would not be a more ideological form of popular seriality today than the Netflix binge serial. Netflix embraced what it saw as a shift in viewership and turned it into a model for television distribution. Based on an extensive survey of users, Netflix declared binge watching television as the “new normal” in 2013. 73 percent of United States users, according to this survey, reported that they binge watched their favourite programs.<sup>34</sup> Bingeing, defined as watching 2-6 episodes of one show in a single sitting was also something a full 73 percent of those “bingers” said that they “felt good” about it.<sup>35</sup> In the least likely corporate agreement with Jacques Lacan of all time, the binge model championed by Netflix was offered initially as something that solved the problems of network television seriality. Here the “linear model” of television is Freud's session with beginnings and ends determined externally by the clock and Netflix is offering a punctuated session determined by the viewer. (The important difference being that the analysand/ viewer's unconscious determines the length of the session, not conscious clicks from an on-demand menu.) With a binge series there are no annoying ad breaks, no waiting for new episodes, and no being told by a TV network *when* to sit in front of your tv or when to set a digital recording time.

Eight years later, it is evident that Netflix's approach to content creation and distribution has irrevocably altered how we view television. What's more, Netflix's model for releasing original television has vexed serial narrative scholars due to its refusal of a traditional serial television release structure. Jason Mittell writes that Netflix has taken the “TV-on-DVD box set” premise and used it as a structure for its entire streaming network approach. This, for him, complicates the status of Netflix shows as serial, since “forgoing the gap-filled serial broadcast experience altogether . . . [raises] the question as to whether these multi-episode narratives can be considered serial at all.”<sup>36</sup> While Netflix series have many of the traditional interruptions we come to expect from broadcast television in its episodes—act breaks, episode breaks, and skeuomorph cuts to black as though there would be a commercial break—it is missing the clear and regimented temporal breaks between



episodes that has long been heralded as the defining feature of television serial narrative, as—with rare exception—all Netflix original television programs are released with every episode available immediately.

The question I want to ask is, despite appearing to offer gapless ideological entertainment, how is something like Netflix's *Stranger Things* still serial? Where can we see the gap and how can we articulate a notion of radical rupture despite its seeming flat continuity? Formulating the questions in this way moves us from treating seriality as though it is only a material quantity (i.e. serial narratives, serial tweets, serial iPhone updates, serial commodities, etc.) and moves us toward considering it as a theoretical construct that psychoanalysis is uniquely capable of taking on.

Before Freud wrote about the intrinsic seriality of the psychoanalytic session, he wrote letters about serial fiction to Martha Bernays, who would marry Freud in 1886. Freud wrote to her frequently about literature, with the work of Charles Dickens occupying a special place in those letters.<sup>37</sup> Freud admired Dickens so much that the first gift he ever gave Martha was a copy of *David Copperfield*. Such was Freud's love of Dickens that he wrote brief critiques to his wife, like the following "review" of Dickens's *Bleak House* dated 5 October 1883. Freud tells Martha it "ranks far below [*David Copperfield*]," or as Freud refers to it, "that incomparable work."<sup>38</sup> He thought *Bleak House* "tendentious and hard," like most of Dickens's later writings but, he adds, "I don't want to spoil it for you; its beauties are obvious, while its faults have to be sought for."<sup>39</sup> I write only half-kiddingly that this may have been the first adherence to the principle of "spoilers" in the history of written communication. More seriously, Freud's experience with serial literature parallels the twenty-first century consumption of binge serials much more closely than one might think. Freud seems to have engaged in what we might call "binge reading" with George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. In a letter to Martha dated 26 August 1882, Freud writes, "I read [*Deronda*] with mounting puzzlement and interest until an hour ago, discounting a few hours of sleep. My well-known impatience made me hurry to get to the end."<sup>40</sup> The phenomenon of staying up well past a reasonable bedtime to finish bingeing a narrative is so ubiquitous that eye-drop brand Visine recently built a whole radio, print, and television ad campaign around it.<sup>41</sup> *Just one more episode*, the ad commands.

