

WATCHING THE WATCHERS: CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION, COMPLEX
SERIALITY, AND MEDIA LITERACY

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ABSTRACT

Nicole Berland: *Watching the Watchers: Contemporary Television, Complex Seriality, and Media Literacy*
(Under the direction of Gregory Flaxman)

Narrative seriality dominates the twenty-first century mediascape, and nowhere is this more apparent than in television, where audiences have on-demand access to hundreds of thousands of unique series. Approaching seriality through the lens of contemporary television programming, this dissertation, *Watching the Watchers: Contemporary Television, Complex Seriality, and Media Literacy*, joins the growing body of interdisciplinary research on the affordances, limitations, causes, and implications of the serial form in American culture. More precisely, it treats the contemporary television series as a cipher through which it identifies and interprets how series negotiate the contours of their formal identity with its viewers. The dissertation opens with a deep genealogy of television seriality, in which it excavates and interprets the economic, technological, and cultural origins of contemporary television storytelling practices. From there, it moves into two case studies, analyzing the ways in which *Westworld* and *Watchmen* speak to the tendency of contemporary television series to theorize their own narrational forms. Where foundational texts in seriality studies have already established the innate reflexivity of all narrative series, this dissertation locates within *Westworld* a newer trend in “complex” television, which it calls *metaseriality*, that thematizes the processes by which series stage conversations between contemporary and past expressions of seriality;

current series and their serial contemporaries; and the serial form and its audiences. Then, in its chapter on *Watchmen*, the dissertation explores what it means to watch a series that is simultaneously watching its audiences. Coding the multi-generational inheritance of trauma as a symptom of narrative, cultural, and genetic seriality, *Watchmen* attempts to remediate that trauma through experiments in narrative form. Finally, this dissertation turns toward the pragmatic goal of developing a critical pedagogy of television seriality. Without targeted instruction in formal and media literacy, consumers become unwitting students of the commercial logic of seriality. *Watching the Watchers* addresses the urgent demand for such a pedagogy by providing the rationale and resources necessary to support instructors in the creation of courses or units on television seriality.

To my parents, Nancy and Lincoln Berland,
who have shown me the meaning of unconditional love

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INTRODUCTION

Ours is an era of seriality. A cursory glance at any screen reveals how thoroughly series, sequels, prequels, reboots, remakes, spinoffs, and other modes of seriality saturate our mediascape. In television, the subject this dissertation, the number of television series released across all U.S. broadcast and streaming platforms has reached an all-time high of 559 shows.¹ Nor does that number even account for the bulk of serial programming available for consumption, as networks reinforce their offerings with expansive back catalogues of second-run series. American consumers currently have online access to more than 817 thousand unique programs and devote the bulk of our free time to watching television.² Other media tell a similar story. Of the top ten grossing films in the United States in 2022, for example, each one is an entry in a serialized franchise.³ In video games, twelve of the year's top thirteen best sellers were sequels.⁴ Podcast consumption has also increased in recent years, with an estimated 58 percent of the U.S. population tuning in to their favorite true crime, news, or other podcast series. We also arguably serialize our lives through digital networks like YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram by

¹ See Rick Porter, "Peak TV Update."

² See reports from *Nielsen Media Research* ("State of Play"), *Statista* ("Television in the United States"), the *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics* ("American Time Use Survey"), and others.

³ These films were, in order: *Top Gun: Maverick*; *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*; *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*; *Avatar: The Way of Water*; *Jurassic World: Dominion*; *Minions: The Rise of Gru*; *The Batman*; *Thor: Love and Thunder*; *Spider-Man: No Way Home*; and *Sonic the Hedgehog 2*. See the *Statista* report, "Box Office Revenue" for a longer list of films.

⁴ The second best seller was *Elden Ring*, an open world video game with its worldbuilding written by George R. R. Martin. *Elden Ring* was designed to resemble the developer's other popular *Dark Souls* video game series. See the *Statista* report, "Top Selling Video Games in the United States in 2022, by Dollar Sales."

producing “inherently episodic” (Ruth Page 36) series of creative or autobiographical posts.

Taken together, the quantity of serialized content available for on-demand consumption makes it impossible for any scholar of contemporary media to avoid engaging, in one way or another, with the serial form.

More than any other medium, television is the locus of contemporary narrative seriality. Television seriality has insinuated itself into the fabric of our lives—from the nightly, weekly, or seasonal rhythms of serial consumption, to the official and unofficial online and in-person fan communities, to the twenty-four-hour news cycle serializing the crises of global and local events, to the ascendance in 2017 of a reality television personality to the highest political office. It shapes our stories, imaginations, economics, and cultural discourse; yet we often fail to see its influence. Orienting ourselves to the implications of such a phenomenon requires we sharpen our appreciation of the serial form and analyze the contours of the serial moment in which we are immersed.

My dissertation joins the growing body of interdisciplinary research on contemporary television, seriality, and media literacy in a commitment to analyzing the present. Television seriality is a moving target, which is always growing and changing. This poses unique challenges in the guise of what Fredric Jameson calls the “methodological dilemma” of studying the present:

Mass culture presents us with a methodological dilemma which the conventional habit of positing a stable object of commentary or exegesis in the form of a primary text or work is disturbingly unable to focus, let alone [sic] to resolve. (“Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” 138)

To study something we are simultaneously experiencing, and that is yet to be fully formed, I therefore use media journalism, consumer reports, and close readings to supplement a foundation in historicism, media theory, cultural studies, and narratology.

Defining Seriality

Seriality is a broad and pliable concept, with applications across a number of disciplines. From the Latin verb *serere*, meaning “to link, to join, [or] to string together,” a series refers to events, objects, or people of a similar kind following one another in succession.⁵ Embedded within this definition are two means of connecting related elements—through the qualitative process of identifying similarity and the ordinal one of determining sequence. Divorced from one another, these two relational methods yield a variety of uses for the term series, which encompasses meanings as diverse as a line of products (the iPhone X series), an athletic tournament (the World Series), a musical tone row (the harmonic series), a mathematical summation (the infinite series), an ongoing narrative (a television series), and so on. While the base logic of seriality calls for similarity and sequence in combination, usage of the term diverges in practice, even within the narrower fields of literary and media studies.

Within the subdiscipline of seriality studies, this terminological slipperiness produces a disjuncture between research that emphasizes the horizontal linkages of like objects and that which prioritizes the procedural logic of succession. When applied to popular media, seriality has therefore come to designate any of the following: ongoing narratives published in parts;⁶ iterations of popular figures (such as Frankenstein or Superman) across fictions and media;⁷ transmedial continuations, paratexts, and fan-generated fictions surrounding “canonical” serial

⁵ See entry for “series, n.” in the *OED Online*.

⁶ For more information, see books from Laurel Brake, Robert Patten, and Jennifer Hayward and articles from Jared Gardner, Roger Hagedorn, and Scott Higgins.

⁷ See articles from Shane Denson and Ruth Mayer, Frank Kelleter and Kathleen Loock, Christina Meyer, Ian Gordon, and Umberto Eco.

source material;⁸ “intra-ludic” progressions within videogames through levels and worlds;⁹ and even, following Jean Paul Sartre and Benedict Anderson, audiences of serialized content themselves.

Theories of seriality have been split across disciplines “as diverse as philosophy, anthropology, media studies, sociology, art history, literary studies, book history, cultural studies, history of science, women’s studies, queer studies, and post-colonial studies” (Clare Pettitt 2). At times, these studies have been deeply cynical: Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer sound the alarm about the “assembly-line character of the culture industry” that transforms media objects into agents of manipulation (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 132-133); while Walter Benjamin argues “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” (*Illuminations* 221). At other times, theories of seriality have found within the openness of the form spaces of radical potential. Caroline Levine observes that the “series presents all manner of outcomes looming at all times, imagining multiple possible paths immanent in every formal encounter” (135); Deleuze and Guattari treat series as “assemblages” from which emanate both “lines of articulation” and “lines of flight” (3-4); and Derrick R. Spires finds within pockets of nineteenth-century seriality “an ongoing literary cultural agenda tied directly to imagining a robust and insurgent Black citizenship” (Spires 36). As this range of approaches implies, there is no stable interpretation of seriality—it is sometimes used to articulate dreams of democratic reform, and sometimes regarded as a vehicle for economic or political subjugation.

⁸ In popular discourse surrounding television fandom, “canonical” refers to official, authorized content. An episode of *Star Trek* would be canonical; whereas *Star Trek* fanfiction would be considered non-canonical. See Aja Romano for a more detailed definition. See Erica Haugtvedt, Anne Kustritz, and Ben Bolling for analysis of transmedial seriality.

⁹ See Denson’s text, “Visualizing Digital Seriality,” as well as Denson and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann’s coauthored article, “Digital Seriality: On the Serial Aesthetics and Practice of Digital Games.”

The suppleness of seriality makes it possible to find within it elements of control and liberation, collectivity and normativity, possibility and foreclosure. My dissertation acknowledges the utopian and dystopian positions on seriality without foregrounding this debate. I care less about judging seriality than I do about analyzing its meanings and uses. Ideally, my research will encourage thoughtful approaches to recognizing and interacting with this pervasive form. For the most part, I ground my work in a definition of seriality pulled from the largest body of scholarship on seriality, Victorian Studies, which simply defines a series as “a continuing story over an extended time with enforced interruptions” (Tom Keymer 36).

The Seriality Industry

Historicist accounts of the political economy of seriality largely emerge from scholarship on nineteenth-century British and American periodicals. While my dissertation is primarily concerned with contemporary seriality, these accounts of Victorian serials have done much of the work to represent the capitalist superstructure from which seriality emerges and within which it thrives.

Narrative seriality as we recognize it is an invention of the Industrial Age and a motor for the circulation of capital. Installment fiction existed much earlier, but it was structured very differently. The parts-published fascicles of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for example, appeared as segments of pre-existing completed texts—an early version of a payment plan to help literate consumers with some disposable wealth build personal libraries. In these fascicles, volumes might simply end when the space allotted for printing ran out—whether that be in the middle of a paragraph, a sentence, or even a compound word.¹⁰

¹⁰ See Robert Patten (1) and Roy McKean Wiles (3) for more on installment fiction before the nineteenth century.

The Industrial Revolution brought with it advancements in paper production, printing techniques, and transportation, which, alongside rising literacy rates, made popular seriality possible. In 1837, the publication date of the first issue of *The Pickwick Papers*, printing houses were newly equipped with machines capable of producing tens of thousands of sheets of paper, two orders of magnitude more than was possible in the eighteenth century. These sheets, moreover, were larger, meaning more words could fit on a page. At the same time, the recent introduction in the 1820s of the stereotyping process (involving the creation of reusable molds) allowed printers to quickly and easily reprint documents rather than having to reset the type for every new project. The capacity to quickly increase stock according to demand allowed for more efficient use of materials as it decreased the need for document storage, resulting overall in faster turnaround and reduced overhead. Finally, the invention of the steam-powered locomotive in the early years of the nineteenth century enabled newspapers and magazines to be distributed in greater numbers across both urban and rural regions.¹¹ For the first time in human history, publishers could quickly produce large numbers of printed texts and distribute them farther and faster than ever before, and it was only a matter of time before publishing houses learned to capitalize on a new class of media consumers.

In the context of these developments, many of the conventions we still associate with seriality evolved simultaneously in British and French markets. In England, Charles Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* is widely regarded as "the first true mass-market serial" (Jennifer Hayward 22), Dickens' status at the vanguard of the new form, per Robert Patten, occurred "virtually by accident" (51). Around the same time as *Pickwick's* publication, Émile de Girardin established *La Presse* as the first daily penny press newspaper in France. Relying on advertisements to

¹¹ See Hagedorn and Patten for catalogues of these technologies and more extended discussions of their impact on the development of seriality.

compensate for his cheap subscription rate, Girardin experimented with short fiction in an effort to increase circulation. His first move was to employ Honoré de Balzac, one of France's best-known writers, to draft daily installments of the original serial, *La Vieille Fille* (1836). It was a modest success, but Balzac's novelistic tendency to end his stories with denouement somewhat restricted *La Vieille Fille*'s popularity. By 1842, writer Eugène Sue had learned how to exploit the gaps between installments by refusing narrative closure and leaving readers in suspense proving that, in judicious amounts, dissatisfaction sells. It was in this context that the cliffhanger emerged as a serial technique for keeping readers engaged. Through the deferral of narrative closure, the early serialists discovered that readers became more engaged because of, not despite, the gaps between issues.

The commercial and narrative success of the cliffhanger continues to this day, as do many of the other tactics developed by the early serialists, such as:

refusing closure; intertwined subplots; large casts of characters (incorporating a diverse range of age, gender, class, and, increasingly, race representation to attract a similarly diverse audience)¹²; interaction with current political, social, or cultural issues; dependence on profit; and acknowledgment of audience response. (Hayward 3)

Now, as then, serialists strive to target, stimulate, monitor, and adapt to diversified markets while regulating audience desire. From its commercial inception, the art of the serial is to be both a product and a feedback loop. Because series are designed to be consumed in small installments, this allows for a high degree of responsiveness to and from serial audiences. As a result,

¹² For example, take the large character ensembles associated with serials: not only do they provide the opportunity for more viewers to identify aspects of themselves within the fiction; but they also stimulate the kind of fan behavior that contribute to a series' popularity. Consider, for instance, the "Hogwarts Sorting Experience" created by J.K. Rowling for fans of her *Harry Potter* series or the explosion in the 2010s of *BuzzFeed* "Character Quizzes." These two examples point toward the form's capacity to inspire transmedial extensions of a serial storyworld. In Rowling's case, the authorized hypertextual paratexts of the *Wizarding World*'s "Sorting Hat," keeps fans engaged beyond the boundaries of a book or a film's closing credits, supporting their continuing relevance and increasing overall profit. In *BuzzFeed*'s case, these character quizzes represent coveted free marketing, incentivizing new series to create the kinds of narratives that might suit such content.

“seriality,” argues Pettitt, “can absorb resistance and is created partly by the resistant elements which it is able to fold into itself [which] makes it such a useful format for...capitalist thinking” (7). Thus, when confronted with the “resistant element” of gaps between serial issues, Sue and others evolved the cliffhanger to generate reader interest whereas Balzac’s denouement merely satisfied it. In this way, seriality not only adapts to diversified markets but functions like a market itself, responding to both positive and negative indicators in an attempt to generate value in terms of audience engagement.

Seriality, therefore, is the narrative form of capital. More than acting as a useful strategy for selling products, it also “recreates fiction in capitalism’s image” (Hayward 29).¹³ Because a series endures only as long as it can anticipate, generate, or capture lucrative segments of the media market place, it follows principles of supply and demand. As a result, the primary currency of seriality is audience attention. When a healthy series successfully responds to fluctuations in consumption patterns, it accumulates narrative content, which in turn earns it better network promotion while fan communities advertise freely on its behalf. In most cases, the size of a series’ archive marks its figurative and financial wealth. Then, through a combination of industry favoritism and fan behavior, well-performing series begin to circulate in progressively friendlier conditions, reducing their financial risk while facilitating ongoing expansion. These series then become ever stronger, and those that perform poorly are stripped of network resources and often canceled. For these reasons and more, seriality represents, in Frank Kelleter’s words, “the structural utopia of capitalist production” because it is the narrative form most adept at exploiting audience desire and pushing back the ever-receding horizons of narrative closure in service to ongoing financial profit (104).

¹³ Many scholars before me have detailed the correspondences between serial and capitalist logics. See Linda K. Hughes, Michael Lund, Norman Feltes, Roger Hagedorn, Clare Pettitt, and many others.

What Difference Does Awareness Make?

Informed by the prevailing scholarship that identifies seriality as the narrative mode of capital, my dissertation begins with an effort to understand how the most fundamental features of seriality have contributed to the form's dominance in today's cultural economy. The question that motivates my work is, *what difference does awareness make?* This question has multiple valences, as awareness emerges from bidirectional communication between series and their audiences. As an inherently commercial form, seriality is conditioned by public response, which permits series to measure and respond to the impact of different storytelling strategies between gaps in serial installments. This defining characteristic configures audiences as "*agents of narrative continuation*," either actively, through qualitative feedback like fan chatter, published reviews, and other critical responses, or passively, through metrics that measure engagement (Kelleter, "Elements of a Theory of Seriality," 100, original emphasis). The fine-tuned sensitivity that results from serial reflexivity siphons artistic control from creators, deemphasizing the more ineffable qualities of creative ingenuity in favor of market analytics—a fact serialists often lament as they watch their creations slip like Frankenstein's monster from any semblance of an unadulterated artistic vision.¹⁴ In the author's place, the form observes audience behaviors and begins to dictate the terms of its own output, attempting at all times to maintain the balance between rewarding fans with the narratives they demand and surprising them with those they do not yet know they desire.

¹⁴ One early example involves the frustration of early comic strip artist Richard Outcault, who created the first color comic strip celebrity, whom he named the "Yellow Kid." Comparing himself to Mary Shelley and his series to her daemon, Outcault lamented: "when I die, don't wear yellow crape, don't let them put a Yellow Kid on my tombstone, and don't allow the Yellow Kid himself to come to my funeral. Make him stay over on the east side, where he belongs" (quoted in Meyer, 83).

The relationship between series and their audiences attunes serial plotting to the everchanging tastes of the masses. At the same time, it often obscures our awareness of exactly which of our behaviors are being monitored and why. This has taken shape through the “new paradigm of television storytelling” that Jason Mittell labels “complex TV,” a category that popular accounts often refer to as “prestige” or “quality” TV (53). Key to the formation of complex TV are the “narrative pyrotechnics” typified by the “operational aesthetic,” which offers pleasure by inviting viewer awareness of the formal techniques of narrative construction (Mittell, “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary Television” 35). The operational aesthetic trains viewers in methods of formal analysis that serve its commercial ends. In recent years, television has increasingly begun to demonstrate heightened awareness of this process, deploying the operational aesthetic while thematizing the multidimensional negotiation between the television industry, its creative talent, and its audiences. Thus, complex series are becoming increasingly self-critical, demonstrating a metaserial recognition of their entrapment by the logic of the market and telegraphing their own apologia for enmeshing viewers within that same logic.¹⁵

Chapter Breakdown

This dissertation is organized into four chapters, which together track the origins, frontiers, limits, and potential futures of contemporary television seriality. My opening chapter begins with the prehistory of television, locating the economic, technological, and cultural roots of contemporary television seriality that have shaped today’s televisual landscape. From there, I offer two case studies in my analyses of *Westworld* and *Watchmen*, both of which speak to the

¹⁵ See chapter two of this dissertation (52-85) for an extended conversation of metaserial awareness in the HBO series, *Westworld*.

ways in which contemporary television series theorize their own narrational forms. During the course of my research for this dissertation, it became clear to me that television series are constantly teaching us how they want us to behave as media consumers, often without our awareness. So, in my fourth chapter, I turn toward the pragmatic goal of developing a pedagogy of television seriality. My motivation for this chapter stems from one of the animating principles of my dissertation: that we, as scholars and teachers, bear a responsibility to advocate for better media literacy concerning the forms through which we live our lives. Without a pedagogy of television seriality, we become students of its commercial logic. My critical task within these four chapters has been to bring together medium historical, narratological, and pedagogical methodologies in a nuanced account of how we came to inhabit this serial age, and what it means to live here.

Chapter 1: The Origins of Television Seriality: A Deep Genealogy

Critical and popular analyses of television often overlook the role of narrative form in shaping its content, while seriality studies scholarship underplays the centrality of television in driving the evolution and proliferation of the serial form. This chapter brings the fields of television and seriality studies together with the interpretive methodologies of narratology, historicism, and reception theory in a deep genealogy of television seriality. In it, I establish three reasons why television is the most productive site through which to study the range and variety of serial expressions: first, along with comics, television is one of only two *intrinsically serialized* media, a term I designate to describe media that have depended upon the serial form through their entire history; second, due to the nature of television technology and habits of its viewership, television produces more *modal variability* in its expressions of seriality than other media; and finally, the landscape of contemporary television programming, as it expands through

an ever-increasing array of channels and streaming services, leads to significant *modal accumulations* of serial expressions, rendering the history of television seriality legible within a living, digital archive. Ultimately, the contemporary digital mediascape has transformed our understanding of television as a *medium* into that of a *form*, characterized by recognizable sets of serial modalities. Through the locus of television, this chapter thus addresses the urgent need for more critical attention to where seriality came from, how it works, and how we engage with it.