But Freud does not just show us a conveniently homologous way to binge a serial text. He helps us see that when one is caught up in the temporal gaps of a serial—the cliffhanger of analysis or the cliffhanger of Thomas Hardy—it is the psyche that takes the hit or "suffers more." When it comes to bingeing a serial, however, it is the body that suffers more. The Visine ad confirms as much, showing a

man who is engaging in masochistic practice to continue watching more episodes of his favourite shows streaming on Hulu. While the ad conjures up a hyperbolic portrayal of binge-watching, it nonetheless touches on a common response to streaming media. In fact, sleep studies have tried to raise the alarm about how deleterious bingeing is for audiences.<sup>42</sup> It seems commonplace to observe that binge-watching is a result of technological advancement colliding with viewer preference (the ideological approach Netflix favours). Freud shows us that it is the serial form itself that occasions this response, and it has aroused the passions of audiences since the Victorian era.<sup>43</sup>

Freud is reading a bound volume copy of *Daniel Deronda*, rather than reading it in its initial eight-part serial print run in 1867 (when he would have been eleven years old). One might argue that the binding of a serial narrative takes something vital away from audience members who experience a serial text long after its initial run of publication. Jason Mittell focuses on the ephemeral aspect of communal viewing of television serials with precisely this idea in mind.<sup>44</sup> I understand and appreciate the value of this approach, as it pulls us back to one of television's medium specific differences from film: its liveness. However, such a viewpoint misses that a cut text stays cut. For this reason, I am reluctant to agree with the idea that the serial is best realized or understood by way of accounting for audience engagement during a serial text's original and simultaneous unfolding. If the serial gap is truly the constitutive aspect of seriality—as Mittell, Sean O'Sullivan, Frank Kelleter and other narrative theorists have rightly argued—then this gap cannot be eliminated by printing *Daniel Deronda* as a single volume, or by extension, releasing *The Wire* in a single DVD/Blu Ray boxset. *Daniel Deronda* is forever marked—cut—by seriality. This cut cannot be healed. In other words, when a volume is bound it is bound by its gaps. The binding does not erase the holes in the whole. The gap will appear somewhere else. The attempt to overcome the gap through binding just places the gap elsewhere. Sometimes it is placed in the body; through dry eyes and lack of sleep.

As in our example, Freud clearly reacted to *Daniel Deronda*'s cliffhanger-like “real time” learning of his own mysterious lineage. Believing that serial narrative only has form as a momentary and transient phenomenon makes it too elusive to be the object of an extended academic inquiry. This relies on one of the cardinal rules of seriality: meaning-making that can only be apprehended retroactively. This even more closely mirrors an audience's actual relation to a serial text, as audiences are always getting caught up in serial narratives long after the original publication date. This is the rule of seriality, rather than the exception. And, just like *Daniel Deronda*'s discovery of his Jewish heritage, the signs are more clearly graspable retroactively

than linearly. If the serial is only graspable in the transient dispersal of a currently running narrative, then one has to conclude that seriality only has temporary form and once it is released it becomes just another episodic and self-contained story. What, then, distinguishes the serial *after* its initial release? What does the mark of seriality look like? How can something bound and seemingly self-contained from the get-go evince seriality? Netflix's popular series *Stranger Things* helps us to address these questions.

*Stranger Things* is a sci-fi/ horror series set in 1980s Hawkins, Indiana (a fictional U.S. town). Hawkins is a hotbed for supernatural activity and the first season of the series inaugurates its overarching thematic of juxtaposing parallel storylines. Season one focuses on the mysterious disappearance of Will Byers, a young boy, with the equally mysterious appearance of a young girl with telekinetic powers named Eleven. Over the course of the first two seasons, the citizens of Hawkins learn of illegal activities and experiments of a paranormal laboratory, the Hawkins National Laboratory, who are hoping to tap into the power of what the show calls "The Upside Down," a dimension of space and time that seems to mirror that of the "real world" of Hawkins. The notable difference between this world and Hawkins is that it is crawling with supernatural creatures that the Hawkins Lab is attempting to weaponize. The second season of the show foregrounds how Will is still affected by the Upside Down and how Eleven decides to investigate her own origins. Both plots come to a head in the liminal space between season two's "The Spy" and the following episode, "The Lost Sister." "The Spy" ends on a cliffhanger that would have caused any audience member to "suffer more," as it becomes clear that Will has been manipulated by the Upside Down. Since one can simply proceed to the next episode on Netflix without even watching a series' opening credits, resolving the tension installed by a cliffhanger is seemingly a click away. Anticipating an end and not getting it is unremarkable because absent from the Netflix series is the temporal delay long heralded as the constitutive of seriality. It does not matter if the characters have five minutes or an hour or a week to rescue another character, as long as the *viewer* has enough time to watch the next episode the tension will resolve itself. In other words, traditional serials accomplish the cliffhanger by way of installing an almost mandatory wait time. The same kind of temporal gap that Freud writes about in psychoanalysis. What *Stranger Things* season two does is accomplish a cliffhanger *while giving viewers a whole episode to watch*. I call this "a gap filled with content," an inviolable gap independent of release schedule temporality.