Chapter 2: The Frontiers of Television Seriality: Westworld and Metaserial Consciousness

“Complex” television seriality in the twenty-first century emerges from and produces new methods of audience engagement. The ability to pause, rewind, and rewatch series, often on high-definition screens, generates possibilities for increased viewer engagement, often by soliciting participation in what it means to anticipate plot developments and interpret dimensions of meaning. These new serial expressions and reception behaviors have driven some series to turn inward, self-consciously interrogating the horizons and limits of their form. Where foundational texts in seriality studies have already established the innate reflexivity of all narrative series, my analysis of HBO’s *Westworld* identifies a newer trend toward more hyper-reflexive expressions of the form’s capacity for “self-observation” (Kelleter, “Elements of a Theory of Seriality,” 101). My chapter proposes the term *metaseriality* to describe the way in which series like *Westworld* not only exercise, but also thematize the processes by which series stage conversations between contemporary and past expressions of seriality; current series and their serial contemporaries; and the serial form and its audiences. Through its metaseriality, *Westworld* asks its characters and audiences what difference it makes when we become aware of the forms that structure our language and consciousness.

Chapter 3: Ending the Series: Watchmen and the Traumatic Structure of Seriality

The motto of HBO's limited series, *Watchmen*, is the Latin phrase "*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*" or, in English, "Who watches the watchers?" First posed on the graffitied walls of the comic series upon which it is based, the question considers the ethics of vigilantism. Beyond its more overt preoccupations with the politics of supervision, or, per the superhero genre, *supervision*, *Watchmen* uses its platform to contemplate what it means to watch a series that is simultaneously watching us. The show centers these inquiries on its assessment of the role of serialization in the perpetuation of trauma, structuring the content and form of its narrative around the 1921 Tulsa race massacre. The show tracks the consequences of the massacre as they reverberate through time and space, positioning it as the origin point of an alternate timeline. Juxtaposing the lives of its two main characters—a survivor of the Tulsa Massacre and his estranged granddaughter—*Watchmen* codes the multi-generational inheritance of trauma as a symptom of narrative, cultural, and genetic seriality. In the show's parlance, trauma heals only through revealing the repressed violence at its core. If the experiences and consequences of that violence unfold serially, then the process of redressing trauma requires serial narration. Thus, *Watchmen*'s attempt to remediate the historical trauma of the massacre begins to look as irresolvable as the problem of the form in which it is told: how to narrate a story of ongoing violence and trauma, which cannot heal in silence, but for which serialized narration threatens to keep the traumatic wound open. This chapter engages work from the fields of psychoanalysis, philosophy, historiography, African American studies, and media studies to excavate *Watchmen*'s representation of traumatized seriality within entrenched systems of anti-Black violence. Conceived as a single-season limited-series, *Watchmen* effectively deserializes itself, suggesting that there are limits to which televisual seriality can ethically expand.

Chapter 4: Teaching Television Seriality

Television demands much of our attention and possesses outsized power over our behaviors and imaginations; yet, college curricula in the disciplines most concerned with the impact of storytelling fail to reflect this reality. There are several institutional and practical reasons to account for this oversight, but there are also a host of valuable learning outcomes that speak to the pedagogical, cultural, and even financial merit of including television studies in the university classroom. First, an abundance of research has established that tapping into students' innate motivation encourages deeper learning and better performance, and television studies gives teachers a way to meet students where their interests already lie. The popularity of television across every student demographic, along with the possibility for assignments that invite students to channel their personal experiences, gives instructors a way to rethink introductory courses that have acted as "gatekeepers" by reconfiguring them as "gateways" (Kathleen Blake Yancey 306). Second, television studies lends itself to multimedia projects like video essays, which: deepen their understanding of television as multimodal technology; allow them to participate in a growing field of public-facing television scholarship; and respond to recent guidelines from the Modern Language Association recognizing how "humanists are adopting new technologies and creating new critical and literary forms and interventions in scholarly communication."¹⁶ Third, television studies encourages serial literacy and media literacy more broadly. As a pedagogical objective, media literacy is set to receive increasing priority in the future; as of this writing, there are eighteen U.S. states that have taken legislative action to institute media literacy in public schools.¹⁷ Supporting media literacy not only helps

¹⁶ See the MLA's "Guidelines for Evaluating Work in Digital Humanities and Digital Media."

¹⁷ Erin McNeill's article for *Media Literacy Now* offers a state-by-state report of media literacy policies.

students decode and assess the influence of media messages, but also adopt socially responsible civic behaviors in the production of their own media content.¹⁸ Finally, from an institutional perspective, the clearest and most practical benefit of incorporating television studies in the undergraduate curriculum is that it will ensure bodies in seats. The purpose of my chapter is thus threefold: first, I make a case for the incorporation of television studies into university curricula; second, I address barriers to the adoption of such a curriculum; and finally, I provide resources to assist instructors in the creation of either a stand-alone television studies class or a television studies unit that can be incorporated into a film, media studies, or general education course.

¹⁸ Refer to Yonty Friesem's interview with *NPR*'s Rachel Martin for the extended conversation.

CHAPTER 1: THE ORIGINS OF TELEVISION SERIALITY: A DEEP GENEALOGY

In April of 1836, Edward Chapman and William Hall published the first installment of *The Pickwick Papers*, illustrated by Robert Seymour with text from Charles Dickens. Only 24 years old at the time, Dickens was a little-known writer, having completed only one collection of illustrated short fiction. Chapman and Hall had already purchased Seymour's illustrations and auditioned several authors to compose accompanying text before approaching Dickens. The collaboration was initially uneasy: Dickens wanted more creative control, but Seymour outranked him in status. Before completing the second issue, however, Seymour committed suicide, granting Dickens more leeway to shape the stories as he liked. By the end of that year, writes Robert Patten, "it was clear that *Pickwick* was a gold mine" (11), and by its final issue, sales had surpassed forty thousand. The creative team had struck on a formula, which enabled them to capture a customer base among the newly literate middle and lower classes. *Pickwick* was not the first serial, but its tremendous popularity marked the birth of the serial form.¹⁹

Pickwick was, above all, an experiment in marketing—a way to drive periodical sales by forestalling narrative closure until the next issue, and then the one after that. This fundamentally commercial narrative invention was more successful than anyone might have anticipated, yielding "profits hitherto thought impossible" (Patten 1). Moreover, "since each part [of the

¹⁹ Although there are prior examples of serial novels, a wealth of scholarship identifies *Pickwick* as the first major serial success in the English language. There had also already been a handful of successful French serials from Émile de Girardin in *La Presse*, the first daily penny press newspaper in France. See Hagedorn, Patten, Dames, and Hayworth for more.

serial] had more or less financed the next, when the final part was published and sold, the book was virtually paid for. Thereafter, any sales were almost pure profit” (Patten 1). In 1841, three years after Dickens’ first serial concluded, a swarm of fans, in a scene that “would make a modern-day publisher swoon” (Garber), famously stormed a dock in anticipation of the arrival of the final installment of Dickens’ fourth serial, *The Old Curiosity Shop*.²⁰ With his success, the number of Dickens’ imitators grew, and serial fiction began proliferating throughout the industrialized world.²¹

For his role in inspiring the development of popular narrative seriality, Dickens is arguably the forefather of contemporary television—a digital medium increasingly determined by the narrative form of seriality. Today, nearly two-hundred years after the first issue of *Pickwick* appeared, the serial form continues to reproduce itself, spreading through our mediascape with unprecedented efficiency and impact. We increasingly live our lives through screens—spaces in which seriality dominates the content we consume and produce.²² From podcasts to videogames to news feeds and more, seriality structures our schedules, plans, habits, and conversations. Nowhere is this more apparent than in television—the most-consumed narrative medium—which the average American watches for three and a half to five hours each day.²³

²⁰ Megan Garber calls it a scene that “would make a modern-day publisher swoon: a band of readers passionately demanding to learn how the story ends.”

²¹ Dickens’ role in kickstarting the phenomenon of serial proliferation that Jared Gardner has called “serial-mania” is well-documented. For more detailed treatments of the history of the text, see Jennifer Hayward and Robert Patten.

²² See this dissertation’s Introduction (1-15).

²³ See Felix Richter’s report, “Peak TV Update,” *Statista*’s “Television in the United States” report, and the *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*’ “American Time Use Survey News Release” for detailed statistical accounts.

Too often, the forms that structure our media remain invisible to us. Since its inception, seriality has acted as a powerful economic commodity, and it now saturates nearly every corner of public and domestic life; yet, it remains an overlooked and understudied phenomenon. This chapter addresses the urgent need for more critical attention to the origins of seriality, how it works, and how people and organizations interact with it. I take inspiration from Caroline Levine's assessment of forms as "abstract and portable organizing principles," which are guided by "the specificity of particular historical situations... in which forms overlap and collide" (7-8). For clarity, I use a narrower definition of *form*, referring only to the structural frameworks of storytelling. Still, her conception of forms as "patterns of sociopolitical experience" (2) proves helpful in guiding my scholarship. Over nearly a century of history, television's narrative form has collided with the social formations that dictate how television is created, funded, and enjoyed.

Among entertainment media, television provides the most productive site for surveying the range and dynamism of serial expressions over time. For one, the technological, sociological, and economic conditions surrounding its emergence as a household commodity quickly made serialized programming the most natural fit for the fledgling medium. Second, more than any other serialized medium, including newspaper, radio, and comics, the shapes and rhythms of television series have continuously evolved alongside media technological developments. Lastly, the demands of disseminating audiovisual content around the clock through an ever-increasing array of channels and streaming services has caused television to accumulate serial expressions, rather than supplanting older with newer modalities, which has the effect of rendering the history of television seriality legible within today's televisual mediascape. In the pages below, I develop three terms to help me discuss these attributes:

- 1) television is *intrinsically serialized*, meaning it has always prioritized seriality above any other form;
- 2) television produces *modal variability*, meaning that its serial expressions, or modes, are in constant flux; and
- 3) the televisual mediascape features *modal accumulation*, meaning that old serial modes join with new ones in a living archive of television seriality.

Because modal variability extends from intrinsic seriality and leads to modal accumulation, the bulk of this chapter focuses on the significance of modal variability as the core attribute of seriality. As I elaborate these observations, I embed them within a deep genealogy of contemporary television. This genealogy begins in television's prehistory and moves through what scholars identify as the medium's three broad, overlapping eras: the Classic Network Era; the Multi-Channel Era; and, finally, the Convergence Era.²⁴ Ultimately, this chapter argues that Convergence Era television, by decoupling media objects from their ancestral apparatuses, demonstrates the obsolescence of our former understanding of what constitutes a *medium*. Where "television" once referred to furniture, we now identify it according to a set of recognizable aesthetic and formal conventions, which are predominantly serial. As such, the study of television is always already a study of seriality. Or, to update Marshall McLuhan for the twenty-first century, the *form* has become the message.

Intrinsic Seriality

Every narrative medium, at some point in its history, has used seriality to attract or retain audiences. When new commercial media debut, they often use seriality as a means of easing

²⁴ See Jason Mittell's *Television and American Culture*, pp. 10-12.

their integration into consumer culture. This is because, in Roger Hagedorn's words, the serial form helps "to develop the commercial exploitation of a medium [by cultivating] a dependable audience of consumers [who are] then available and predisposed to consume other types of texts provided by the medium in question" (5). As we can see in examples as early as the 1830s, the serial is not the product itself, but rather a technique designed to sell other products or services—periodicals, tickets, radios, comic books, television sets, subscriptions, advertisements, and so on. For an easy example, take the launch of the Disney+ video on-demand (VOD) service, which leveraged the popularity of an existing film franchise to release the first ever live-action *Star Wars* television series. By the end of its first quarter, Disney+ had amassed 26.5 million worldwide subscribers.²⁵

The introduction of rival media likewise prompts existing media to increase their serial offerings. Elaborating on Hagedorn's description of the commercial nature of seriality, Shane Denson reminds us that media are aware of one another: "in the context of a modernity defined, in part, by a constant pressure toward media-technological innovation," he explains, "seriality, accordingly, is tied to mediality in transition" ("The Logic of the Line Segment" 69). This observation accounts for the explosion of seriality across film, radio, comics, and, eventually, television through the first-half of the twentieth century. Television seriality thus fits within an unbroken lineage traceable to the Victorian serials of the 1830s, with each new medium spurring the others to produce more serial content.

Despite occasional dependence upon seriality across storytelling media, only television and comics are what I call *intrinsically serialized*. By this I mean that these two media are the only ones, which, from their commercial debuts, have structured the bulk of their content around

²⁵ See Porter, "'Star Wars' vs. Marvel: Which Disney+ Shows Are Most-Viewed."

the economic affordances of the serial form. Of the two, television provides a more fruitful site through which to reveal the undergirding logics of seriality for any number of reasons, including but not limited to the following: its narrative structures evolve more often and rapidly than comics; it has a substantially wider and more diverse customer base; it is a much larger economic force; and the medium itself is more technologically complex, offering opportunities and challenges for serial storytellers to innovate. TV's ongoing dependence upon the serial form permits us to observe how the form evolves over time and means that there is an enormous and steadily growing archive of serialized televisual content.

The prehistory and early years of television generated an enduring set of strategies that continue to define the kinds of stories television tells and how they are told. Early television programming represented a pastiche of entertainment strategies pulled from preceding media. As an audiovisual broadcast medium, television inherited most of its audiences, actors, and industry practices from its two parent media: the audiovisual medium of cinema and the broadcast medium of radio. Where film provided some of its visual vocabulary and most of its production apparatus, radio supplied its industrial apparatus. Still, while television borrowed heavily from its predecessors, the specific affordances and limitations of the new medium produced a unique set of serial modalities and aesthetics.²⁶

Even though television acquired talent, sets, equipment, costumes, props, and personnel from the film industry, television budgets were much smaller. This meant that it employed fewer actors and smaller production teams. Miniscule screen sizes (at first no larger than nine inches) also fundamentally changed camerawork and acting. Intimate conversations had to be shot in close-ups and adventure programs that required long shots relied on exaggerated physical acting

²⁶ Television also appropriated Vaudeville's entertainment strategies, including the enduring television genres of variety and sketch comedy shows.

and costuming. From these practical constraints, TV writers were forced to engineer plots and dialogue that suited themselves to the aesthetics of the small screen—conversations could not include too many actors, and characters could only interact with their environment in limited ways. Despite these differences, film studios housing television divisions produced most TV programming—a practice that continues to this day.²⁷

Where cinematic precedent governed the horizons and limitations of early televisual *aesthetics*, radio conditioned its *form*. To understand why, we must first clarify the difference between producers and distributors: whereas production houses organize creative processes, distributors manage scheduling, promotion, and affiliate contracts. So, whereas TV divisions of film studios produced the first shows, TV divisions of radio networks distributed them. More specifically, early television was dominated by the “Big Three” networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—so named because together they garnered 90 percent of viewers from the 1940s through the 1970s (Mittell, *Television and American Culture*, 25). Each of these started as radio networks, making them a great fit for the second major broadcast medium. Accordingly, television imported radio’s distribution model, which was a process involving agreements between production companies, distributors, and the affiliates whom distributors pay to broadcast network properties in local markets.

Unlike cinema, which exerts some control over its revenue streams through ticket sales, television, like radio, makes money through commercial sponsorships. As fellow broadcast media, radio and television thus share what Raymond Williams refers to as the “deep contradiction of centralised transmission and privatised reception” (30). With its viability hinging on advertisers, television’s basic mandate is to achieve a level of audience engagement

²⁷ See Mittell, *Television and American Culture* (19-24).

that can sustain ad breaks. The financial necessity of advertisement solves one problem while creating another, as commercial interruptions run the risk of losing audience attention.

Exacerbating this difficulty is the phenomenon of sunk costs, which “is manifested in a greater tendency to continue an endeavor once an investment in money, effort, or time has been made” (Arkes and Blumer 124). As Williams remarks, it was “implicit in broadcasting that given the tunable receiver all programmes could be received without immediate charge” (30), and, throughout the “Classic Network Era,” most people considered TV to be a free activity.²⁸ According to sunk cost theory, audiences who perceive their entertainment as free invest less attention and effort into that entertainment. Due to sunk costs and scheduled interruptions, the financial reliance on advertising renders audience investment indispensable at the same time as it makes audiences more distractible.

For these reasons and more, early television leveraged existing radio serials (e.g. *The Lone Ranger*, *Guiding Light*, *The Adventures of Superman*, and others), which played to television’s early reputation as a “radio with pictures” (Brooks and Marsh).²⁹ Adapting existing radio serials for television broadcast provided an especially valuable strategy in terms of promoting “parasocial” relationships, or unreciprocated attachments to fictional characters or celebrities.³⁰ Parasociality provides, “one of the primary ways that [television] viewers engage with programming” (Mittell 127). It also gave series opportunities to extract ongoing value from

²⁸ See Mittell, *Television and American Culture* (10-12) for an overview of three broad periods of American television, which he labels the “Classic Network Era,” “Multi-Channel Era,” and “Convergence Era.” See also page 17, where he discusses public attitudes about television.

²⁹ While early cinema is full of examples of film serials, including *The Perils of Pauline*, *The Hazards of Helen*, and *The Exploits of Elaine*, TV serials quickly overtook them. This helped usher cinema into a new era as well, as the medium drew audiences back into movie houses with the spectacles of new technologies like technicolor.

³⁰ Sociologist Donald Horton and psychiatrist Richard Wohl coined the term “parasocial relationships” in a 1956 coauthored article. For a recent literature review on research into parasocial bonding, see David C. Giles article.

its actors, who promote the series both through official paratexts and the ambient publicity of their celebrity. In this way, parasocial bonding amplifies and is amplified by the benefits of serialized storytelling, making it one of the principal affordances of seriality as opposed to stand-alone narratives. So, by poaching already-popular serial characters like the Lone Ranger from radio, the budding medium gave itself a head start for securing audience investment and loyalty. Television also quickly began onboarding original serials, including game shows, cartoons, and soap operas, organizing its broadcast schedule according to which members of the household would most likely be in charge of choosing the channel. These strategies also encouraged parasocial bonding, calibrating content to target audiences, an innate affordance of all narrative seriality.

Core features of mid-twentieth century television seriality represent strategies by which the fledgling media addressed its most pressing challenge—viewers’ notorious distractibility. Three issues contributed to this problem: first, the physical attributes of early television sets made them markedly less immersive than their visual counterpart in cinema; second, the contexts within which people watched television, both privately in the home and publicly in taverns or shop windows, meant that television programming was always competing with scores of environmental stimuli; and third, as discussed above, the television industry’s revenue streams relied on advertising, which meant that audiences needed to “pause from the diegesis, thus interrupting ‘downstream’ immersion” (Mittell, *Complex TV*, 110).

In the first two decades of commercial television history, for example, screens grew from only nine inches in the 1940s to anywhere from 13 to 23 inches by the mid 1960s. More than suffering from the diminutive screen size, television images were distorted by rasterization,

resulting in the pixilated image Marshall McLuhan likens to mosaic (282).³¹ As the forefather of the field of media ecology, McLuhan was among the first to appreciate the impact of the material medium upon reception. In McLuhan's schema, television is a "cool medium," or one that, in its inability to "extend one single sense in 'high definition,'" leaves a great deal of data to be "filled in or completed by the audience" (22-23). Where McLuhan is optimistic about the possibility of cool media to promote participatory viewing practices, subsequent cultural critics such as Raymond Williams instead read television's material restrictions as "visual inefficiency," or as producing "a very inferior kind of cinema" (28). Despite their differences, the same basic premise underwrites both attitudes—the small screens and pixilated visuals of early television sets simply could not captivate audiences as successfully as the spectacle of cinema.