"The Spy," ends with a season changing event that leaves many of the series prominent characters in imminent peril—in a traditional cliffhanger situation. It is important to stress that viewers of a binge series do not expect a cliffhanger to be a

“real cliffhanger,” as we will see in a moment. And so what *actually* creates the cliffhanger is *not* that *Stranger Things* interrupts a scene, nor is it that the episode pivots away from the previous action entirely.<sup>45</sup> What creates the cliffhanger here is twofold. “The Lost Sister,” the episode following “The Spy,” does *not* pick up on *any* of the previous episode’s story lines. Secondly, and more importantly, the Netflix viewer is virtually unaware that it is even possible to introduce a cliffhanger in a streaming series. One of the great myths of Netflix as television producer is that it has freed itself—and viewers—from the shackles of the network schedule. Ted Sarandos, Chief Content Officer of Netflix upholds this myth when he says in a 2013 press release, “Netflix has pioneered audience choice in programming and has helped free consumers from the limitations of linear television.”<sup>46</sup> The notion that a popular Netflix series would engage in a “dirty trick” typical of traditional television is almost beyond belief, given how Netflix has positioned itself in contradistinction to traditional broadcast methods of storytelling.

And yet, to get to the episode that resolves the tension introduced by “The Spy,” one has to watch all of “The Lost Sister.” In other words, *Stranger Things* introduces a proxy for the week-long or months-long gap that viewers of traditional television serials experience. In fact, between episode three “The Pollywog” and episode four “Will the Wise,” *Stranger Things* cuts in half a dramatic sequence where Will Byers attempts to confront the demon creature that has been stalking him. “The Pollywog” ends with Will screaming at the creature to leave him alone. Rather than take orders from a child, the supernatural being dives into Will’s mouth, possibly (for all the viewer knows) killing him, and the episode cuts to black. “Will the Wise” begins on the other side of this cut, with Will alive but with the creature seemingly possessing Will’s body. *This* is the expected kind of cliffhanger on Netflix. Certainly, an episode might end in such a way that a viewer is required to move on to the next one, but the viewer can simply watch the next five minutes of the next episode immediately to resolve the tension. “The Lost Sister” refuses to allow *Stranger Things* viewers to evade the “To Be Continued” and the registration of the interruptive gap—the cut of seriality.

Unsurprisingly, “The Lost Sister” is, by some distance, the show’s worst rated episode by viewers on IMDb (as of this writing). Having to watch a character-based episode that not just interrupts the tension produced by “The Spy” but seems to rip *Stranger Things* away from every single urgent storyline has been met by widespread annoyance. The following is an excerpt from a review of “The Lost Sister” by the user tggrif, whose comment is rated by other IMDb users in the top six comments on the episode ranked by “helpfulness” (read: most representative). It is titled, “Why did this exist? Save yourself the trouble and skip it!!”:

This episode was such a jumbled piece of garbage. I love this show (excluding this episode), and the episode was written in a vacuum probably for the sole purpose of one or more spin-offs. It doesn't even feel like it's on the same time line, nor does it feature any of the other main characters doing anything important.

I dug my IMDb account out of the graveyard just to review this monstrosity... This is just such a train wreck that I have to speak against it, lest it become more common in the future. As subscription television becomes more popular and common it should not need to relive the historical downfalls of traditional TV and the reason we cut cords in the first place.<sup>47</sup>

This IMDb user's comments are extraordinary for a number of reasons. The first is that tggrif, in panning this particular episode of a Netflix series, affirms the "consumer choice" model of television that Netflix is chiefly responsible for creating. The user even warns against *any* Netflix series from writing an episode such as "The Lost Sister," associating the structure of *Stranger Things* season two with "the historical downfalls of traditional TV." If the register of these comments seems unnecessarily high (i.e. a bad episode of television is maybe not a "monstrosity"), we should recall Netflix executive Ted Sarandos's comments that Netflix has "free[d] consumers."<sup>48</sup> A cliffhanger episode such as "The Lost Sister" is a reminder that one cannot be freed from the spectre of a serial interruption. As Freud shows, the interruption causes the patient to suffer more than if the session—or serial story—came to a complete and self-contained end. The binge model mitigates a number of non-narratively mandated interruptions, as previously discussed, but it cannot turn serial television into a gapless five- or ten-hour movie. Film is a far more radically self-contained medium. To think of streaming television as simply a long movie is to ignore the ongoing interruptive aspects that simultaneously break and bind it. It is to imagine the erasure of the gap. As I have argued, erasing the serial gap is formally impossible.