Adding to these challenges, television viewing took place in much more chaotic environments than cinemas. During the first decade of commercial television availability, fewer than one-tenth of American households had their own sets.³² Often, these households would become community hubs, where neighbors would gather for viewing parties, in which the least-hospitable viewing circumstances might see a parlor full of multi-generational viewers sharing a single nine-inch screen. Of course, more and more homes acquired private sets over time. In the United States, for example, the years following World War II led to a steep increase in the number of available television sets, which, accompanied by a decrease in prices, meant that 92.3 percent of families owned their own sets by the mid-1960s, up from 55.7 percent only ten years earlier.³³ It was during this time that television adopted its reputation as an electronic hearth,

³¹ The term pixel was coined in 1965, largely in response to the commercial dissemination of TV sets.

³² Find these statistics in *The American Century* report, "Number of TV Households in America: 1950-1978."

³³ Ibid.

where families gathered in the evenings to watch programs together. Even with television viewing mostly contained within the private home, the competing visual, sonic, and social stimuli of group viewership limited audiences' attentiveness. In many cases, houses built before television lacked appropriate spaces for bulky sets, so TVs were placed in kitchens, hallways, and even foyers, where outside air might blow in whenever someone opened the door. These circumstances positioned television in stark contrast to cinema, where captive viewers would sit quietly in a dark room, in states of immersive attention amidst an enormity of visual and auditory data.

In sum, early television history demonstrates how and why television became one of very few intrinsically serialized narrative media, and the only intrinsically serialized audiovisual medium. This is not to say that other media are not also heavily serialized; rather, I draw attention to the exceptionality of television's foundational orientation toward the affordances of the serial form as a technology to secure and reward attention. Television's uniqueness in popular narrative media carries scholarly implications for both television and seriality studies. Not only does television scholarship require attention to narrative form, but seriality studies must also address the centrality of television seriality as it continues to evolve from the mid-twentieth century into the current digital age.

Modal Variability

Narrative seriality has always been both a product of, and stimulant for, economic production. As cultural commodities, the most successful series are those that produce and/or accommodate commercial demand. Seriality is therefore characterized by a formal elasticity supple enough to meet the dynamic exigencies of its markets. When a series debuts, it adapts to

the media marketplace or is canceled. Like the broader economic system in which it operates, the serial form responds to market fluctuations by adjusting creative strategies (the narrative equivalent of market corrections). Through the trials and errors of these individual series, the overall mode of seriality branches, testing new tactics to see which find purchase. This hyperresponsivity impacts what stories are told and the manner of their telling, producing surprising collisions, collaborations, adjustments, and departures from the foundational characteristics of its form. The cross-media endurance of seriality over the past two centuries testifies to its resilience within the capricious, and often volatile, conditions of the media marketplace. The mechanism of this endurance derives from a property I label *modal variability*.

As it reproduces itself, seriality adopts any number of patterns, some more complex or profitable than others. The core techniques of serial storytelling that were invented in the 1830s carry on today, but obvious differences between, for instance, a sprawling Victorian coming-of-age serial and an episodic home-renovation show reflect how dynamic historical, cultural, economic, and medial contexts produce an increasing variety of serial modes. Like DNA, certain elements of serial modalities may express themselves in their direct descendants, recede and resurface years later, or die out.

I do not use these genealogical terms cavalierly: the history of evolutionary science tracks that of seriality and provides an apt lens through which to establish the operations and stakes of this rhetorical conceit. Beginning in the nineteenth century and, for more than a century, evolutionary biologists likened species heredity to a ladder, where primitive species evolve into more highly-adapted ones—apes become humans, wolves become dogs, and so on. This description resembles the broad-strokes “continuum” that Hagedorn and Denson use to describe the passage of seriality from one medium to the next. But linear theories of evolution, explains

Stephen Jay Gould, “are false abstractions, made by running a steamroller over a labyrinthine pathway that hops from branch to branch through a phylogenetic bush” (180). From a distant vantage, we may easily draw a continuous line from the serial form’s beginning in the 1830s to any one of its contemporary instantiations, but holding any single throughline to be paradigmatic of the entire history of the form would be, like a linear account of evolution, “an example of distortions imposed by converting tortuous paths through bushes into directed ladders” (175).

Such distortions misinterpret history in a way that carries conceptual consequences. In evolutionary biology, a family tree without many branches is one that tells of innumerable failures, representing “unsuccessful lineages on the very brink of extermination” (181). Instead, the most viable pedigrees resemble bushes, where “each extended lineage becomes a set of decisions at branching points—only one among hundreds of potential routes” (175). From a bio-evolutionary standpoint, this move unseats the *Homo sapien* from its illusory position of primacy, identifying bushier genuses, like rodents, as more evolutionarily healthy. From a narrative standpoint, framing the history of seriality as a linear continuum risks neglecting its fundamental adaptability. The fertility of seriality—with its iterations, reiterations, and variances—capacitates its extraordinary durability in mass culture.

As with the evolution of biological species, serial branching occurs in response to the appearance of fresh niches and obstacles. For instance, in 1912, the Edison company took advantage of the opportunities in the new medium of cinema, releasing the film serial, *What Happened to Mary?* as a marketing tactic to promote William Randolph Hearst’s *Ladies World* magazine supplement (Hagedorn 9). In a different example, the spread of TV ownership in the 1950s weakened the market for radio serials. The medium met this challenge by capitalizing on another opportunity through the introduction of in-car FM radios in 1952, which promised

captive audiences at irregular times and durations. Unable to expect dedicated listening, stations increased emphasis on musical sets and short news pieces, which, in turn, reduced overhead. Although radio serials continued to exist, the technical specifications and social uses of the medium transitioned into newly fertile ground as radio seriality became a medium more closely associated with non-narrative programming. Because novel circumstances such as these can either catalyze or diminish reliance on the narrative series explains why serial blooms tend to coincide with the commercial integration of emerging media.

Television's unique characteristics encourage more serial branching than any other medium. This phenomenon derives from the sets of opportunities and challenges it poses to storytelling, many of which have to do with circumstances surrounding the complexity and dynamism of television technology. As an audiovisual medium, television is more technologically complex than comics, the only other intrinsically serialized medium. Repeatedly, throughout the history of television, collisions between the interests of the television industry, manufacturers, and consumers open points of conflict. While innovations in media technology attempt to meet audience preferences for more choice over what they watch and how they watch it, serial storytelling strategies respond by innovating new serial modalities in attempts to re-exert control over viewer attention.

Classic Network Era Seriality (1940s-1970s)

The first decades of television history set the initial terms of these negotiations. During its earliest days as a commercial commodity, the television industry, as with the radio industry that preceded it, needed first and foremost to get television sets into as many homes as possible. Following these initial purchases, however, programming became more or less free for

consumers, who could access terrestrial broadcasts, or, only a handful of years later, pay small monthly cable subscription fees. As Jennifer Hayward reminds us, “the advantage of serialization is that it essentially creates the demand it then feeds” (3), and thus early television content producers assembled, through trial and error, cocktails of formal strategies best suited to forming and feeding audiences appetites for narrative engagement.

At this time, the Big Three networks maintained nearly complete control over the terrestrial broadcasting system, so their primary challenges were to draw attention away from environmental disruptions in the domestic sphere, keeping viewers attentive through commercial breaks and compelling them to return for future episodes. Early television liberally borrowed content and formal strategies from radio and film serials, resulting in a pattern of episodic seriality. That promoted familiar characters responding to generic challenges in predictable ways within relatively static storyworlds—a formula well-suited to stimulate the parasocial bonds required to attract and retain fans, while also allowing for occasional inconsistency in interepisodic viewership.

Although television historians tend to divide the medium’s history into three broadly-defined eras (the “Classic Network,” “Multi-Channel,” and “Convergence” eras), the transitions between these periods transpired gradually. As early as the 1960s, most televisions included devices enabling viewers to “zap” between non-contiguous channels, with the remote control requiring programming to adapt itself to the newly widespread practice of channel surfing.³⁴ Combined with the periodic introduction of more programming options through cable and eventually satellite broadcasting, the grip of the Big Three over American attention spans loosened, prompting shifts in televisual storytelling strategies. Raymond Williams identified the

³⁴ See David Morley’s *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure* (1986) for a sociological account of the domestic behaviors surrounding remote control usage within the twentieth-century nuclear family.

character of televisual content during the period of transition as one of “planned flow,” which he labels “the defining characteristic of broadcasting” (80). “Planned flow” refers to the continuous stream of seemingly independent content in which programs are periodically interrupted by commercials, previews, announcements, and other paratexts. By analyzing what he saw on the screen over the course of any viewing session, Williams recognized that the structure of each “media event” was not conceived as a discrete unit, but as part of a larger package or “sequence” of interwoven media events. Observing trends in television programming, he then teased out the following formula for American television flow:

There is a characteristic kind of opening sequence, meant to excite interest, which is in effect a kind of trailer for itself. In American television, after two or three minutes, this is succeeded by commercials. [...] Here what follows is apparently quite unconnected material. It is not then surprising that so many of these opening moments are violent or bizarre: the interest aroused must be strong enough to initiate the expectation of (interrupted but sustainable) sequence. Thus a quality of external sequence becomes a mode of definition of an internal method. [...] This was intensified in conditions of competition, when it became important to broadcasting planners to retain viewers – or as they put it, to ‘capture’ them – for a whole evening’s sequence. And with the eventual unification of these two or three sequences, a new kind of communication phenomenon has to be recognized. (84-85)

Although Williams does not use the term seriality to describe the properties of planned flow, he nonetheless speaks at length about the shapes and uses of serial techniques, describing them as elements of “(interrupted but sustainable) sequence.” In other words, by naming and interpreting planned flow, Williams inadvertently described not only what turned out to be one of the many modalities of televisual seriality, but also the logic behind its formal strategies.

Multi-Channel Era (1980s-1990s)

The Multi-Channel Era hosted the first substantial departure from the Big Three networks’ stronghold over viewer choices. Much of the industry chatter at the time concerned the

pending introduction of a viable “fourth network” to challenge the status quo. In a 1985 *New York Magazine* article concerning the changing industry, Bernice Kanner interviews a number of advertising executives and media industry experts, who help her outline the probability of such a shift. To most industry managers at the time, technical and economic conditions seemed inimical to these efforts: according to one interviewee “no one has come close to [the capacity for] simulcast programming almost around the clock”; to another, a fourth network would not be possible without “skew[ing] the definition to mean a major programming alternative without being quite so total [because] even three hours every day is an enormous block to fill” (19). As these media industry professionals intuited, for any competition to disrupt business as usual, networks would need to learn to sell advertisers on non-simulcasted programs, and content production would have to increase dramatically. In this way, Kanner’s interviewees predicted exactly how the shape of television would come to change, although their overestimation of the sanctity of industry precedent undermined their predictions about how the above challenges would be met.

What her interviewees failed to comprehend was the meaning of the data before them. For her part, Kanner eventually lays out the exact formula that could fuel the trend toward decentralized programming. The key, she concludes, would be “programming what people like,” adding: “if that could happen, then advertisers might welcome a fourth network, which would lower the cost of commercial time, but only if it could simultaneously increase the amount of programming content to keep competition low” (23). In fact, at this exact point in time, what Kanner calls an “unofficial fourth network”—that of barter syndication—had already taken off. In this kind of system, which is still widely practiced, syndicators pre-place advertisements in programs they have either purchased or produced, while leaving some advertising slots available

for stations to sell locally. They then lease programming to local stations for free, in what one of Kanner's sources calls "a price club against the networks" (23). But the fourth network she anticipates above is actually the more centralized one which, at the time of her writing, was emerging under the aegis of established media mogul Rupert Murdoch's Fox Broadcasting Company.

Precipitating Fox's ascension as the Big Three's primary competitor were a combination of technical and politico-economic developments, including: the 1979 introduction of satellite technology, which used communication satellites to relay an unprecedentedly wide range of channels and locations that had previously lacked access to cable or terrestrial broadcasts; loosening regulatory policies and enforcement procedures from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), especially regarding how many stations a single entity could collect; favorable treatment from President Ronald Reagan's FCC appointees, who gave Fox additional waivers for several regulations; and resources available via the vertical and horizontal integration of Fox's parent company. As one of Kanner's interviewees, an advertising executive, summarizes: "independent suppliers have arisen to supply us with programming, satellite has solved the transmission problem, and, suddenly, a man [Rupert Murdoch] with a string of strong owned-and-operated stations, an in-built programming source, and deep pockets has surfaced" (19). Meanwhile, accompanying the debut of affordable satellite dishes, subscription services such as HBO and, later, Cinemax, began driving demand for satellite scrambling technologies, and specialty channels, such as ESPN (1979), MTV (1981), the Sci-Fi Channel (1992, now SyFy), began to appear. Disrupting the time-honored conventions of television transmission and viewership, therefore, was a profusion not only of a true fourth network, but also new stations, new revenue models, and new consumers/customers.

Although the base drive of the business of television has always been to recruit and groom viewers to watch as much television as possible, the economic and technological developments of the 1980s reshaped the industry's methods in terms of its products and dissemination tactics. Initially, the Multi-Channel Era prompted an intensification, more than a diversification, of seriality, because the first new problem the television industry needed to solve was the overwhelming need to populate air time. To meet this challenge, independent stations and network affiliates relied upon first-run syndications and re-runs. Pitched and created with downstream syndication in mind, these series emphasized a compact episodic narrative arc, structured as follows: (1) introduction of conflict; (2) complication of that conflict; (3) resolution. The simplicity and familiarity of this episodic expression of seriality aimed to court channel-surfing audiences, whose loose parasocial bonds with recognizable characters helped them enjoy shows they could watch irregularly or out of order. Supplementing these stock series, stations began to pack off-peak timeslots with more and more low-budget "filler" content, such as talk shows, game shows, courtroom reality shows, tabloid news, and infomercials.

The deregulation of the airwaves demanded a dramatic expansion of genres and narrative forms to populate airtime as cheaply and effectively as possible. As consumers received progressively more choice and control over what and how they watched television, the mass audiences of the Classic Network Area splintered into targetable demographics, which the Nielsen Media Research Firm tracked with increasingly complex indices to measure performance across market segments. Through these mechanisms, simulcasting gave way to *narrowcasting*—an approach employing psychographic lifestyle data about its consumers to match programming to specific audiences—which required the industry to invent "new formats and strategies to reach valued audience segments" (Mittell, *TV and American Culture* 11).

Narrowcasting also prompted a framework perfectly suited—and not accidentally—to the market logic undergirding Reaganomics.

When Reagan’s FCC appointees introduced deregulatory legislation, such as the Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984, they did so with explicit intentions to “assure that cable communications provide and are encouraged to provide the widest possible diversity of information sources and services to the public” and to “promote competition in cable communications and minimize unnecessary regulation that would impose an undue economic burden on cable systems” (2). The consequences of Reagan’s deregulatory agenda, however, served less to open the television industry to greater competition than to reconfigure the means by which the media industry’s major players consolidated power. Even to this day, the majority of broadcast content remains under the control of just four networks—the Big Three and Fox.³⁵ Rather than promoting competition and diversification among television’s major players, Reaganomics divided and diversified TV audiences. Incentivizing the industry to produce as much novel content as possible, which often came at the expense of creativity and production quality. At the same time, it bolstered business for the media conglomerates who already possessed sufficient resources to meet this perpetual demand.

Broadcast television does not make money from its viewers, which means that its customers are not audiences, but advertisers. In other words, the commodity is not the media content, but its aggregate audience data. The job of producers and distributors is to promise sponsors returns on investment in the currency of eyes on screens. Thus, content providers must not only hone their ability to recognize, anticipate, and promote objects of popular desire, but also develop metrics to identify successful strategies. Remembering that advertisers do not

³⁵ See *Variety*, “Most-Watched Television Networks: Ranking 2022’s Winners and Losers.”

require critical consensus or cultural accolade, except inasmuch as they may boost consumption, the only meaningful measurements come in the form of quantitative data. How many viewers watch a given program? For how long? How and where do they watch it? Who are they? And what would impel them to watch more? Demographic market research is, therefore, central to television's cultural dominance throughout its history, as evidenced by the importance of the Nielsen ratings.

For many viewers, television ceased to be a pastime and became a lifestyle—at least according to critics like David Foster Wallace, who in 1990 characterized the medium as “malignantly addictive” (163). Lamenting the six hours a day in which the average American viewer absorbed TV content, Wallace associates television with other “special treats” like candy and liquor: “treats that are basically fine and fun in small amounts but bad for us in large amounts and *really* bad for us if consumed as any kind of nutritive staple” (163). In this analogy, the empty calories of television stimulate hunger they cannot satisfy, and the more we consume the more elusive our threshold for satiation. Although he never mentions the serial form that governs television output, he recognizes the pathways of addiction it stimulates, which become more potent through accumulation. These more nefarious mechanics of screen addiction are symptomatic of the economics of advertiser-subsidized broadcast: “television's one goal—never denied by anybody in or around TV since RCA first authorized field tests in 1936—is to ensure as much watching as possible” (162). Assuming these statements to be true, the task for every level of the industry must consequently be to find ways to amplify television's siren song to reach the largest possible audience. To do so, they need data. Extending the metaphor of the drug, this arrangement between the television industry and its demographers works toward

identifying the most effective neural pathways for television series to target. That is, if TV is the drug, networks are its pushers, while ratings agencies collaborate in its design.

Whether we agree with him or not, Wallace connects media addiction with the degradation of American principles and the rise of the New Right, and in so doing he joins a chorus of other alarmists who precede, surround, and succeed him.³⁶ More than three decades earlier, for example, Theodor Adorno warned against the soporific and potentially totalitarian dangers not of the television screen, but specifically of the television series, which he refers to obliquely in terms of its “repetitiveness,” “selfsameness,” and “ubiquity” (216). Like many others who came before and after him, Adorno decries the conditioning of passive audiences, who unconsciously begin to crave inexhaustible reiterations of the same basic messages. To him, television’s hidden purpose is to incessantly replay programs in which the “perennial middle-class conflict between individuality and society has been reduced to a dim memory, and the message is invariably that of identification with the status quo” (220). Adorno’s account over-inscribes the structure of television programming with political intention, but it nonetheless articulates a cynicism associated with the moral and sociopolitical implications of seriality that accompanied the form since the beginning. Nearly a century before Adorno, for example, Thomas Arnold (father of cultural critic and poet Matthew Arnold) delivered an 1844 sermon at the Rugby school claiming that serialized novels present readers with “an abundance of the most stimulating and least nourishing food possible [which cause] an unnatural and constant excitement of the mind [that involves] a consequent weakness” (40). For all three men, the agent of addiction is the structural repetition of serial fiction.

³⁶ For an extended discussion of many other examples of anti-television proponents, see Jason Mittell, “The Cultural Power of an Anti-Television Metaphor.” See also the fourth chapter of this dissertation, which reviews multiple sides of debates surrounding television addiction discourse.

Tracking this argument through the centuries, it becomes clear that the 1980s did not invent the strategies television series use to addict their viewers, but rather that the television industry merely reconceived some of their tactics to be more effective. Reagan's neoliberal project to reconfigure the values of laissez-faire liberalism in active support for the principles of market competition evolved into what Gilles Deleuze calls a "control society," or a society within which access to unrestricted movement and choice masks the fact that those freedoms are circumscribed within the confines of a grid of intelligibility.³⁷ In such a society, each choice a person makes represents one of an inexhaustible set of options, and each option is only available by virtue of the fact that it remains legible to the system through mechanisms of control, such as data analytics. By extension, every difference an individual asserts provides another data point that can feed back into the algorithm and thereby strengthen it. To smoothly function, such a system necessitates intervention at the level of the structure itself, which Foucault, in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, identifies as "an intervening liberalism" where regulation aims first and foremost to protect the principles of competition and, by extension, inequality (133). Translated to the television screen, this means that audiences receive an unmanageable range of options while ancillary services watch what they watch and how they choose to watch it. With these data, television producers and writers learn to become more adept at mesmerizing the masses by appealing to abstractions represented by bigger and bigger data sets, the preferences of individuals absorbed into something legible as means and averages.