The second insight we should take seriously from this user's assessment of *Stranger Things* is that "The Lost Sister" shows the stakes of being confronted with serial narrative design in a binge series. For the IMDb user (and many others), the confrontation of "The Lost Sister" is the forcible look "behind the curtain," so to speak, to peek at the mechanism of serial narrative. In other words, we can categorize this as a clear confrontation that there is no subject-supposed-to-know. As the IMDb user sees in "The Lost Sister," there is no benefit in the episode other than interrupting the

overarching narrative of Will Byers and company dealing with a new threat from the Upside Down in Hawkins, Indiana. There is even the cynical suggestion in the comment that the episode is intended to establish a spin-off series for which there is no evident basis. In effect, there is no benefit apart from the suffering it incurred. The result is narrative trauma.

What distinguishes “The Lost Sister” is that it radically reconfigures the viewer’s understanding of the shape of *Stranger Things* season two. The virtue of “The Lost Sister” is in its capacity to manipulate, misdirect, and mislead. The cliffhanger, recalling Freud, *should* cause the viewer, reader, or listener to “suffer more” than if the story had simply played out for another five minutes. A cliffhanger is simply not worth talking about if our investment in the narrative is not upset in some way. Worthwhile narrative should always raise our expectations for it. When we feel let down or betrayed, we know that the narrative has “worked.” When we feel our time has been wasted is *exactly* what a great serial narrative should aspire to give its audience. Freud wrote *Studies on Hysteria* in 1895, but the notion that the “To Be Continued” causes suffering is just as prevalent today as it was at the end of the Victorian era. *Stranger Things* opens an interruptive gap within a serial publishing model that seems intent on eliminating gaps. That the interruptive gap comes by way of providing content is, to me, a radical gesture. Finding a way to introduce a serial gap into the binge structure shows the supposed “user control” (or mastery) over a Netflix series is illusory. This is something the IMDb user recognizes but categorizes as negative. In fact, this loss of mastery is doubled: the user has no control over the narrative and, it appears, neither do the showrunners (why else would they write such a “jumbled piece of garbage” other than that they don’t know what they are doing?). We also see, and this I am keen to underline, that significant interruptions can arise in narratives *seemingly liberated* from such interruptions. The *Stranger Things* example shows that the serial gap is not a relic of a bygone era of network television programming, as our intrepid IMDb user would like to think, but is the single ineradicable element of seriality.

### **Conclusion: The Confrontation of Psychoanalytic Seriality**

Seriality constantly confronts us with interruptions—sites of resistance—to continuity. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud writes “... *whatever interrupts the progress of analytic work is a resistance.*”<sup>49</sup> Lacan amends this line in *Seminar I* by saying, “Everything which suspends/ destroys/ interrupts the continuity . . . of the cure is a resistance.”<sup>50</sup> These sites of resistance do not stop analysis; rather, they are the precondition for it. “Resistance,” Lacan observes, “is produced at the moment when

the speech of revelation is not said.”<sup>51</sup> This is what the cliffhanger does. It punctuates an end through interruptive closure but leaves revelation for another day.

“Revelation,” as Lacan says, “is the ultimate source of what we are searching for in the analytic experience.”<sup>52</sup> We might say the same of the serial fiction experience. Lacan believes that it is in these moments of resistance that the analytic work takes place, as “The ego makes itself manifest [in analysis] as defence, as refusal.”<sup>53</sup> Psychoanalysis says, do not look to the end—look to the gap. Rather than saying that resistance and refusal prevent revelation, Lacan’s point is that speech is already itself resistant to meaning and non-total. The resistance of the gap is also the revelation of the gap. For Lacan, “it is often what appears to be harmonious and comprehensible which harbours some opacity. And inversely it is in the antinomy, in the gap, in the difficulty that we happen upon opportunities for transparency.”<sup>54</sup> Lacan uses the word “antinomy” where contradiction is perhaps more appropriate because he is hitting on the paradox of a clear opacity, the clarity of obscurity. Nevertheless, psychoanalytic seriality looks precisely at this “antinomy in the gap,” this constitutive confrontation. While Lacan does not grant “the gap” primacy in his system, my wager is that there is something to be gained by formalizing our inquiry to the gap. We need to think of it not as a one-off occurrence common to many different relations or structures, but a site of torsion in the psyche that is always already serial.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Even a casual glance at the *Game of Thrones* obsessed subreddit *r/freefolk* will demonstrate this.