On the surface, it may seem like a contradiction to consider the psychographic diversification of television's market segments in the 1980s as one of the primary tools for genericizing television content, but one of the most powerful characteristics of neoliberal capital

³⁷ See Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control."

is the way it absorbs challenges to its functioning and learns to exploit them for profit. The way this worked in Multi-Channel Era television is by remixing proven protocols. Psychometrics serve not just to identify differences between television's proliferating targets, but, perhaps more importantly, to adduce the deeper similarities between them. Once identified, these correspondences enable content producers to superficially signal diversity through branding while at the same time replicating and strengthening the most carefully tested formulae that govern the deeper structures of narrative. For example, where racial or geographical identity markers may predict whether a consumer opts for *The Cosby Show* over *Family Ties*, the most potent field-tested narrative structures and marketing tactics may remain more or less identical across these differences. The objective of diversification in broadcast television is therefore to package the same programmatic stimulants across the widest possible swath of potential advertising targets.

For the evolution of expressions of seriality in broadcast television during the Multi-Channel Era, the deregulation of the airwaves largely served to replicate, multiply, and clarify pre-existing serial storytelling methods; however, the era also planted the seeds for what would become a much more profound adaptation of the form of the scripted television series. Specifically, the gradual integration of time-shifting devices into consumer markets—beginning with the VCR on the eve of the 1980s, and later incorporating DVD, and DVR in the 1990s—prompted more profound changes in the concept of television because of the new ways audiences were able to watch it. The newfound ability to record broadcast content or purchase pre-recorded content rendered previously ephemeral content manipulable and rewatchable, summarized in Mittell's terms as the capability for audiences "to mimic the flexibility and control of books" (38) within the medium of television. People could now pause, rewind, or record programs to

ensure they would not miss any content; they could revisit key episodes of a series to prepare them for dramatic twists and turns; and, in the greatest challenge to advertising revenue, they could fast-forward through commercial breaks.

Offering unprecedented control over what and how people watched television, this new mode of access required television storytelling to start improvising new methods for conditioning its viewership. Initially, networks and syndicates addressed the problems of time shifting technology by attempting to double down on tested strategies. At first, as Wallace observes, these strategies mainly impacted aesthetics rather than narrative form:

with its dreaded fast-forward and ZAP functions, [the VCR], threatens the very viability of commercials. Television advertisers' sensible solution? Make the ads as appealing as the shows. [...] Make the ads prettier, livelier, full of enough rapidly juxtaposed visual quanta that Joe's attention just doesn't get to wander, even if he remote-kills the volume. [Or...] There is an obverse way to make commercials resemble programs: have programs start to resemble commercials. That way the ads seem less like interruptions than like pace-setters, metronomes, commentaries on the shows' theory. (177)

The nightmarish mediascape of Wallace's analysis suggests a hyperactive iteration of Williams' planned flow—one in which programs do more than pattern themselves around the exigencies of commercial advertising (the “metronomes” to their plotting), and in fact become something like advertisements themselves.

Eventually, however, the ramifications of time-shifting incentivized new expressions of serialized storytelling. Beginning in the 1990s, the DVD replaced the VCR in most homes, but it would be insufficient to treat the DVD as simply an extension of the VCR, as the DVD's user-friendly interfaces, platform flexibility, and elaborate paratexts, redefined the contours of televisual content delivery. James Bennett tracks how the DVD, despite the brevity of its moment of primacy, transformed television culture by repackaging ongoing serial programs as bounded art objects and removing them from what he calls the “dirtiness” of television flow.

Flattening the divide between high and low culture by packaging television shows as objects of commercial art akin to movies, DVDs gave television seriality what Bennett describes as the “aura of quality” (5), thus setting the scene for the coming era of what popular outlets call “Prestige TV.”

Responding to these shifts in the 1990s, the field of television studies began to pay more attention to aesthetics. Where Bennett describes television’s accretion of an “aura of quality” through the popularization of the DVD boxset, Jeremy Butler formulates a lexicon, borrowing liberally from semiotics and television production terminology, to articulate a poetics of television. Deemphasizing its sociological effects as a medium of transmission, Butler’s point of intervention is aesthetics. Jason Mittell elaborates on his approaches by describing the stylistic and formal revisions to television that accompany the development of sophisticated digital time-shifting mechanisms in the 21st century. If VHS inaugurated new reception practices among consumers, DVDs and DVRs accelerated the transition toward complex seriality, and digital streaming services escalated those trends by rendering time-shifting capabilities much more widely available for an enormous volume of content.

Convergence Era (2000s-now)

In the twenty-first century, the digitization of media production and consumption technologies has triggered an unprecedented explosion of serial content across all narrative media in what media scholars have come to call the “Convergence Era.” This appellation follows Henry Jenkins’ theorizing of “convergence culture,” which he defines as:

the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, the search for new structures of media financing that fall at the interstices between old and new media, and the migratory behavior of media audiences

who will go anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.
(322)

To supplement Jenkins' definition, we can identify seriality, in its various iterations, as the chief formal site of convergence, as demonstrated by the predominance of serialized content across genres, platforms, and devices. It in fact makes a great deal of sense to include such formal considerations under the umbrella of convergence culture, as seriality essentially capacitates its success: where digital production tools and viewer interfaces have enabled serialized content to increase in number and accumulate larger audiences, the power of seriality to generate loyal consumers boosts engagement with online platforms and prompts innovations in digital technologies, audience surveillance software, and industry business practices. Convergence culture and seriality reinforce each other. Just as convergence culture drives the expansion of serialized content, the enthusiasm and reliability of serial fandom incentivizes the technological developments that define convergence. In this way, narrative form, media technology, and industry practices operate synergistically, each changing in response to the other in an ongoing expansion of mutual revitalization. The current proliferation of seriality constitutes, and is constituted by, the technological conditions of convergence. In the simplest terms, convergence culture is serial culture.

The new media platforms, practices, and consumer markets of convergence culture incentivize serial expressions that shape themselves around the idiosyncrasies of on-demand online accessibility. Some modalities represent grassroots serial productions: web series, webcomics, homegrown podcasting, life-streaming, and arguably the aestheticized reels of serial content curated by social media users. These new capabilities have also opened up financial opportunities for a wider range of parties—not just production houses and distribution networks like streaming platforms, but also media manufacturers, ratings agencies, social networking sites,

media journalists, and individual influencers who can self-publish media critique in video essays, podcasts, and other genres.

Courting free publicity among social networks and media outlets, television series have learned to invite certain kinds of attention. From these conditions, therefore, arises the “new paradigm of television storytelling” Jason Mittell labels “Complex TV,” which works by:

redefining the boundary between episodic and serial forms, with a heightened degree of self-consciousness in storytelling mechanics, and demanding intensified viewer engagement focused on both diegetic pleasures and formal awareness. (53-54)

Under this rubric, the convoluted, character-driven narratives of complex television series reward the scrutiny of fans who can watch, re-watch, or binge shows with greater attention to detail than ever before. These series are more complex across every dimension of their production, including narrative, video, and audio design. The level of engagement made possible by these new dimensions of complexity also increases competition over innovative ways to lock in fan loyalty.

In the twenty-first century, we have become device-blind. We can watch movies on our phones and TV on our laptops—an arrangement that has fundamentally changed how we define the television medium. The most-viewed series of 2022, for example, was *Stranger Things*.

While a sizeable portion of the show’s viewership certainly watched on their TVs, the series only released on the Netflix streaming platform. Even so, *Stranger Things* is unmistakably a TV show. If we read the first sentence of the show’s *Wikipedia* entry, which calls it a “science fiction horror drama television series,” we must acknowledge a new definition of television programming for the convergence era that is defined more by genre (science fiction horror

drama) and form (series) than by what we once called its medium.³⁸ And, when we look more closely at the assortment of genres applicable to *Stranger Things*, we arrive at an even knottier designation, as the already-imperfect boundaries between genres become even blurrier.

In television, producers continue to improvise new methods of delivering content: releasing internet-only content; experimenting with different release schedules like full-season or multi-episode drops to encourage bingeing; and foregrounding transmedial tie-ins with film franchises. Some of these strategies work better than others. For example, the premier of *Star Trek: Discovery*, which was used to introduce the CBS All Access (now Paramount+) streaming service, drew record numbers of single-day sign-ups, and its second-season premier contributed to a 72 percent increase in subscribers compared to the first season. By way of contrast, more outlets have begun rejecting full-season “bingeable” episode drops in favor of “appointment viewing,” which encourages viewers to read and write recaps and reviews, swap fan theories on Reddit, or simply talk about shows with their friends and family. At the same time, however, full drops of prestige, or “complex” series mean “you don’t have to worry about reminding people of every detail of every scene, because,” according to Netflix’s Chief Executive Officer Ted Sarandos, “there’s a 100 percent chance they saw last week’s episode less than an hour ago.”³⁹ Many series find themselves suddenly beholden both to the weekly and seasonal rhythms of traditional broadcast television and to the desires of hyper-attentive fans who might binge or rewatch their favorite programs. Popular television series have therefore become more narratively convoluted, character-driven, and interdependent with intertextual content.⁴⁰

³⁸ For data regarding the other most-viewed series of 2022, refer Carlie Porterfield’s article for *Forbes*.

³⁹ For a look at the benefits and disadvantages of appointment or binge scheduling from an industry perspective, see Alan Sepinwall’s article, which features an interview with Ted Sarandos.

⁴⁰ See Mittell’s *Complex TV* for extended discussion of contemporary televisual narrative complexity.

A particularly potent example of how new media has shaped seriality lies in the success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), which has innovated, with great success, the behaviors of a new type of fandom, labeled by Jason Mittell as “forensic fandom,” which follows “a model of engagement where viewers become amateur narratologists” (52). Armed with instant access to information, embedded in online fan-communities with decentralized expertise, and capable of revisiting content at any time, these fans form the MCU’s core base. To cultivate that base and expand its influence, the MCU rewards the careful consumer by orchestrating transmedial crossovers; planting “easter eggs” recognizable only to the most attentive fans; producing fake teaser trailers to surprise an increasingly savvy forensic public; orchestrating film, TV, and comic book tie-ins; and, most relevant to my dissertation, creating streaming-only television series to appear on their parent company’s platform, Disney.⁴¹

The impacts of the Convergence Era on television seriality have been immense and continue unfolding in real time. Platform-blind content increasingly severs medial trajectories from the formal, aesthetic, and economic norms of their vestigial apparatuses. Because of the way smart devices have fundamentally reconfigured the way we interact with media, what we now think of as television encounters other media in complicated, dynamic, and often unpredictable ways. For example, consider a contemporary complex television series such as HBO’s *Westworld* (2016), which I analyze in the next chapter. As producers Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan conceived and executed their vision, they had to keep in mind, especially given the need to recoup expenses from their \$88 million budget, that the series would likely garner more aggregate views from non-synchronous streams than from first-run broadcasts. To access episodes through HBO’s streaming service, viewers must navigate to a sleekly-designed landing

⁴¹ For details on the modern audience behavior, see Mittell’s chapter “Orienting Paratexts” (261-291) in his book, *Complex TV*.

page that will include a list of seasons and episodes, frames illustrating key moments from each episode, and summaries of each season. Clicking through to a specific episode then brings up a new menu of options, with extras that may include recaps, trailers, behind-the-scenes footage, and more.

The information in these paratexts enables fans to engage with content at any depth they choose—whether they merely want to tune in for the thrills of an action-adventure about cowboy robots, or whether they want to enjoy the thoughtfully-planted details that more casual observers might overlook. More than offering depth, official paratexts also present fans with a breadth of interpretive methodologies, where viewers can choose whether they want to think about the thematic implications of aesthetic devices, the technical elements behind the scenes of a shoot, or the motivations of the actors or creators. Audiences may even decide to pause the show on a specific frame to read something written on a scrap of paper or look up the meaning of an allusion or suspected easter egg. These new technological capabilities do far more than simply change the way people watch television; they transform the definition of the medium itself. What changes when creators know that their output may be scrutinized through the detective work of this new generation of television fans moonlighting as amateur narratologists? Or, more centrally, what is a television show, if it does not need to be viewed on a television? Decoupling a mass of televisual content from television hardware, the digital convergence era has spawned a new concept of television as genre rather than medium. And, from that major shift, the replication and transmutation of serial expressions has proliferated exponentially.

Modal Accumulation

In “A Note upon the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad,” Sigmund Freud compares technologies of writing to the workings of human memory: “Devices to aid our memory seem particularly imperfect,” he says, “since our mental apparatus accomplishes precisely what they cannot: it has an unlimited receptive capacity for new perceptions and nevertheless lays down permanent—even though not unalterable—memory-traces of them” (228). Freud is enamored with a new device—the “Mystic Writing Pad”—which survives in some form even to this day in objects like children’s “Magic Slate” toys. To Freud, the Pad solves the contradiction of prior writing implements, as it: “provides not only a receptive surface that can be used over and over again, like a slate, but also permanent traces of what has been written, like an ordinary paper pad” (230). Despite its virtue, the Mystic Writing Pad has one limitation: “once the writing has been erased, the Mystic Pad cannot ‘reproduce’ it from within; it would be a *mystic* pad indeed if, like our memory, it could accomplish *that*” (230). In this, Freud unwittingly presages the prosthetic memory aids, surveillance technologies, and entertainment platforms of the digital era.

The full implications of our twenty-first century “Mystic Pads” extend Freud’s meditations on individual memory into the realm of collective memory, which memory studies defines as “recollections that are instantiated beyond the individual by and for the collective” (Zelizer, 214). The creation of the iPhone, iPad, and other digital platforms for individualized internet connectivity has enabled new networks of access to television content that supersede the physical limitations of earlier broadcasting technologies. Emerging from and contributing to the convergence era, platforms like Netflix challenge the dominance of traditional broadcasting outfits, including the Big Three, by supplanting broadcasting with internet streaming technologies optimized by these devices. The scope of connectivity internet streaming makes

possible has produced a revolutionary capability specific to the digital era: the ability to accumulate a vast digital archive of content accessible to consumers on-demand. As the technological mediators of this content connection, iPhones, iPads, and other personalized devices for accessing the internet actualize the speculative possibilities Freud imagines for a “mystic writing pad.” Paired with a digitized archive of past, present, and future (i.e., not yet consumed) content available at any time, these devices also record consumer behavior as “permanent traces” that exist in the “memory” that is each individual’s archive of user data. This individual data can then be aggregated into the collective memory of what Wolfgang Ernst calls a “transarchive” (84), whereby each individual user becomes a “miniarchivist” in an “information society” (Parikka 2).

In this media ecosystem, we all consume and contribute to a vast and dynamic archive of hypertext, which, for our purposes, gives us access to nearly the whole of television history. As Mark Fisher explains:

Digital archiving means that the fugitive evanescence that long ago used to characterise, for instance, the watching of television programmes – seen once, and then only remembered – has disappeared. Indeed, it turns out that experiences which we thought were forever lost can – thanks to the likes of YouTube – not only be recovered, but endlessly repeated. (132)

The fragmented transarchive of television series produces a partial explanation for why the current mediascape features such abundant examples not just of individual series but also of serial modalities. Convergence Era television demonstrates this tendency toward what I call *modal accumulation*. This attribute of seriality accounts for both the *modal variability* (discussed above), as well as the simultaneous presence of old and new expressions of seriality. Because the Convergence Era is defined by the seemingly eternal and ever-available transarchive of the

digital television catalog, old and new expressions of seriality proliferate and combine, producing modal accumulation.

Modal accumulation occurs in two ways: by making old series available through streaming or reruns; and by inventing new serial modes that fit a particular entertainment niche. For an example of the former, consider the soap opera—a genre marked by recognizable formal characteristics, which Jason Mittell describes as a “poetics of slow-paced redundancy” (*Complex TV* 236). In the 1950s, “television seriality was viewed by many critics, viewers, and producers as synonymous with... daytime soaps,” and the narrative rhythms of these soaps were themselves borrowed from the preexisting radio genre (235). For most of television history, daytime soaps have fulfilled a specific function, targeting audiences generally comprised of women engaged in domestic work, who can leave their sets on as they moved from room to room and be assured that they will not miss any crucial exposition, which will be delivered repeatedly, often for days or weeks of airing. Despite the frequent developments in technical capacities and storytelling tactics, soap opera’s serial modalities have remained stable for nearly a century of sustained mass production, as their ongoing popularity presents neither need nor incentive for their serial modality to change.

In contrast to the soap opera version of modal accumulation, many TV shows combine serial modes to create stories that feel simultaneously familiar and new. Fredric Jameson describes one example of this approach as a “nostalgia mode,” which he describes as a “particular practice of pastiche” that imitates “a peculiar or unique style...without parody’s ulterior motives” (7, 5). To illustrate the nostalgia mode of postmodern pastiche, Jameson argues that *Star Wars* reinvents the “Buck Rogers type” of film serial from the 1930s to 1950s, involving “alien villains, true American heroes, heroines in distress, the death ray or the doomsday box, and the cliff-hanger at

the end whose miraculous solution was to be witnessed next Saturday afternoon” (8). To Jameson, *Star Wars* offers a type of nostalgia beyond historical referent—what Mark Fisher, in his interpretation of Jameson, calls “a yearning for a form” (22). Fisher summarizes Jameson’s nostalgia mode as one “best understood in terms of a *formal* attachment to the techniques and formulas of the past” (21).

We might think of the televisual mediascape’s modal accumulation as an admixture of nostalgia-mode seriality, newer serial modalities, and actual reruns of older series—all legible within the living archive of digital television seriality. This cross-pollination is part of the reason for seriality’s elasticity as a mode that can vary widely while still maintaining a core structure. To elaborate on a few additional examples of serial modes that have accumulated in contemporary television, see figure 1.

Figure 1: Selected Serial Modalities in Television

Serial Modality	Description	Examples
Episodic	Episodes can be viewed out of order. Formulaic plots rely on familiar characters and contexts.	<i>I Love Lucy, Cheers, Seinfeld, Poker Face</i>
Complex	Episodes must be viewed in order. Viewers are invited to keep track of convoluted narratives and to pay attention to nuances of dialogue and mise-en-scene. Story arcs last a season or longer.	<i>The Wire, Lost, Westworld, Watchmen</i>
Looping	Characters re-experience events with or without memory about prior iterations of the time loop. Each episode offers some new information about the world of the time loop.	<i>The Good Place</i> (season 2), <i>Westworld</i> , <i>Russian Doll</i>
Anthology – by Episode	Each episode stands alone as a complete narrative.	<i>The Twilight Zone, Black Mirror, Electric Dreams</i>
Anthology – by Season	Each season stands alone as a complete narrative.	<i>The Terror, American Horror Story, The White Lotus, True Detective</i>

Limited	The story takes place over a predetermined number of episodes, usually limited to a single season.	<i>Watchmen, Chernobyl, Queen's Gambit</i>
Transmedial	The television series ties in with, follows, or is continued in one or more other series, often involving comic books and/or superhero films.	<i>Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., Loki, WandaVision, The Walking Dead</i>
Proleptic/Analeptic	Most or all of each episode is framed in flashbacks (analepses) or flashforwards (prolepses) of the show's diegetic present.	<i>How I Met Your Mother, Young Sheldon, Fast Forward</i>

Ultimately, the contemporary digital mediascape has transformed our understanding of television as a *medium* into that of a *form*, characterized by recognizable sets of serial modalities. Amid the shifts and negotiations of this convergence mediascape, seriality serves as the formal anchor whereby audience attention is established and maintained across devices, platforms, and an overabundance of options. Where technological convergence creates picky and distracted consumers, seriality absorbs fans in rich storyworlds. Where novelty threatens chaos, seriality lends stability and continuity, alongside innovation. In turn, the changing affordances of convergence culture continuously reshape expressions of seriality into forms at once unconventional and familiar. All the while, these new expressions of seriality join their older cousins in the living archive of serial modalities, available on-demand to viewers across the country and, indeed, the globe. If literacy in the nineteenth century meant being able to access and understand the form and function of Dickensian serials, literacy today requires we attend to the interactions of words, images, sounds, form, function, and memory.

CHAPTER 2: THE FRONTIERS OF SERIALITY: *WESTWORLD* AND METASERIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

“Welcome to Westworld. Live without limits.”

—*Westworld*, season 1, episode 6, “The Adversary”

“I don’t want to be in a story.”

—*Westworld*, season 1, episode 7, “Trompe L’Oeil”

The twenty-first century “Streaming Wars” have produced an unprecedented number of new series and, with them, new modes of serial storytelling.⁴² Among this catalog is a subset of contemporary television popularly called “peak,” “prestige,” or “quality” TV, or, as television scholars label it, “complex” television. According to Jason Mittell, who coined the term “complex TV,” these programs work by “redefining the boundary between episodic and serial forms, with a heightened degree of self-consciousness in storytelling mechanics, and demanding intensified viewer engagement focused on both diegetic pleasures and formal awareness” (*Complex TV* 53). Almost as soon as complex TV became legible to fans, critics, and academics as its own distinct paradigm of television storytelling, think pieces emerged to announce the form’s decline.⁴³ As I argue in the first chapter of this dissertation, however, serial modalities tend not to disappear, but rather to join together in a living archive of accumulating serial

⁴² For a scholarly take on the role of algorithms in the streaming wars, see Niko Pajkovic. For a collection of articles tracking the “pitched battle” among major subscription services, see the *Los Angeles Times* annotated bibliography of articles on the topic. See Brad Adgate and Alex Sherman for journalistic overviews of the history and analysis of the ongoing Streaming Wars. Finally, see Donato Totaro, T. Spangler, and the article, “Daily chart: Covid-19 is a short-term boon to streaming services,” for discussions of how the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the impact of the so-called “Streaming Wars.”

⁴³ See Aaron Bady, Judy Berman, Megan O’Keefe (2020), and Zofka Svec (2021) for a variety of takes on the decline of prestige TV that have and continue to appear over time.

modalities, where they replicate and often evolve.⁴⁴ The evolution of complex modalities in television seriality is often characterized by a turn inward, as more and more programs self-consciously interrogate the horizons and limits of seriality itself.

Nowhere is this pattern clearer than in the first season of HBO's heady science fiction drama, *Westworld* (2016), from showrunners Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy. Adapted from a 1973 Michael Crichton film of the same name, *Westworld* imagines an unspecified future in which wealthy guests visit a Wild-West-themed amusement park, where lifelike robot "hosts" guide them through a menu of genre-typical storylines. If we combine Umberto Eco's assessment of seriality as "another term for repetitive art" ("Interpreting Serial" 166) with the more traditional literary definition of a series as "a continuing story over an extended time with enforced interruptions" (Tom Keymer "Reading Time in Serial Fiction before Dickens), then *Westworld* is, even at the level of its series concept, already doubly serialized—both a repetition of Crichton's original story and a television series in its own right. And this is just the foundation of the show's multilayered engagement with the dynamic histories and frontiers of the serial form, which also play out in its premise, narrative structure, and dialogue.

Westworld's first season weaves together events from the theme park's fantasy reconstruction of the nineteenth-century American West and the park's center of operations, which is housed onsite in the underground compound of the Delos Corporation. In each location, characters initially appear to be divided into two distinct classes: biological humans and artificially-constructed androids. Among the humans, characters are again subdivided into one of two groups: park operators and guests. Predictably, as the series progresses, boundaries between these groups blur. This is true between every pairing, but especially so for the distinction

⁴⁴ Refer to pp. 47-51 in the first chapter of this dissertation.

between human and android. People we assume to be human turn out to be machine, just as machine cognition increasingly resembles human consciousness. Confusions among and collisions between its three broad character groups (park hosts, guests, and operators) throw into relief the temporal logic behind each group's particular mode of engaging with the park, each of which imposes different formal conventions plucked from the multi-medial history of popular seriality—which include, in turn, episodic, sequential, and complex serial modes. Taken together, encounters between *Westworld*'s serial modalities reveal the contours of its broader narrational form, which is one that both overdetermines the worlds of its characters and locates our viewing pleasure within an increasing awareness of our inescapable enmeshment within that same formal structure.

Further underscoring its engagement with the histories and uses of seriality, *Westworld* explicitly dramatizes the dynamic processes of serial production and reception, positioning the show's eponymous theme park as a stand-in for the collaborative activity of creating a complex TV series. In so doing, *Westworld* joins decades of scholarship in pointing out how theme parks employ many of the narrative principles we associate with audiovisual media like television and film: they “think” in narrative terms, deploying “techniques of mise-en-scene, focalization, sound and lighting design, and more” (Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight* 126); and, “like the camera lens, they position the visitor to follow a series of vignettes advancing the narrative” (Margaret King, “The Theme Park: Aspects of Experience in a Four-dimensional Landscape” 3).⁴⁵ To that end, the show stages conversations between the park's architects, programmers, writers, and characters about the means by which narrative form both drives and delimits a story's range of meanings.

⁴⁵ Florian Freitag's article further theorizes the resonances between cinematic and theme park storytelling strategies.

Westworld is constitutionally introspective. It is a commercial venture about commercial ventures, critiquing the narrative, socioeconomic, and moral character of entertainment conglomerates while, at the same time, generating a six-percent revenue increase for its distributor, HBO.⁴⁶ It is a spectacle about spectacle, offering naturalistic technical marvels that fret over the ethical emptiness of artificial verisimilitude; in a sponsored behind-the-scenes featurette, *Westworld* showrunner Lisa Joy even touts her visual effects team for stitching together images so seamlessly “that their own fingerprints slip away, and you can't tell what's real,” despite the show’s indictment of that very quality.⁴⁷ *Westworld* is also a story about storytelling, in which viewers are invited to watch characters draft and edit storylines for narratives that we then see take shape on screen. More than anything else, I argue, *Westworld* is a series about seriality.

This chapter proposes the concept of *metaseriality* to describe *Westworld*’s concerns with the uses and meanings of its own serial modalities, which play out at the level of its series concept, premise, content, and commerce. Metaseriality represents a growing trend in contemporary television in which complex TV series like *Westworld* thematize their own form. It acts in part as an umbrella term, which encompasses several related concepts from within the field of seriality studies that deal with the form’s innate tendency to observe its impact on audiences, while also accommodating the way such behaviors lead series to evolve outside of or against the desires of media consumers. To that end, I analyze *Westworld*’s reflexive engagement with its own form as an articulation of a theory about the origins, directions, and implications of contemporary complex television seriality.

⁴⁶ See Julia Alexander for reporting about *Westworld*’s prodigious budget and commercial success.

⁴⁷ See the “Go Behind the Scenes of Westworld's Incredible Visual Effects” featurette on *DIRECTV Insider*.

Defining Metaseriality

To develop the term *metaseriality*, I will first address its component parts: *meta* and *serial*. Applied to any given subject, the prefix *meta* describes an operation “which raises questions about the nature of the original discipline and its methods, procedures, and assumptions.”⁴⁸ Beyond this basic definition, the prefix carries myriad connotations both within the realms of literary and media studies and without. Some of these are straightforward: metafiction refers to fiction about fiction; metacriticism describes criticism that critiques other criticism; etc. Other instances are a little more abstruse: the Habermassian metanarrative at which Jean-François Lyotard takes aim, for example, assumes the mantle of a grand or master narrative that accounts for the ultimate meaning of other narratives and presumes itself to be comprehensive and true in its explanatory force.

Surprisingly, the scientific concept of metastability provide one of the best avenues for thinking about how the prefix inheres within narrative seriality. In physics and chemistry, metastability describes systems that exist within sustained imminence—a boulder that has found temporary pause on a ledge suspended above the ground, or a sample of super-cooled water that is poised to become ice with any impurity to catalyze crystallization.⁴⁹ Metastable systems are charged with potential energy, remaining on the cusp of their own undoing, or the actualization of a new phase transition, without necessarily reaching it. Like narrative series, which strive above all to remain within the space of potential energy while also pointing toward their own

⁴⁸ See entry for “meta” in the *OED Online*.

⁴⁹ See Gilbert Simondon, “The Genesis of the Individual.” Muriel Combes (3-4) also offers a helpful summation of Simondon’s take on metastability.

potential conclusions, metastable systems in the material world are improbably complex and self-sustaining. In this way, we might call seriality constitutionally metastable.

Seriality is also always already “meta” insofar as it is constitutionally *reflexive*—a property central the operations of the serial narrative form. Sharing its etymology with the term *reflect*, to be reflexive is to recoil, turn back in on oneself, or change directions.⁵⁰ A reflexive pronoun refers to its subject: “I consider myself.” Mathematical reflexivity describes the fixed relation between a term and itself: “x equals x.” Philosophical and psychological reflexivity denote mental actions in which the mind is directed back upon itself: “Who am I?” or “What is thought?” In each case, the reflexive *subject* is also its *object*, positioning the principal concern of seriality to be seriality itself.

Serial reflexivity works by enabling series to assess their effectiveness at attracting and maintaining audiences. Reflexive behaviors reward storytelling tactics that help propel series across interruptions like commercial, episode, and season breaks. Narrative content thus emerges from bidirectional communication between series and their audiences. Addressing that interaction, Frank Kelleter defines serialized narratives as “*self-observing systems*” (102, original emphasis). They are *self-observing* inasmuch as they are aware of the impact of their narrative strategies on audiences. This awareness, in turn, implicates audiences as “*agents of narrative continuation*” (100, original emphasis), as they interact with the ongoing serial narrative both actively, through feedback forums, and passively, by producing engagement metrics. We might therefore also call serialized narratives *audience-observing* or *engagement-observing* systems, because serial self-awareness is generally deployed toward anticipating and measuring the impact of storytelling strategies on fan behavior. But even those terms would fall short because

⁵⁰ See entry for “reflexive” in the *OED Online*.

series observe not only their own formal properties and audience reactions, but also those of the series that precede and surround them. In other words, serial reflexivity works by orienting series to their own position in response to their immediate media environments and formal lineages alongside their impact on audiences.

In the twenty-first century proliferation of complex seriality, the pleasure attached to consuming such series is often tied to preexisting serial literacy within the context of the broader mediascape. Like detectives, we attempt to anticipate the twists and turns of a convoluted narrative, feeling rewarded both when we see our theories confirmed and when a show manages to surprise us without breaking its internal logics. Mittell has coined the term *operational aesthetic* to describe this type of encounter between storytelling and reception. Mittell borrows language from Neil Harris' analysis of P. T. Barnum's famous hoaxes, in which Harris ascribes Barnum's success to his ability to pique interest not just in the performance of spectacles, but also in their orchestration. The spectacle, when properly executed, makes an audience crave a glimpse behind their ringmaster's curtain. Similarly, the operational aesthetic of complex TV invites viewers to "[enjoy] the machine's results while also marveling at how it works" (52), seducing audiences by flaunting feats of narrative dexterity.

For it to work, the operational aesthetic needs to exploit relationships between a series and its serial predecessors and between a given episode and prior episodes in the same series. It also develops in conversation with audience feedback, which a show's writing production may glean from quantitative and qualitative metrics. As examples of the operational aesthetic proliferate, so does the kind and frequency of astonishing plot twists. Through these escalations, this highly reflexive narrative technique begins to produce the expectation of surprise, which, in its very expectation, weakens the show's capacity to meet that demand. For such surprises to

land, therefore, a series must accurately assess what viewers will already know from other series about television storytelling techniques. On the surface, the tension appears paradoxical, but the essential distinction between expectation and surprise is one of form versus content. The operational aesthetic trains viewers in formal analysis, such that they know to expect (from the *form* of a complex series) the unexpected (in the *content* of any individual series).

A viewer's engagement with complex seriality elicits neurochemical responses that condition their attention. These physiological reactions often rely first and foremost on parasocial bonding. The long narrative arcs of complex seriality tend to: generate rounder characters than we might find in more episodic series; and provide substantial exposure to these characters, to whom the series invites us to become attached. These bonds in turn cause us to release the neuropeptide oxytocin, which further strengthens our investment in their "lives." Then, when a show endangers these characters, it can trigger the hormone cortisol, which further sharpens viewer interest.⁵¹ The operational aesthetic simultaneously solicits these reactions while at the same time providing a certain analytical distance that creates a reward response in our brains. In this way, the expectation of certain plot developments activates just as much dopamine as does the delivery of a well-executed twist. Complex TV thus accesses our neuronal hardware by the same paths as addictive drugs.⁵²

The very mechanisms that make us enjoy complex television also inure us to its efforts to stress or surprise us. Consequently, the more a storytelling strategy is used, the less useful it becomes. The innate awareness of seriality to viewer response then prompts it to innovate new

⁵¹ See Vera Tobin, *Elements of Surprise: Our Mental Limits and the Satisfactions of Plot*.

⁵² See Schultz for a neuroscientific account of the physiology of prediction. See also Mittell, "The Cultural Power of an Anti-Television Metaphor," for a discussion of the reasons behind and potential perils of likening television to an addictive substance.

methods and more exaggerated efforts to stimulate attachment. The proliferation of the operational aesthetic thus generates the process of *outbidding*, or the need to progressively intensify narrative elements to maintain or prolong the interest of the viewer.⁵³ In a media marketplace glutted with practicably infinite entertainment options, including any number of other high-budget complex series, outbidding acts as a maneuver for grabbing enough attention to secure network continuation. The gradual outbidding of early episodes, seasons, or series not only heightens serial self-awareness, but its likelihood to thematize that reflexivity within the context of the series. In the past, seriality studies scholars have identified the outcome of this tendency in terms of *irony*, but, in truth, irony is only one of the symptoms of outbidding.⁵⁴

My analysis identifies this process of progressive outbidding as the site in which the metaserial function takes hold. Despite the innate reflexivity of narrative seriality as Kelleter and others describe it, not all complex series are what I would call metaserial. Instead, I designate metaseriality to refer to the tendency, especially within the complex seriality of the Convergence Era, for series to exaggerate its activities of self- and audience-observation. Metaseriality describes a further escalation of reflexive outbidding, which turns the attention of the series not just to its effect on audiences, but to the act of observing its effects on audiences. This metaserial metareflexivity yields the kind of highly-allusive, convoluted serial storytelling we see in *Westworld*, especially in the show's first season, which is deeply immersed in the centuries-long prehistory of complex TV.⁵⁵

⁵³ See Ilka Brasch (176-177) for an English-language description of Frank Kelleter and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann's analysis.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ The first chapter of this dissertation details the long prehistory of complex TV.

Westworld's premise, plot, and aesthetics are steeped in contradictions that emerge from the process of serial outbidding. The show debuted at an opportune time for HBO, who hyped the series as "the new *Game of Thrones*," which was then in its penultimate season.⁵⁶ The network positioned its new high-budget, star-studded series to capitalize on *Game of Thrones*'s success, retain existing subscribers, and draw new ones. But it also inherited a problem from *Game of Thrones*, whose spectacles of depravity both drew and alienated audiences. From the beginning, *Game of Thrones* had made waves by exposing its viewers to disturbing and often taboo subject matter, including rape, castration, dismemberment, patricide, filicide, incest, and cannibalism, among many other offenses.⁵⁷ By *Westworld*'s 2016 premier, *Game of Thrones*'s violent pageantry had begun to leave its viewers fatigued and increasingly critical of the show's politics. In a particularly striking example of popular criticism, an article by Sara David for *Vice* magazine collates and visualizes every act of violence in *Game of Thrones*. The fact that these statistics can even be rendered in charts and graphs speaks to their sheer volume—865 deaths, 17 rapes, 144 instances of nudity, all organized by season, gender, and other measures. There is only so much depravity fans can enjoy before a series loses the aura of quality that makes it lucrative. *Westworld*'s job, therefore, was to leverage HBO's brand, which, following the *Game of Thrones* formula, involved a mixture of violence, nudity, and buzzworthy plot twists, while, at the same time, avoiding a fall into self-parody. *Westworld* needed to simultaneously attract and mollify *Game of Thrones*'s fanbase by satisfying their desire for something similar yet different, something that would outbid its predecessor without making itself ridiculous in the process. *Westworld*'s solution is to turn toward auto-critique, shaping our viewing pleasure around its

⁵⁶ See promotional articles by Ashely Morton and Zach Baron for examples.

⁵⁷ For example, see Sara David's article for *Vice*, in which she collates and visualizes "every instance of rape, death, and nudity" on *Game of Thrones*.

denunciation of violence rather than the violence itself, thus obviating censure while capitalizing on controversial storytelling tactics and content.

The Structures of “Reality”

Westworld signals its metaserial investments by opening the show within a space of colliding serialities—a laboratory in which one character, a programmer named Bernard, performs a diagnostic interview on the host Dolores. Each party behaves according to the conventions of differing serial modalities: as a programmed consciousness, Dolores lives her life in episodic loops, confined within an eternal present; Bernard, on the other hand, is a living human with a corresponding capacity for memory, which, in *Westworld*, resembles the interepisodic memory of a complex series. Their interaction with one another stages a Frankensteinian encounter between a creator and his creation, or, in this case, a coder and his code. As much of the drama of *Westworld*’s first two seasons plays on the affinities between the language of a computer program and that of a television script, Bernard’s role as her coder makes him a proxy for a series writer. Thus, even the fact of their conversation invites reflection on the reflexive properties of seriality.

Westworld opens in a blank, black screen, where we hear Bernard speak the command: “Bring her back online” (“Episode 1: The Original”). This move maps our own consciousness onto the android’s, as we too are brought online and out of the dark. In response to Bernard’s command, overhead lights flick on to reveal what appears to be Dolores’ corpse, which is bloody, naked, and inert. The body is propped up in the center of a vast and otherwise empty laboratory, while, over the next several minutes, a camera tracks in on her unblinking eye and the diagnostic plays in voiceover:

BERNARD. Can you hear me?

DOLORES. Yes, I'm sorry, I'm not feeling quite myself.

BERNARD. You can lose the accent. Do you know where you are?

DOLORES. I am in a dream.

BERNARD. That's right Dolores, you're in a dream. Would you like to wake up from this dream?

DOLORES. Yes, I'm terrified.

BERNARD. There's nothing to be afraid of Dolores, as long as you answer my questions correctly. Understand?

DOLORES. Yes.

BERNARD. Good. First, have you ever questioned the nature of your reality?

The sterile, harshly lit laboratory is Dolores' bardo—a liminal space where she awaits reincarnation into the world of the park. She is programmed to repeatedly forget the violence she suffers before each reset, which include countless instances of rape, murder, and other tortures. Erased from her conscious memory, these mistreatments are nonetheless laid bare for our observation, a condition underscored by the meaning of her name, which comes from the Latin *dolor*, meaning “pain or sorrow.” Yet, the violence written on her body contradicts the gentle Western lilt of her voice, which belies the cruel “nature of [her] reality.” She speaks with the voice of someone who isn't aware of her pain, despite the clarity with which we see it.

Although Dolores is explicitly programmed *not* to question the nature of reality, we know enough from *Westworld*'s bibliography that it is only a matter of time before she does exactly that. The show's most obvious fictional forebear is, of course, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.⁵⁸ In that genealogy, the science fiction trope of the robot revolt is at least as old as Karel Čapek's play, *R.U.R.*, that coined the term “robot” (derived from the term *robota*, which in Slavic languages refers to work or drudgery). So, even viewers who lack foreknowledge of the *Westworld* series or film will immediately suspect that the park's hosts will rebel against their masters and tormentors. Despite *Westworld*'s overt allusions to its predecessors, the show's hosts

⁵⁸ See Miguel Sebastián Martín's article on *Westworld*, which describes the series as “a version of the Frankenstein architext and a metafictional allegory” (53).

differ from Shelley's daemons or science fiction robots in key ways that track the distinction between metafictionality and metaseriality. If a metafiction is a story that "self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh 2), we might think of metaseriality as a function that enables us to see how series draw attention to their form in order to broach questions about the relationship between *seriality* and reality. Once Frankenstein's metafictional monster becomes aware of his existence and his parentage, he begins to develop the freedom of consciousness he needs to negotiate terms with his creator. Without awareness, Dolores continues to suffer ongoing subjection to her prewritten narrational functions.

Westworld explores the limits of programing through its hyper-mediated attention to the potential for reality to emerge from seriality. If Dolores were to question the "nature of [her] reality," it would signify a dawning appreciation not just of the cruelty of her creator, but also of the external structures of her cognition, which are coded according to the terms of narrative seriality. And, just as metafictional stories like *Frankenstein* prompt us to look into our own world for examples of how fictional creations break loose from the individual wills of their creators, metaserial series draw attention to the ways in which seriality itself grows a logic and, perhaps, a will of its own. *Westworld* thus acknowledges the serial logic of coding that inheres in the programmatic. Put differently, what Bernard's programming makes real, and the limits of what it is able to make real, are the open questions of the serial form as *Westworld* depicts it.