<sup>2</sup> David Wolinsky, “HBO Releases A New Game of Thrones Season 8 Trailer,” *Gamespot* (April 7, 2021). <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/hbo-releases-a-new-game-of-thrones-season-8-trailer/1100-6489884/>

<sup>3</sup> As a brief note, for more on serial narrative approaches, see Jason Mittell’s *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, Linda Williams on serial melodrama in *On the Wire*, and Caroline Levine’s *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. For discussions of audience, see Frank Kelleter’s “Seven Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality” and Jennifer Hayward’s *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera*. Finally, the idea of seriality as social formation begins in earnest through the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, which this essay addresses.

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume 2 (1893-1895)*, translated by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955). 356 (emphasis in original). James Strachey translates *nachträglich*, which is an adverb, as “deferred action.” The word “retroactively” might be closer to Freud’s meaning and it is the sense of term that I will use most often. Relatedly, Jean Laplanche uses the term *après-coup*, translated as “afterwardsness” in English, to understand *Nachträglichkeit*. See Jean Laplanche, “Notes on Afterwardsness” in *Essays on Otherness* (New York: Routledge. 1999). James Strachey translates *nachträglich*, which is an adverb, as “deferred action.” The word “retroactively” might be closer to Freud’s meaning and it is the sense of term that I will use most often. Relatedly, Jean Laplanche uses

the term *après-coup*, translated as “afterwardsness” in English, to understand *Nachträglichkeit*. See Jean Laplanche “Notes on Afterwardsness,” in *Essays on Otherness* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Freud, *Project*, 353 (emphasis in original).

<sup>6</sup> Freud, *Project*, 353.

<sup>7</sup> Freud, *Project*, 353.

<sup>8</sup> Freud, *Project*, 354.

<sup>9</sup> Freud, *Project*, 356.

<sup>10</sup> To my knowledge, besides Freud, it is only Juliet Mitchell who has worked to connect trauma and seriality in psychoanalysis. In *Siblings: Sex and Violence*, Mitchell discusses trauma in seriality as the sibling’s recognition—or failure to reckon with—the other’s only minimal difference from the self.

<sup>11</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume 2 (1893-1895)*, translated by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 297.

<sup>12</sup> Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, 297-298.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*/Volume 1, translated by Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 104.

<sup>14</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 104.

<sup>15</sup> It is arguable that Marx is the first serial narrative theorist. Marx uses the dialectical form to tell a compelling narrative of the life of the commodity in *Capital*. Marx concerns himself with form and content in the way the Russian formalists would pick up decades later. Marx begs us to pay attention to structure. While Marx had qualms with *Capital* being published serially in French, he need not have had them; the literariness to the way Marx writes helped his work be both novelistic and philosophical. If Hegel could have written the way Marx did—if Hegel could have understood that the dialectic is a narrative structure as much as a truth procedure—his work would doubtlessly be more widely read today.

<sup>16</sup> Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, 298.

<sup>17</sup> I owe this reading of the etymology of the word narrative to Martin McQuillan, *The Narrative Reader*, edited by Martin McQuillan (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 17.

<sup>19</sup> Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 17-18.

<sup>20</sup> Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> In the French, *le sériel*, or, as Bruce Fink clarifies, “what forms a series.” I have, of course, seized on both the English translation and the French meaning in my analysis above. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*, translated by Bruce Fink, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999), 19 (emphasis mine).

<sup>23</sup> Or, as Lacan puts it a little later in *Seminar XX*: “what characterizes the relationship between the signified and what serves as the indispensable third party, namely the referent, is precisely that the signified misses the referent” (20).

<sup>24</sup> George R.R. Martin, “The Meereenese Knot...” *Not a Blog*, LiveJournal (February 26, 2010).

<https://grrm.livejournal.com/135972.html>

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, translated by Sylvana Tomaselli and edited by Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991), 185.