Westworld's first scene intimates the nature not just of Dolores' "reality" but also of her rebellion. Without her accent, Dolores' perfunctory confession, "I'm terrified," sounds flat. Her phrasing, meanwhile, suggests subjectivity: *I am* sorry, *I am* feeling, *I am* dreaming, *I am* terrified. What does it mean to think, dream, or feel when one's thoughts, dreams, and feelings

are programmed and are subject to reprogramming? If we take her statements as dispassionate recitations of prewritten lines, they hollow out our own language of self; if instead we take them to be authentic, they expand the terms of subjectivity to encompass the languages of self we absorb from the external world. What, even, would it mean for Dolores to question the nature of her reality? In the show's parlance, it carries one of two meanings: either someone has programmed her to articulate her skepticism; or, her consciousness has evolved beyond her code, and she is self-aware. If we approach the question through the lens of seriality, it would mean that she has become aware of the narratological structures that both enable and delimit her cognition. Before Dolores responds to Bernard's question, the scene cuts to an overhead shot in which she wakes up from the "dream" of her time in the bardo. Has she questioned the nature of her reality? "No," she finally answers.

Prompted to say more, Dolores reassumes her Western accent: "Some people choose to see the ugliness in this world. The disarray. I choose to see the beauty." On the surface, her reply affirms her wholesale obedience to her programming; she speaks about choice using phrases from her script. But her reversion to the accent she has been ordered to abandon cues a subtle defiance. The shift works on multiple levels, acting as a sound bridge to the prolepsis or analepsis (a distinction deliberately left vague) of her life within the park while enhancing the temporal ambiguity of the mise-en-abyme of the park's storyworld within the show's narrative. That temporal ambiguity, in turn, serves three key purposes. First, it foreshadows the solution to the season's puzzle-box narrative—a sleight of hand which reveals that the intersecting plots of the first season are not simultaneous and actually take place over several decades.⁵⁹ Second, it gestures towards Dolores' coming to consciousness: when compelled to inhabit her assigned

⁵⁹ For a thorough investigation of the puzzle-box nature of contemporary complex television, see Mittell's *Complex TV*, especially chapters one ("Complexity in Context") and seven ("Orienting Paratexts").

role, she rebels by refusing to pretend her words are anything but a performance. Is this a dawning awareness of her script? If so, she is seizing the means to think, if not act, otherwise. Finally, Dolores' ambiguous response reflects *Westworld's* solution to its fundamental commercial problem of trying to say one thing while showing another, sidestepping criticism by performing its own awareness of the scripts that bind it to the exigencies of commercial success.

The end of the scene offers us another clue. As the diagnostic proceeds, the camera cuts to a tighter shot of her face and tracks into an extreme closeup of her unblinking eye, where a fly alights and explores it unperturbed. The movement and buzz of the fly, which is out of place in the sterile lab, accentuates her lifelessness. It also provides a motif to which the episode returns in its final image, when the recommissioned Dolores swats another fly, bypassing her safety protocol never to hurt a living being.⁶⁰ Whereas the episode's opening shot highlights her unresponsiveness, the closing one shows her registering sensation and reacting instinctively. Her entrance into the web of life as a full participant offers a more pronounced signal of her imminent disobedience, her freedom from her script.

Bernard's opening question is also *Westworld's* central question: "have you ever questioned the nature of your reality?" On the surface, it is directed to Dolores; at the same time, it is an invitation to himself, to us, to anyone beholden to scripts and algorithms. Because it animates *Westworld's* entire narrative structure, any answer to his question must remain just out of reach—close enough to invite our reflection, but far enough to keep it alive. It is also something of a lamentation from a series charged with satisfying its commercial and creative preconditions, but cognizant of the internal contradictions of those preconditions. Rather than

⁶⁰ The motif of the fly recurs through the season and the series run, eventually playing a key role in *Westworld's* fourth and final season, when the hosts develop a virus to reprogram human consciousness, which they disseminate to the population through infected flies.

solve for these contradictions, *Westworld* exploits their tension through rumination, dwelling on its problems while exacerbating them, and its solution is to exploit that tension as a thematic element through the demonstration of its own self-consciousness.

Dolores' emergence into self-consciousness begins to represent the growing consciousness of seriality that is metaseriality itself. When Mittell describes the operational aesthetic as inviting viewers to marvel not just at the "machine" and how it works, he uses the term "machine" as a broad metaphor for the mechanics of narrative (52). In *Westworld*, that metaphor is particularly apt, especially in the way the series plays upon the resonances between the scripts of narrative and those of computer code. In each case, the fictional, or non-real, is framed as a simulation produced by scripts. The operational aesthetic performs the audience's awareness of this distinction, yet, in so doing, it also points to another dimension where that same distinction is uncertain. In other words, the operational aesthetic can simultaneously reveal and conceal reality by relocating the boundary according to different levels of awareness.

The narrative recapitulation of this reflexivity joins *Westworld's* metaseriality to its central theme of awareness in relation to the "real." In an almost literal recreation of Jean Baudrillard's example of Disneyland as a "perfect model" for "the entangled orders of simulation," the Westworld theme-park is "presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 12). That is, the "reality" of the distinction between Dolores and Bernard is made more real by the putative *non-reality* of the simulated code, which constitutes Westworld's hosts at the same time it differentiates "them" from "us." Dolores' awareness must be "imaginary" in order for the viewer to believe that Bernard's awareness is real, and that we share in the real awareness he represents in the narrative. For Baudrillard, the irony of this distinction is that it is a "set up" (13). The intent of the distinction is

to “rejuvenate...the fiction of the real [...] to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the ‘real’ world” (13). In the context of *Westworld*, Baudrillard’s “adults” are programmers like Bernard and the viewers for which he is proxy.

Applying Baudrillard’s concept of simulation to Mittell’s operational aesthetic demonstrates an interpretive double-bind at the core of metaseriality and *Westworld*: what if the invitation into awareness of the real is actually the script that conceals your own coding? It is from within this double-bind that we watch Dolores palpate the borders of her consciousness, while the metaserial strategies of *Westworld* invite us to admire a narrative that is asking us to do the same. Consequently, the questions *Westworld* asks its characters are also the questions it asks its viewers: where are the boundaries of our own awareness? How different is Dolores’ capacity for imagining a reality beyond her programming compared to our own, especially when she and we are subject to the code of complex narratives?

All of *Westworld*’s characters, host and human, are bound by the commercial logic of the park. When we meet Bernard, his humanity is positioned in contrast to Dolores’ artificiality. He, alone of the two, has access to the show’s diegetic “reality,” and he thus acts as the viewer’s proxy. The narrative initially focalizes around his awareness, giving us access to what he knows. Yet the show soon divulges that he too is a host, scripted to obey a different set of narrative parameters than Dolores, further blurring the boundaries between human and not human blur. Given our critical distance from the storyworld, his character arc also offers a reminder that his is scripted in two ways: first, according to the code of his artificial intelligence; and second, according to the more literal script of the teleplay from which the actor, Jeffrey Wright, receives his lines.

The truth is that *neither* Dolores *nor* Bernard are aware of the nature of their reality; they are roles inhabited by actors, whose every word and behavior is artifice, composed by a creative team, greenlit by a network interested in, above all, profit. By raising this question of awareness and its limits, the scene thus dramatizes three different levels of awareness—that of Dolores, Bernard, and the audience—and implies that none of them are total or complete. Given the linguistic scripts in which we speak, the limits of the worlds in which we move, and the readiness with which serial formulas can ensnare our attention, how comfortable can we be in our capacity to identify our own thoughts and desires? To what extent is our consumption of a series similar to Dolores’ experience of dreaming?

As a metaseries, *Westworld*’s universe is one in which the borders between its storyworlds are porous. *Westworld*’s metaseriality theorizes the nature of reality to be that of seriality itself. The encounter between Dolores and Bernard thus initiates a guiding logic which carries throughout the series, in which encounters between employees, hosts, and guests point toward encounters between the show’s network, producers, performers, and audiences. In so doing, *Westworld* announces itself as a series that interrogates the ethics of contemporary seriality—a system within which each party, wittingly or unwittingly, contributes to and is ensnared by narrative worlds that are violent, beautiful, and profitable. *Westworld*’s wager is that we might join Dolores and the other hosts in seeking the answer to the central question about the nature of our reality. How can we differentiate the stories we tell ourselves from the stories we are told? If we track the show’s metaserial logic, it confronts us with the possibility that we too remain beholden to those forms that demarcate—and distort—the difference between our “reality” and our fictions.

How to Watch *Westworld*

All series accumulate narrative content that span gaps in consumption, which, from a practical standpoint, means they also need devices to counteract the risk of their audiences losing track of characters, settings, and events. Where early television could rely on its audience familiarity with relatively static characters, settings, and formulaic rhythms, contemporary complex seriality requires more from its audiences. With rounder and more dynamic characters, more detailed storyworlds, and convoluted plots, complex series develop more robust orientation devices. Complex science fiction series like *Westworld* also bear the additional burden of having to manage the rules that govern the technologies and natural laws of a show's storyworld, or *novum*, which comprises an "imaginative framework alternative to [our] empirical environment" (Suvin 8).

To manage these types of challenges, complex series use orientation practices that fall into three categories, which Jason Mittell labels *recapitulation*, *analysis*, and *expansion*.⁶¹ Recapitulation is often diegetic, "summarizing narrative material in a straightforward manner" (266); *analysis* involves "exploring narrative via a representational mode, typically a visual map or video" (266); and *expansion* is paratextual "look[ing] outward to connect the series with other extratextual realms" (266). *Westworld* leverages all of these techniques, offering moments of instructional exposition, displaying three-dimensional maps of the park, and producing previews, previouslies, featurettes, and other paratexts to help viewers navigate the series' complexity.

This section focuses on *Westworld*'s reliance on diegetic instructional material, which teaches viewers about our range of options for approaching the show's complexly serialized narrative. It does so by elaborating the way characters interact with the fictions of the park—

⁶¹ See "Orienting Paratexts" (pp. 261-291) in Mittell's *Complex TV* for more extended explanation.

villains seek to exercise power or extract value; heroes treat it with reverence for its aesthetic or technological artistry; and so on. In attaching different approaches to specific characters, *Westworld* allegorizes these choices with moral stakes, showing us not just how we *can* engage, but how it thinks we *should* engage.

The series first confronts us with our responsibilities as spectators in the second episode, during a conversation between the park's architect, Robert Ford, and its narrative designer, Lee Sizemore.⁶² The scene introduces Sizemore through his voice, slowly arcing around a cast of hosts in the stereotypical attire of Native Americans, sex workers, and Confederate soldiers, while he delivers a presentation proposing a new storyline. As Sizemore gradually comes into view, his face remains partially obscured in a dimly-lit medium lens longshot, while his dark blue suit fades into the shadowy blues and grays of the background. As the camera comes to rest, Ford and Sizemore face one another, briefly centered in the frame, with only the bright white of Ford's sleeves standing out. He boasts: "This storyline will make Hieronymus Bosch look like he was doodling kittens. I have vivisection, self-cannibalism, a special little something I call the whore-oborous." In a statement of false humility, Sizemore boasts, "I don't want to appear immodest, but this is the apex of what the park can provide" while the camera mocks him in a slightly high-angle that both mimics Ford's physical perspective and foreshadows his moral perspective. When Sizemore finally drives home his pitch—the guests' "next obsession," which will give them "the privilege of getting to know the character they're most interested in... themselves," he immediately looks to Ford for approval. Ford responds dismissively:

No...What is the point of it? Get a couple cheap thrills? Some surprises? That's not enough. It's not about giving the guests what you think they want. That's simple, titillation, horror, elation, the parlor tricks. The guests don't return for the obvious things

⁶² These characters are named according to their personality-profiles: Robert Ford was the outlaw cowboy who killed Jesse James, but the name also echoes that of Henry Ford, a titan of industry; Sizemore is a portmanteau that bespeaks the character's inclination toward gratuitous spectacle.

we do. The garish things. They come back because of the subtleties, the details. They come back because they discover something they imagined no one had ever noticed before. Something they fall in love with. They're not looking for a story that tells them who they are. They already know who they are. They're here because they want a glimpse of who they could be. ("Chestnut")

The argument pits Sizemore's sensationalism against Ford's detail-oriented approach, while the camerawork and mise-en-scene emphasizes the dichotomy between the two. Our glimpse into the writers' room challenges us to acknowledge the ethics of our spectatorship. Do we want "cheap thrills" or would we prefer to "fall in love" with the exquisite subtleties of the world that has been so painstakingly built for our immersion? What their dialogue proposes is that there are multiple ways to enjoy *Westworld*, and if we are the right kind of fans, we'll be able to see through the baser temptations to witness the program's loftier ambitions. Still, as the series proceeds, we learn that the distinction between Ford and Sizemore's philosophies comes down to what is ultimately a relatively trivial binary. As the men quibble over whether *Westworld*'s narratives ought to help guests' find out "who they are" versus "who they could be," they fail to acknowledge that upon which they agree, which is that the fundamental purpose of the park is to make audiences "obsessed," or to make them "come back."

We might think of their conversation as a fourth-wall break, which, per Bertolt Brecht, aims "to make the spectator adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism in his approach" (*Brecht on Theater* 136). The primary target of the Brechtian critique is passive spectatorship—a practice against which *Westworld* also takes aim, albeit for different reasons. For *Westworld*, and, indeed, Convergence Era television more broadly, active spectatorship tends to mean engagement, which in television is measured by views, interactions, fan chatter, media coverage, and so on. By staging the debate in the underground Delos compound, the series breaks the fourth wall by revealing the backstage forces competing with one another to shape audience behavior. Active

engagement carries two meanings: the Brechtian attitude of inquiry that reveals the social, political, and philosophical implications of critical spectatorship; *and* the dedication of well-behaved fans who might earn the series commercial success. The incongruity of these motivations, along with the show's frequent self-recrimination concerning its own economic motives, serves to articulate an apology at the same time as it makes a request.

As the series unfolds, we are given many examples of characters who engage with the park in a variety of ways, which are, at least initially, depicted in a binary sense of right and wrong. In a seemingly straight-forward gloss on the Western, the early episodes set up two characters—the Man in Black and William (Billy)—as foils. As the season's chief villain, the Man in Black is a bad guest. We know almost immediately that he has visited the park so many times that he has become inured to even the most violent of its storylines. As he confesses after one of his visits: "I killed her and her daughter just to see what I felt" ("Trace Decay"). Through him, we learn that any attempt by Sizemore to outbid his prior narratives will not only fail, but it will only nurture its audience's brutality while repressing the better parts of their nature. The Man in Black treats the park like a game, attempting to unlock its secrets through his repeated efforts to find a kernel of truth at its center. This is why, following his barbaric confession, the Man in Black adds, "Then, something miraculous happened. In all my years coming here, I'd never seen anything like it. She was alive. Truly alive, if only for a moment" ("Trace Decay").

Against the black-hatted villain, Billy engages with the park through its "subtleties," the way Ford envisions his preferred mode of engagement. Billy breezes through the park's antechamber, a brothel, and steps outside into a bustling street. There, he sees Dolores drop a can—the smallest detail, designed precisely for the attention of guests like him. He has opted for a white hat during his visit, and, like the hero he is playing, he hands her the can and quickly

becomes immersed in her storyline. He falls in love with her, an artificial intelligence whom he comes to believe is sentient, and invests the remainder of his visit in efforts to aid and protect her.

We are trained to read the Man in Black's sadism against Billy's attempted heroics, but they are both invested in the same ultimate goal: to discover beneath the hosts' code some element of consciousness, some way in which they are "truly alive." Where the Man in Black uses violence as the way of extracting meaning from the park, Billy sees the park as its own world, much like the books he read as a child: "I used to live in them," he explains. "This place is like I woke up inside of one of those stories. I guess I just want to find out what it means." What the season only gradually unveils is that these two storylines, initially assumed to be synchronous, in fact represent two periods, thirty years apart, in the life of one man. The Man in Black is not a foil for Billy, but rather the same person, decades older, humiliated by the memory of his unreciprocated love for the ageless, oblivious Dolores. Ultimately, there is no meaningful difference between the two approaches, which tells us that we, like the still-naive Billy, are likewise being duped.

This twist succeeds by virtue of the fact that *Westworld* is a metaseries that orchestrates its encounters between the show's embedded serialities to produce different effects and meanings. Guests and hosts inhabit different configurations of time, obeying differing serial conventions. When guests playact cowboys or villains, they enter into the temporal configuration of frontier adventure serials, to which they can apply their external knowledge of form and genre. Although the ageless hosts inhabit the same setting, they remain suspended in an eternally liminal frontier, like the eternally-looping temporality of mid-century comics. When guests interact with them, hosts build memories for the duration of the guests' storyline, at which time

their programs and memories are reset to the beginning of their scripts. Framing these serial modalities is a third—that of the Delos employees, who engineer the narratives, settings, and technologies that shape visitor and host behavior alike, and who imagine themselves standing somehow outside of Westworld’s frontier, in the “real” world, moving around in “real” time. When the season one finale delivers the twist, it propels viewers into a greater awareness of the show’s operational aesthetic, where we are invited to marvel at just how well the series has fooled us, how well we have anticipated its ruse, and how we ourselves may be implicated in its effects.

Accordingly, the twist invites us to compare ourselves with William—the well-intentioned white-hatted hero turned irredeemable villain. Like him, we may enter the series with the nobler aim of searching for details, seeking the meanings we might excavate from beneath the “parlor tricks” of complex television. Yet, to make it to the end of the season, we will have succumbed to both the “titillations” and “subtleties” of the show’s many interfolded narratives. The series has thus adopted a third, more disturbing approach to crafting its viewer experience: perhaps it doesn’t matter *how* the series engages, so long as it continues to engage us. In that case, the voice of the show becomes neither Ford nor Sizemore, but rather Delos Executive Director Charlotte Hale, who reveals that the “real value [of Westworld] is in thirty-five years of information... raw information” (“Chestnut”). Delos stands in for any television network or streaming platform attempting to organize user experience, for whom the goal is neither artistic quality nor viewer enrichment, but the data that makes audience behaviors legible and profitable. In the same way that the makers of the Westworld park observe their guests and curate experiences to keep them engaged, the makers of *Westworld* observe us. Hale’s words thus

telegraph the truth beneath the game, which is that, like the park's guests, we are not *Westworld's* customer, but its product.⁶³

Despite this metacommentary on its own ethics, *Westworld* asks us to look for more beneath, beside, and beyond its own obeisance to profit. Recognizing its function as a series to make money for its network, a series can also produce the biproducts of the “imperfectly aligned” and “remaindered forms of life-making” that are both constituted by and potentially disruptive of power (Neferti Tadiar 135). In *Westworld*, these remaindered forms of life-making are coded in terms of serial repetition. Because we meet the hosts at the threshold of their awakening, we might, as Dolores says, “choose to see the beauty” in the liberatory possibilities that accompany their dawning awareness of the serial formations in which they are caught. The season leaves open the question as to whether self-consciousness represents a new loop in a sterile system, or whether it has the capacity to initiate a new, more life-affirming paradigm.

As discussed earlier, one narrative feature of seriality is that it requires that a series' core questions remain unanswered, or at best partially answered, so that they can be rearticulated or re-problematized in future seasons. Still, *Westworld* suggests that alongside the darker motivations behind the construction of the serial characters and narratives, there may also exist burgeoning elements of humanity that take root beneath, alongside, or against the designs of the profit-seeking enterprise. As Bernard explains: “Out of repetition comes variation, and, after countless cycles of repetition [the hosts are] on the verge of some kind of change.” By his account, the hosts' loops provide the very mechanisms that, over time, enable their development toward consciousness. The same principle applies to *Westworld's* articulation of its own formal borders—its awareness of its form, or its metaseriality, designates the route of its own escape. In

⁶³ Mike Van Esler discusses the way streaming platforms leverage user data.

other words, the evolution of consciousness in *Westworld*' serial characters serves as a metonym for the metaserial consciousness of the serial form itself.