- <sup>26</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Vol. 1: Theory of Practical Ensembles*, translated by Alan Sheridan-Smith and edited by Jonathan Rée (London and New York: Verso, 2004), 66-67 (emphasis in original).
- <sup>27</sup> *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Citadel Press, 2001), 728.
- <sup>28</sup> James H. Wittebols, *The Soap Opera Paradigm: Television Programming and Corporate Priorities* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 2.
- <sup>29</sup> Wittebols, *Soap Opera*, 6.
- <sup>30</sup> Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013), 117.
- <sup>31</sup> Crary, *24/7*, 117.
- <sup>32</sup> Crary, *24/7*, 86 (emphasis in original). Crary leaves out that the Cornell study was authored by economists and the immediate critiques of the paper by other economists. See: Steven D. Levitt, "TV causes autism? I doubt it." (October 17, 2006), <http://freakonomics.com/2006/10/17/tv-causes-autism-i-doubt-it/>
- <sup>33</sup> Crary, *24/7*, 118.
- <sup>34</sup> "Netflix Declares Binge Watching is the New Normal." Netflix, Inc. PR Newswire. Dec. 13, 2013. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/netflix-declares-binge-watching-is-the-new-normal-235713431.html>
- <sup>35</sup> "Netflix Declares Binge Watching is the New Normal."
- <sup>36</sup> Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 41.
- <sup>37</sup> Dickens scholars, such as Lawrence Frank ("In Hamlet's Shadow: Mourning and Melancholia in *Little Dorrit*"), Albert Hutter ("The High Tower of His Mind: Psychoanalysis and the Reader of *Bleak House*"), and John O. Jordan (*Supposing Bleak House*) have noted the usefulness of using psychoanalytic concepts to unpack Dickens' fiction. I want to suggest that the relationship works the other way around: serial fiction—particularly the work of Dickens—inspired Freud to see the importance of crucial psychoanalytic concepts such as *Nachträglichkeit*.
- <sup>38</sup> S.S. Praver, *Freud: A Cultural Citizen of the World: Sigmund Freud's Knowledge and Use of British and American Writings* (New York and London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Routledge, 2009), 71-72.
- <sup>39</sup> Praver, *Freud*, 72.
- <sup>40</sup> Praver, *Freud*, 74.
- <sup>41</sup> Andy Cush, "This Commercial About Lubing Your Eyes With Visine to Watch More Hulu Is The Bleakest Thing I've Ever Seen," *Spin* (March 13, 2017). <https://www.spin.com/2017/03/visine-hulu-commercial-bleak/>
- <sup>42</sup> See: Liese Exelmans and Jan Van den Bulck, "Binge Viewing, Sleep, and the Role of Pre-Sleep Arousal," *Journal of clinical sleep medicine (JCSM)* 13, no. 8 (15 Aug. 2017): doi:10.5664/jcsm.6704
- <sup>43</sup> The Exelmans and Van den Bulck sleep study concludes that it is narrative—not technology—that is responsible for the inclination to binge: ". . . the narrative complexity of these shows leaves viewers thinking about episodes and their sequel after viewing them. This prolongs sleep onset or, in other words, requires a longer period to 'cool down' before going to sleep," 1004.
- <sup>44</sup> Mittell, *Complex TV*, 109.
- <sup>45</sup> What Luke Terlaak Poot has recently called "continuous" and "discontinuous" cliffhangers in "On Cliffhangers," *Narrative* 24, no. 1 (January 2016): 50-67. doi:10.1353/nar.2016.0001
- <sup>46</sup> "Netflix Declares Binge Watching is the New Normal."

<sup>47</sup> tggrif, November 1 2017 "Why did this exist?," comment on "*Stranger Things* Chapter Seven: The Lost Sister," IMDb.com, December 18, 2019. [https://www.imdb.com/review/rw3847494/?ref=tt\\_ury](https://www.imdb.com/review/rw3847494/?ref=tt_ury)

<sup>48</sup> "Netflix Declares Binge Watching is the New Normal."

<sup>49</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, translated and edited by James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 520 (emphasis in original).

<sup>50</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-1954*, translated by John Forrester and edited by Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991), 34 (emphasis in original).

<sup>51</sup> Lacan, *Seminar I*, 49.

<sup>52</sup> Lacan, *Seminar I*, 49.

<sup>53</sup> Lacan, *Seminar I*, 53.

<sup>54</sup> Lacan, *Seminar I*, 108.

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