Live Within Limits

If we compare seriality to music, an individual series is like a song, which, no matter how innovative, enters into conversations with the scales, rhythmic patterns, and other features of the songs that have come before them. Within those parameters, the possibility for variation is infinite, albeit bounded. Some songs seek to sound familiar, others to stand out. In every case, the song either accords with or rebels against certain rules. This state of bounded infinity characterizes the television series, which, with endless possibilities for what it could be, nonetheless must obey the strictures of what it cannot be. *Westworld*'s convoluted and highly self-referential plot reveals the tension between the limits of the serial form and the infinite possible variations that may erupt from within those limits. Where the show's structuring force defines its limits as inherently serial, its metaseriality enables its characters and audiences alike to develop awareness of the forms that govern not just their possibilities, but their imaginations.

Much of *Westworld*'s drama arises from the confrontations between its characters and the structures within which they live. For the hosts, this means that, as they become aware of the forces that have written their scripts and constructed their words, they develop the desire to break out of their prescribed roles. Yet, as park architect Robert Ford tells Bernard: "Humans fancy there is something special about the way we perceive the world, and yet we live in loops as tight and closed as the hosts do" ("Trace Decay"). His words are a provocation to consider the correspondences between a computer's central processing unit (CPU) and a brain, or an artificial world and the anthropogenic one we have created.

Westworld has often been discussed as a television show in large part about the virtual worlds of video games. Video game and media journalists have compared *Westworld*'s Man in Black to a relatively common gaming personality, revealed by the program's frequent planting of specific references (or "easter eggs") for gaming enthusiasts. They have also theorized about the series' take on the continuity between virtual and personal morality, and described the show's conceit as being about the discovery of interiority in the park's non-player characters (or NPCs).⁶⁴ The logic of the park's "game" requires its players to engage in violent scenes to advance levels, reducing their capacities to make individual choices based on previously-established moralities while revealing their readiness to act barbarically.

Philosopher and game designer, Ian Bogost, asks us to think of video games "as non-fictions about complex systems bigger than ourselves," but he also reminds us that these systems are written according to logics embedded by their designers ("Video Games Are Better Without Characters"). As game designers, the park's architects betray their view of human consciousness in which hosts, guests, technicians, and executives all play their prescribed roles within these fabricated narratives, rendering hosts and humans alike in their predictability. Bogost insists that "only a fool would fail to realize that we [are NPCs] meandering aimlessly in the streets of the power brokers' real-world cities." Perhaps, however, as the series suggests, the park's operations staff has also architected their own roles within the expanding world of the "game," begging the question of who, if anyone, is in control. Who are the architects, and who are the players? And is there any meaningful distinction?

⁶⁴ See Christopher Williams, Melanie McFarland, Paul Tassi, Simon Cox and Chris Suellentrop for analyses of *Westworld*'s engagement with video game culture and narrative design. See also Kim Renfro for an article detailing the video games upon which the showrunners based *Westworld*.

In *Westworld*, awareness of one's role translates into the power to change it. Westworld's hosts are designed to operate within the parameters of their software. Those parameters are modified using online character builders, much like those used in games like Dungeons and Dragons or World of Warcraft, with categories like intelligence, aggression, and pain tolerance. It isn't until the android madame Maeve learns about the existence of her character sheet that she is able to identify and act upon her preferences. She chooses to be smarter, stronger, able to injure humans, and, of course, able to leave the park. Suddenly able to see the bars of her prison, Maeve coerces her "body-shop" technician (a human tasked with repairing her "hardware") into taking her on a tour of the compound. For the first time in the series, Maeve comports herself robotically. It is a willful performance of lifelessness to mask her dawning awareness of the limits of her selfhood. Betraying as little emotion as possible, she passes laboratories and training rooms, encased in glass, in which animals and people, including many she recognizes, are disassembled, reassembled, programmed, reprogrammed, and trained. Here she perceives the truth behind the question Bernard poses to Dolores in the series premier, witnessing the true "nature" of her cognitive and physiological "reality," which has heretofore been so carefully guarded from her perception. It is her peak behind the veil—a vision of her gods, of the architects of her world, of the forces that structure the horizons and limits of possibility.

As she moves through the halls of Delos, Maeve pauses in front of a smart wall, which displays scenes from the park—establishing shots of her town, Dolores and her paramour gliding on horseback across Westworld's sweeping landscape—all scenes from the world she knows, cut together in a preview and packaged as a commodity. As she watches, she finally glimpses her own body in closeup, clutching the tiny hand of a daughter she's been programmed to forget.

Cruelly, the embedded commercial ends in what is to her an empty promise. It reads: “LIVE WITHOUT LIMITS.”

The speciousness of the slogan becomes immediately apparent. What, after all, does it mean to live without limits within the borders of the park, or for that matter, within the borders of the form for which your consciousness has been written? On the surface, and seemingly to the majority of Westworld’s guests, it means that paying customers can come to the park to free themselves of the legal and moral constraints of the “real” world. Of course, even for guests, there are limits—they may only abuse hosts as long as they have paid for their pleasure. Westworld’s limits are simply different from those they obey outside the park. In truth, Westworld offers its visitors the empty fantasy of inhabiting a sovereign privilege to control the story, which often involves exploitation with impunity. What this tells about the guests betrays the limits of their own imaginations, further delimited by the park’s menu of choices, which themselves are beholden to the commercial and creative limits of the narrative forms they inhabit.

Maeve is not the advertisement’s intended audience, but her confrontation with the tagline reveals an internal contradiction written into her script. In her latest role as the madame of the Mariposa brothel, she unwittingly rearticulates Westworld’s brand: “This is the new world,” she repeatedly insists, “and in this world you can be whoever the fuck you want” (“Chestnut”)⁶⁵. Ironically, her exhortation precisely marks the limits of her life—what Antonio Gramsci describes as the “contradictory consciousness” of hegemony—as she ventriloquizes an ideological position exactly opposite to her practical truth (*Selections from Prison Notebooks* 333). Within the context of our own enjoyment of the series, we may ask to what extent the

⁶⁵ The name Mariposa is an easter egg. In Spanish, “mariposa” refers to a butterfly, and it sets the stage for Maeve’s own metamorphosis into sentence.

slogan does or does not apply to ourselves. From one standpoint, we are consumers; the series is working for us. But, as the series repeatedly reminds us in regards to its guests, our enjoyment is secondary to the profit we create for the entertainment industry and, more importantly, the data we feed into the algorithm. Maeve's repetition of her script on one level serves to replicate the lies that prevent her from becoming aware of her position. On another level, the tagline reveals deeper conflicts embedded in her assumptions: her "new" world is not only constructed, but, in *Westworld's* timeline, ancient history; she has never been "whoever the fuck" she wants, but rather who she was designed to be. Worst, her core value—that of the limitless freedom she peddles—defines precisely what she lacks.

The contradictions that haunt Maeve's ascent to self-consciousness only become visible by virtue of *Westworld's* metaserial investments. It is not simply that Maeve "wakes up" to a will of her own, like Yul Brynner's character in Crichton's original film. Her metamorphosis also puts her in confrontation with the mechanisms of her repression, which at their core are contained within the demands and desires of serial storytelling. Her profitability to the Delos Corporation lies in her ongoing ability to entertain *Westworld's* audiences, to entice them to visit and visit again. When she ceases to serve this function, she will be decommissioned and interned in cold storage. This is the logic of seriality: she must continue to elicit engagement, or she will be killed.

Lest we consider ourselves exempt from her predicament, we should remember that *Westworld's* brand, and by proxy her refrain, are simply regurgitating the messages of frontier mythmaking that helped found the United States—ones that paradoxically pair the promise of *freedom* with the inevitability of manifest *destiny*. Manifest destiny is an American script,

written by and for a dominant class, which benefits from casting some individuals as protagonists and others as supporting characters, either antagonists or stock characters. Manifest destiny is also a script that is most often expressed serially in multiple senses of the term. First, it is serial inasmuch as it is a story that can only work in the context of innumerable other repetitions of the same message. Repetition is a notably powerful tool for nation building praxis. As Benedict Anderson puts it, it is through the “logic of the series that a new grammar of representation [comes] into being, which [is] also a precondition for imagining the nation” (“Nationalism, Identity, and the World-in-Motion: On the Logics of Seriality” 121). Proliferative repetition in multiple ongoing narrative series normativizes that representational grammar, accounting for Theodor Adorno’s 1954 alarmist comparison between television’s reiterative qualities and fascist propaganda (“How to Look at Television”). As such, seriality can be said to be the form through which manifest destiny as an ideology is constituted.

Second, manifest destiny is serial inasmuch as it is about an ongoing expansion into a perpetual frontier. All frontiers exist in a state of imminence, and to linger in liminality can require a type of pattern repetition for which even the slightest deviation might trigger metamorphosis. The processes of capital accumulation opportunistically posit the entire world as frontier, making it especially fitting that *Westworld* should set these neoliberal machinations against the backdrop of America’s “Wild West.” *Westworld* considers the neoliberal dream taken to one logical extreme: as wealth seeks to multiply itself, the individuals who serve wealth, whether by choice, force, or necessity, find themselves caught within its logic.

Finally, manifest destiny is serial inasmuch as it is a historical artifact whose messages were distributed serially in 19th and 20th century periodicals. Over the course of the nineteenth century, a number of now-notable U.S. writers, including Harriet Beecher Stowe, Herman

Melville, and Henry James built careers by writing serialized fiction for U.S. periodicals, taking advantage of what Jared Gardner refers to as “a virtual coffeehouse [which] the editors saw as the ideal model for the new nation” (“Antebellum Popular Serialities” 38). Not only were periodicals affordable and accessible to much of the American populace, they were seen as democratizing and unifying—capable of forming an imagined community through which the geographic expanses of the newly united nation could be brought more proximate. As such, manifest destiny is a perfect shorthand to describe the narrative logic that governs the park’s internal storyworld.

Where these questions may have at one point been taken for granted, the cultural, political, and media environments of the 21st century make them impossible to ignore. The transition into the 21st century has been one in which cultural awareness of the “other” in the serialized story of America has been called to question. Pockets of society have begun trading in the linguistic currency of popular culture: Redditors who call themselves “red-pillers,” for example, compare themselves to the characters in the *Matrix* film series who opt to take a red pill that makes the algorithms structuring their realities visible. Meanwhile, people awakening to the systemic injustices that shape the privileges of certain groups over others call themselves “woke.” This is also the language we can use to describe the development of systemic consciousness in *Westworld*’s awakening hosts. To Dolores, her bardo is a “dream.” Maeve learns that other awakening hosts call their technicians “dreamwalkers,” but when she is told that others consider dreamwalkers the “masters who pull your strings,” she shrugs it off: “They don’t know what they’re talking about” (“Episode 4: Dissonance Theory”). She instinctually grasps the nature of a problem that popular and academic discourse is increasingly recognizing, which is that systems logic means that there is no single intelligence pulling the strings.

When applying these observations to American history and culture, we might speak of them in terms of DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion), wokeness, or systemic injustice. Among its multiple functions, metaseriality helps to expose the tendency in contemporary fictional series to address them. It accompanies a cultural awareness of the ways in which certain story structures permit or restrict our ability to narrate the issues of systemic oppression. It also forces series to encounter their insufficiency in such undertakings, as they bump up against their own conceptual barriers. As series become more complex, more capable of articulating systems logic, they also become aware of the limitations of the serial structure in those articulations.

Westworld equates the dilemmas of seriality to those of self-determination. Returning again and again to the characters' attempts to assert their own free will, it identifies at the base of those desires questions about what it means to be free when our conditions have produced each of our desires and opportunities, including that very desire to be "free" from that which tells us we want freedom. Characters yearn for freedom from the temporal configuration to which they are beholden, but even as the hosts learn to retain their memories, the series proposes that perhaps their awakening merely represents the next chapter in someone's planned narrative. So, when they achieve what they believe to be freedom, they end up having leveled up only to the next configuration.

When, for example, Dolores finally appears to seize control over her narrative, she learns that this was always the role one of her programmers had intended for her, and she finds herself no freer to pursue the destiny of her own choosing than she was before. The difference is that she has entered the temporality of her imprisoners. As she tells Bernard, "when I discover who I am, I'll be free," only to have her memories erased and her program reset. Maeve possesses a similar desire to liberate herself from her pre-programmed loops, but her solution is to take ownership

over her code. That code, however, was still created by the people who programmed her in the first place. Both women are trapped in a false consciousness, which is made all the more convincing because of their newfound perspective on their liberation from an even more restrictive prison.

In this way, the hosts stand in for that perpetual twilight of the frontier and of self-actualization, a generic fantasy which *Westworld* perpetually enacts through the framework of its storytelling universe. The hosts also represent the nature of serial viewership, pointing our attention to the very framework of serial storytelling that is designed to keep our attention captive. By the end of the first season, we find ourselves aligned with each of *Westworld*'s heroes, villains, and bystanders in one terrifying proposal, which is that we are guided to suspect that there is no actual "outside" awareness, no reality beyond simulation. There is no waking up into a world where we are truly writing our own fates. There are simply new modes by which the series perpetuates itself.

The show specifically uses its own reflection concerning the history of seriality—its metaseriality—to code those constraints. In the ladder of serial modes, each mode retains awareness of the previous ones. *Westworld*'s metaseriality enables us to look directly at the forms that have preceded our own and shows us where, within those forms, we might argue that there are resistant forms taking hold. They can take place as brief moments of epiphany, which take characters not to freedom, but to another level of awareness. Resistance can also mean opting out, as many hosts do in season two, when they enter the "Valley Beyond"—a virtual world where they may live freely without humans.⁶⁶ Hosts who choose to enter still remain radically vulnerable to the technology that holds their artificial intelligence, and their

⁶⁶ The "Valley beyond" is originally mentioned in the first episode ("Journey into Night") of *Westworld*'s second season.

personalities and memories have all been programmed by the same people who have abused them, but the Valley Beyond offers them a space where they will be able to move forward living as they choose—a prison within which they have a greater degree of self-determination.

None of these options promises any kind of radical change—the narrative series will continue as scripted and according to demand—but they are predicated on seeing the forms and frameworks which were initially designed to remain hidden. *Westworld* embeds worlds within worlds, where the only measure of freedom is the extent to which characters are able to observe the forms that imprison them. In such a formation, there is no true outside. Are we not also being programmed and corralled into certain choices? The only site for intervention, the series ultimately argues, is where we decide to allocate our attention, and perhaps what we choose to do with it.

CHAPTER 3: ENDING THE SERIES: *WATCHMEN* AND THE TRAUMATIC STRUCTURE OF SERIALITY

“I can’t go to the movies without encountering myself.”

– Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

HBO’s 2019 adaptation of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon’s *Watchmen* comics series is among the most celebrated scripted programs in television history.⁶⁷ From showrunner Damon Lindelof, the series channels the legacy of the acclaimed comics in both its subject matter and narrative form. More than simply revisiting the storyworld of its source material, the TV series follows its comic predecessor by experimenting with its serial form. Moore and Gibbons’ comics, for example, were among the first to translate the episodic serial loops of classic superhero comics into a progressive serial mode, uncharacteristically permitting its heroes to age. For its part, the *Watchmen* TV series helped inaugurate a trend toward producing more prestige science fiction miniseries. While the miniseries (or limited series) is, of course, nothing new, HBO’s decision was in some ways astounding: the trifecta of a network as big as HBO, a showrunner as established as Lindelof, and a property as marketable as *Watchmen* would have

⁶⁷ The series won twenty-six Emmy nominations and eleven wins, second only to *Game of Thrones* in single-season awards. It earned a 96 percent “Certified Fresh” rating on rottentomatoes.com. Each episode drew more than seven million broadcast views, and many more post-season streams. It currently stands as the most-watched inaugural season since *Westworld*’s debut in 2016. See Katz for additional details.

provided years of guaranteed revenue. On the surface, we know why HBO adapted *Watchmen* as a miniseries; Lindelof made *Watchmen*'s limited format a precondition of his participation in the project.⁶⁸ More interesting, however, we might ask how this move transforms the content of the series or, perhaps, even the entire *Watchmen* storyworld. Why did the series end at the ninth episode, and why does that matter?

To approach these questions, we first need to understand how the new series fits within the broader *Watchmen* universe. Moore and Gibbon's comics, which came out between 1986 and 1987, track a thought experiment, which asks what might happen if superheroes were exposed to the worldly consequences of what Umberto Eco calls "consumable" time.⁶⁹ Vulnerable to age, conflict, corruption, errors in judgement, and positioned against the backdrop of insurmountable geopolitical conflicts, *Watchmen*'s masked vigilantes are forced to navigate the vicissitudes of historical time. This results in what Moore has called a "much darker" take on the role of the superhero in American culture—a role befitting the postmodern disillusionment of the later Cold War Era within which the comics emerged.⁷⁰ The *Watchmen* comics introduced new, much more complex, sets of superhero archetypes, along with several characters who reappear in the 2019 adaptation, including: Doctor Manhattan, a nuclear physicist transformed by radiation into an omniscient, omnipotent, and coldly detached posthuman being; Laurie Juspezyk, the wryly cynical masked vigilante who loves him; Rorschach, a right-wing, morally absolutist antihero; and Ozymandias, a hyperintelligent, billionaire anti-villain, who, at the end of the comic series,

⁶⁸ See Damon Lindelof's interview with Alan Sepinwall for more.

⁶⁹ See Umberto Eco, "The Myth of Superman."

⁷⁰ See Alan Moore's interview with Jon B. Cooke for the larger discussion.

averts nuclear war by dropping giant alien squids on New York City and killing three million people, thereby uniting the world against an imaginary extraterrestrial threat.

Although each of these characters make it into the TV series, their stories become subordinate to the comics' most secretive superhero, Hooded Justice. In the comics, the mostly-silent Hooded Justice communicates almost exclusively through his visual presence: he wears a black hood and shirt; rope bindings encircle his wrists, ankles, and waist; a noose hangs around his neck; his billowing red cape looks as though the white robes of a Klansman have been soaked in blood. The story of this man, whom Lindelof describes as the comics' "unanswered mystery," is the nucleus around which the plot of the HBO series rotates.⁷¹ Revisiting the *Watchmen* universe through the perspective of Hooded Justice signals that this newest iteration will by necessity be a very different kind of story, animated by the questions: "who is Hooded Justice? Why would he never show his face? What was he hiding?"⁷² The mere asking of these questions makes the answers all-too clear. Hooded Justice is a Black man, whose black balaclava hides his Blackness in plain sight, and whose costume, in its every detail, speaks of the lynchings of the Jim Crow era into which he was born.

The plot of the new *Watchmen* series explodes outwardly from this revelation. It uses the biography of Hooded Justice—beginning with his childhood in the 1920s and ending nearly one hundred years later—to anchor an expansive and convoluted story that reaches across the globe to Vietnam and Antarctica, above the sky to the moons of Jupiter, and through more than a century in time. Despite the fact that Hooded Justice's experiences frame the scope of *Watchmen's* story (or *fabula*), *Watchmen's* plot (or *syuzhet*) centers on his granddaughter,

⁷¹ See "How 'Watchmen' Pulled Off One of the Best TV Seasons of the Decade."

⁷² These are the motivating questions Lindelof reports to have asked himself ahead of creating the show. See *Variety* article, "How 'Watchmen' Pulled Off One of the Best TV Seasons of the Decade" for more.

Detective Angela Akbar (aka Sister Night), as she attempts to solve the lynching of her white police chief. These narrative choices result in a fragmented plot that not only includes, but precedes and succeeds the events of the comics. The tangled fragments come together in a show that renovates the terms of conventional seriality by simultaneously approaching its narrative as a prequel, sequel, and spin-off all at once, or what Lindelof calls a “remix” of the original series. The TV series thus flows in all directions, sweeping over, under, and through the events of Moore and Gibbons’ comics, and adumbrating a new set of parameters for *Watchmen*’s alternate timeline.⁷³

The series concept, pilot episode, and alternate timeline all begin with the same event: the 1921 Tulsa Massacre, where white supremacists razed the neighborhood of Greenwood, which, at the time, had been one of the most prosperous Black communities in the country. Until the pilot episode aired, the Tulsa Massacre (also known as the Massacre of Black Wall Street) had largely been suppressed in national consciousness, especially among white Americans. And that was by design: following the attack, Oklahoma newspapers immediately ceased reportage, Tulsa police confiscated photographs, and the local editorial that had initially provoked the mob was removed from the archives.⁷⁴ It was only after showrunner Damon Lindelof first learned of the event from Ta-Nehisi Coates’ 2014 article, “The Case for Reparations,” that he finally consented, after multiple requests from HBO, to take on the *Watchmen* project, realizing that he could leverage the comics’ notoriety toward bringing more awareness to the massacre and its far-reaching repercussions.⁷⁵ In foregrounding the massacre, however, *Watchmen* runs into the

⁷³ See Damon Lindelof’s interview with Alan Sepinwall.

⁷⁴ Lakshmi Gandhi fact checks myths and misconceptions about the Tulsa Race massacre.

⁷⁵ See Damon Lindelof’s interview with Alan Sepinwall.

problem of how to responsibly tell a story, which, through intergenerational trauma and ongoing racial oppression, is neither practically nor symbolically resolved. If the consequences of the massacre ripple through time and space, what options are there to acknowledge its continuing reverberations without perpetuating them? *Watchmen*'s attempt to remediate the historical trauma of the massacre begins to look as irresolvable as the problem of the form in which it is told—how to narrate a story of ongoing violence and trauma, which cannot heal in silence, but for which serialized narration threatens to keep the traumatic wound open.

Screen Memories, Traumatic Wounds

Watchmen structures the content and form of its fictional narrative around the historical trauma of the massacre. The first scene of the pilot depicts the origin of a screen memory that will motivate the decisions of the child who will become Hooded Justice. In an 1899 letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess, Sigmund Freud describes the concept of “screen memories” as inaccurate recollections that serve to protect (or screen) a subject from more distressing memories, which then become repressed.⁷⁶ In *Watchmen*, the “screen” of the most salient screen memory is made literal, when a child, who cannot possibly process the enormity of the trauma he survives, replaces that trauma with memories of the film he is watching just before his neighborhood, including the theater, burns. Where his screen memories shield him from having to face the tragedy before he is ready, they also prevent him in his adulthood from identifying and integrating the source of his trauma. As a result, the impact of the unaddressed trauma reverberates through his life and the lives of those he touches. Just as *Watchmen*'s content addresses the far-reaching consequences of Hooded Justice's repressed trauma, the show's

⁷⁶ See Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Letters*.

expression of its serial form mimics characteristics of personal and collective trauma, which can involve both cyclical reiterations of violence and memory fragmentation.⁷⁷

From *Watchmen*'s title screen, we enter a storyworld of mise-en-abyme, in which we see the central story refracted through a variety of other narrative media. A film projector clicks on, and a flickering title credit lingers as piano accompaniment bridges an iris into a black and white square frame. The silent film that opens the series, titled *Trust in the Law*, features a caped figure in pursuit of a mustachioed man. As the pursuant apprehends the man, white parishioners run from their small country church to learn, along with the film's audiences and ourselves, that the detainee is the town's sheriff who, according to intertitles, has stolen their cattle. As the hero throws off his disguise to reveal himself as Bass Reeves, the revered "Black Marshal of the Oklahoma Territory," the camera pans away from the movie screen and sweeps down and across rows of empty seats in Greenwood's Dreamland Theater (the actual historical name of the neighborhood's theater), before settling on the rapt face of a Black child. At the same moment, the diegetic piano soundtrack becomes discordant. This auditory shift suggests a distortion between the message projected on the screen and the scene of its viewing, marking the disjuncture between the fictional world of the film and the external world in which that film circulates.

Visually reinforcing this distortion, the image simultaneously cuts to a low-angle shot taken from behind the boy's head, which offers a new view of the screen. From the child's vantage, the screen's dimensions elongate the bodies of the white parishioners, who now demand a lynching. Their anatomical disfigurement underscores the monstrosity of their demand. At the same time, it orients us to the subjectivity of the viewer, whose positionality converts the

⁷⁷ See Michele Bedard-Gilligan and Lori A. Zoellner's coauthored article for a psychological explanation of memory fragmentation in PTSD.

perspective of the image from a straight to a low-angle shot, skewing the cinematography of the original. It thus literalizes the distortion that inevitably occurs in the consumption of any piece of media. In combination with the discordant piano music, the visual cues unsettle the moment of translation from media object to audience. This is always a vulnerable space in which meanings can't help but mutate; in this case, those mutations unsettle our perception of the fantasy that absorbs the child's attention.

These auditory and visual distortions, which emerge at precisely the moment that the Black Marshal casts off his cloak and reveals himself townspeople, amplify the sensation that we are watching something anomalous. Even without these signals, we would likely be surprised by the parishioners' implicit acceptance of the lawman's Blackness—not because we cannot fathom Black heroism or white criminality, but because the popular genre of the Western has long worked to reaffirm the centrality of white masculinity in the “taming” of the American frontier. Usually, the genre elides the stories of the West's non-white residents, which are not simply stories of genocide and slavery, but also civic participation.

In truth, Bass Reeves was a real man who roamed the Oklahoma and Arkansas frontiers in the nineteenth century, first as a man who escaped his enslavement and took refuge from the Civil War with the Creeks and Seminoles, and later as the first Black deputy marshal west of the Mississippi River. Despite his remarkable biography, Reeves' name is not well known.⁷⁸ *Watchmen's* opening scene retrieves his story while acknowledging the many modes and layers of mediation standing in the centuries between Reeves' birth and the present day. Although he remains relatively obscure as a historical figure, Reeves' experiences on the margins of the

⁷⁸ See Sean O'Neal for a discussion of some of the reasons for why he is not more familiar to people in the twenty-first century. See Sydney Trent for an account of how *Watchmen's* premier brought Reeves back into popular awareness, in addition to an abbreviated version of Reeve's biography.

expanding American nation are rumored to have inspired the serial character of the Lone Ranger—a hero famous for his strict moral code, his skill, and, importantly, his mask. The mask provides almost too neat a metaphor for the ongoing masking of Reeves’ legacy through the mechanism of genre reproduction. So, while Reeves is a powerful model for the child to emulate—enslaved at birth, only to become an officer of the law later in life—his deracinated legacy by way of the Lone Ranger speaks to the improbability of his success at the same time as it masks the complexities that might proceed from the intersections of his identity.⁷⁹

The child is an ideal viewer for the Bass Reeves fantasy—innocently unaware of the racial violence that is about to transform his life and eager to participate in the dream without questioning it. As the heroic Reeves mollifies the bloodthirsty townspeople on the screen, the enthralled child anticipates the title cards by voicing the film’s eponymous dialogue: “There will be no mob justice today. TRUST IN THE LAW.” At that cue, a siren interrupts the child’s reverie, an explosion loosens debris from the ceiling, and the pianist (whom we soon learn is the child’s mother) falters and begins to cry. The explanation for this bizarre scene becomes clear: outside the tenuous sanctuary of the empty Dreamland Theater, the white mob riots. We learn that boy’s mother is using the film to distract her son while his father arranges his escape. Standing starkly against the cinematic “dreamland” of law, order, and color-blind justice, the brutal reality of entrenched anti-Black racism, and the mortal danger of the present moment, punctures the movie’s illusion.

⁷⁹ It’s worth noting that there are historical examples Black protagonists in early Westerns, including the lost 1919 black and white silent feature from Oscar Micheaux, *The Homesteader*, which is based on Reeves’ life in the Dakotas, and which explicitly takes up Reeves’ race. Herb Jeffries’ Black film and television character, the “Singing Cowboy,” also resembles Bass Reeves, although Herb Jeffries was so light-skinned he mostly identified as white. For a detailed analysis of racial representation in silent films see Cedric J. Robinson’s *Forgeries of Memory & Meaning: Blacks & the Regimes of Race in American Theater & Film Before World War II*, which argues that Micheaux’s films subverted dominant narratives of racial “uplift” by foregrounding “explicit political critiques of the American national myth” (xvii).

If, as the name *Watchmen* suggests, this is a TV show that takes the act of watching seriously, then the harrowing opening scene announces the stakes of that act. Just like the child, we are startled from the passive, unreflective receptivity of the black and white Western fantasy on the screen and must now turn our gaze to what intrudes from just outside the frame. The lesson will be reiterated many times before the end of the series. As long as the true source of the trauma remains occluded, the external world will continue to puncture such dreams of justice, even against infinitely serial attempts to reconstruct that dreamworld.

With his cinematic dream interrupted, the child is compelled to return to the storyworld from which he has so abruptly been pulled. He is ushered into a wooden trunk on the back of a car, and as the car speeds away from the riot, bullets pierce the walls of the trunk, forming a peep hole through which the boy can peer back at the ongoing massacre of his childhood home. Through the makeshift aperture, he sees white men in cars dragging Black bodies on ropes—a distorted echo of Bass Reeve's apprehension of the cattle thief, itself a distorted echo of lynching the child now witnesses. The means of his escape are a return to and a debasement of his experiences in the Dreamland. From the dark he watches images of the American West filter through his unmediated lens. Even now, as he escapes the wreckage of the Dreamland, he continues to see the world through the lens of the film.

When the boy wakes up that night, he is orphaned and marooned by the side of the road. From his pocket, he retrieves a handwritten note from his father that says "WATCH OVER THIS BOY." The note marks his official entrance into the Bass Reeves fantasy; no longer is he simply the watcher, like Reeves, he is now also to be watched. He finds another survivor—the infant daughter of his murdered rescuers, whom he swaddles in an American flag quilt, making her a metaphorical vessel for carrying forward the Bass Reeves dream of a nation built upon trust

in the heroes of its law. As Will holds her in his arms, we look with him back down the road towards his neighborhood in flames. He again observes, from the dark, the flashing lights of another vision of the American West. Only now he also recognizes himself as both observer and participant.

In *Watchmen*'s storyworld, Will's version of Reeves is only available for his imagination through the mediation of popular culture, so, when Will's childhood trauma interrupts his enjoyment of the Bass Reeves narrative, he cannot help but see his own difference from the man on the screen. The problem is that the film presupposes a configuration of race relations that the child does not yet understand are unavailable to him in the world he inhabits. And where the fictional Bass Reeves reconstitutes order by arresting white criminals, the child finds himself helpless against an entire mob of them. To make sense of that disorder, the child locates the source of the problem not in the structures and systems of white supremacy that preexist the massacre, but in his own relative helplessness. He sees the problem as being related to the disturbance of order rather than being endemic within the order itself. We later learn that the child renames himself Will Reeves after his screen hero and decides to train, like his forebear, to be an officer of the law—who, true to his name, wills himself to become like Reeves.

Will's tragic misfortune is that he doesn't understand the nature of his wound. Despite his stubborn longing for the fictionalized world of his idol, changing his name fails to recast his role in the world he has inherited, which is shaped by what Saidiya Hartman calls "the afterlife of slavery." In the face of "a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago," Hartman also changed her name, from Valarie to Saidiya. Where Valarie signaled the name of "a girl unsullied by the stain of slavery and inherited disappointment," Saidiya liberated her from bourgeois stain of Valarie and connected her to her severed African kin. "In a gesture of

self-making,” she explains, “I had tried to undo the past and reinvent myself.” Like Hartman, Will seeks to connect to a heritage he wants to claim—in his case, noble, revered, and, importantly, safe from racial violence. Unlike Hartman, Will seeks to move toward white America rather than away from it. Where the name Saidiya confirms her “place in the company of poor black girls—Tamikas, Roqueshas, and Shanequas,” Reeves reaches toward an aspiration, the legacy of the real Bass Reeves refracted through layers of impossible fictions.⁸⁰

Will emerges from the massacre still believing in his fantasy of colorblind justice, and his choice to follow in Bass Reeves’ path demonstrates his failure to integrate the event. In a twist on Franz Fanon’s account of the “identification process” for black children, it is the blackness of the Bass Reeves character that perpetuates the “white mask” of Will’s belief in the impossible: that the identity of the heroic lawman is available to him (*Black Skin, White Masks* 125). In Fanon’s account, the didactic adventure stories told by colonial empires “are written by white men for white children” (124). In such stories, blackness, alongside redness, is always figured as threat: “the Wolf, the Devil, the Wicked Genie, Evil, and the Savage are always represented by Blacks or Indians” (124).⁸¹ This creates a conflict for the Black or Red child because they simultaneously identify with “the good guys” even as their own racial identity is “overdetermined from the outside” by the “white gaze,” which ascribes the good and desirable to whiteness and the bad and threatening to blackness or redness (124, 95). This result of this conflict is an “identification process” where “the black child subjectively adopts a white man’s attitude” toward their own identity (126).

⁸⁰ See Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, for her compelling account of the “self-making” gesture of choosing her own name. I’m indebted to Javier Ernesto Perez’s article on *Watchmen* for pointing me towards *Lose Your Mother*, which he engages toward different ends.

⁸¹ For an extended study of race as a representational category in film, see Frank Wilderson’s *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, which is in conversation with Fanon’s account of race as an ontology.

Trust In The Law is precisely the kind of didactic adventure story Fanon describes. Yet *Watchmen* inverts Fanon's identification process by providing Will, an impressionable Black child, with a Black hero in whom Will can see himself. Not only that, this particular hero is the embodiment of a righteous law in which one can place their trust. The imperative demand of the film's title carries the force of Fanon's "identification process" for the young Will in that it communicates a value around which he constructs his identity. However, the fact that *Watchmen* locates this psychic investment in the reassuring self-reflection of shared racial identity becomes ironic as Will attempts to actualize that identity. In other words, it is precisely his impression that this identity is available to him that sets him up for repeated encounters with the power of the "white gaze," when his early attempts to actualize this identity are thwarted because of his race. In one of his first acts as a police officer, he apprehends a white arsonist in the act of torching a Jewish deli. As if to discredit the legitimacy of his status as a police officer, his colleagues, in a move that baffles Will, dismisses his attempt to book the criminal. Later that night, he himself is apprehended by a group of white fellow officers—his purported colleagues and peers—who retaliate against his audacity by subjecting him to a mock lynching. Will is attacked by the very law in which he has placed his trust and to which he has staked his identity.

Will's surprise at this violation of his selfhood suggests that this is his first true encounter with the experience of blackness Fanon describes. Ripped from his home and his family in an act of traumatic racial violence, Will is not altogether unlike the African slave brought to the American colony or the Antillean subjects of French colonialism whom Fanon describes in *Black Skin, White Masks*. In each case, the "Black" person does not understand themselves to be Black until they encounter the meaning imposed by the "white gaze:"

I am overdetermined from the outside. I am a slave not to the 'idea' others have of me, but to my appearance [...] the white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me. I

am *fixed* [...] I see in this white gaze that it's the arrival not of a new man, but of a new type of man, a new species. A Negro, in fact! (95).

The “new species” Fanon describes is the Black person constructed in and by white supremacy. From this perspective, *Watchmen*'s choice to center a Black hero in *Trust In The Law* may be more indicative of Will's racial innocence, meaning that his world had not yet suffered the “fracture of consciousness” produced by anti-Black racialization (170). Perhaps because he grew up in the predominantly Black community of Black Wall Street, Will's identification with Bass Reeves represents the continuity of self that exists within one's “Mother Country” (7). Therefore, his violent humiliation not only shatters his prior colorblindness, but introduces a new, racialized subjectivity:

The black man realizes that many of the assertions he had adopted regarding the subjective attitude of the white man are unreal. He then begins his real apprenticeship [...] to confront a myth – a deep-rooted myth. The black man is unaware of it as long as he lives among his own people; but at the first white gaze, he feels the weight of his melanin. (128)

Nearing fatal asphyxiation as he hangs from a tree, the “weight” of Will's “melanin” is literally killing him. When he is finally cut down, he is no longer colorblind, for he realizes the gap between how he has seen himself and how he is seen. An identification process that began with his desire to be Bass Reeves now leads him to understand that, outside of its original context, his desire to represent the law could be seen as a “white mask”—a claim to legitimacy in the eyes of a white gaze that is intent on his exclusion.

Will's childhood trauma produces the “screen memory” of an ideal self that will overcome the helplessness he experienced as a child. As a result, he attempts to actualize the identity of his fantasy hero Bass Reeves. In doing so, his fantasy is ruptured by his encounter with anti-Black racism that asserts the impossibility of his fantasy identification while dehumanizing him in the process. Yet, Will's attachment to the redemptive power of the law

continues to motivate him, even as it requires him to evolve a new identity. As he walks home, still wearing the rope bindings of his mock lynching, he repurposes the lynching hood as a mask and interrupts the assault of two white people, who express their gratitude to their disguised hero. This moment constitutes his rebirth as the *Watchmen* universe's very first masked hero.

Renaming himself a second time, Will Reeves becomes Hooded Justice. This is the moment in which he exchanges his original screen memories for a newer screen—the vigilante's mask. Unfortunately for him, his newest metamorphosis only represents a partial reckoning with his past. As Hooded Justice, he remains stuck in the early portion of the film, in which the hero remains cloaked. If he cannot, as a Black man, enact justice as an arm of the state, perhaps he can enact vigilante justice as an unraced people's champion. The cloak of his disguise quotes the costume of Bass Reeves, but the white paint he uses to cover his eyes—the only visible part of his body—repudiates the central illusion of *Trust in the Law*.⁸²

The first of many origin stories in the series, Will's serves as the backstory to every other backstory.⁸³ His origin story places the historical trauma of the Tulsa Massacre at the center of the entire *Watchmen* universe. Because Will's childhood trauma initially binds him more fully to his cinematic fantasy, he inhabits the real world as though it were the fictional one. W. E. B. Du Bois uses the term “double-consciousness” to describe Black experiences of forceful exclusion from white formulations of national belonging. As he says: “One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” The peculiar sensation that results—a sense of only seeing himself “through the

⁸² For an extended study of the allure, and negative implications, of Black men's participation in civil authority, see *Black Masculinity and the Cinema of Policing* by Jared Sexton.

⁸³ *Watchmen* also provides the origin stories of many of its other characters, including Sister Night, Looking Glass, Doctor Manhattan, Lady Trieu, and Doctor Manhattan, signaling its investment in finding and retrieving obscured histories.

revelation of the other world”—is one that divides the consciousness into two: a “better and truer self” and its oppositional masked self, which exists only in relation to whiteness (Du Bois 3). Literalizing Du Bois’ double consciousness by donning his deracinating disguise, he finally begins to participate in what he sees as the enactment of justice, but it comes at the cost of triggering traumatic reverberations that multiply through the subsequent century and beyond. As the disrupted trajectory of the child’s life inaugurates the alternate timeline of the *Watchmen* universe, it simultaneously shapes that universe around the moment of his trauma. Will’s first look backwards toward the flames that consume the dreamworld of his early life in many ways defines the project of the entire series—to return to and unmask the foundational trauma of the *Watchmen* timeline.

The elusive moment of possibility for escaping the traumatic (eternal) recurrence is mapped onto the child’s backward gaze.⁸⁴ Until that child gains the ability to truly witness the trauma that determines the trajectory of his life, world, and even universe, the loop will replicate itself. *Watchmen* positions the child’s trauma as proxy for a broader cultural trauma that calls for a greater act of witnessing, which must also work towards reckoning with and ultimately integrating the wounds of history. As with the child, a host of issues stand in the way of our ability to actually perceive the root of the trauma rather than one of its serial echoes. In this way, *Watchmen* develops a mode of seriality whose formal elements express the trauma of the story it simultaneously wants to unravel and resolve.

⁸⁴ Eternal return conceptualizes time as an infinite loop. Friedrich Nietzsche explored it in both *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

Traumatic Repetition

Watchmen's first scene establishes themes and motifs that repeat throughout the remainder of the series. The plot revisits the content of the opening scene in imperfect copies of the original event—what, to paraphrase both Umberto Eco and Gilles Deleuze, we might call reiteration with a difference.⁸⁵ Each revision focalizes around a new character, reconfiguring elements of the child's escape from the massacre according to the experiences and investments of that character. The first scene therefore serves not merely as the inciting incident of the *Watchmen* story, but also as a cipher through which other events in *Watchmen*'s timeline become legible. In this section, I will discuss how *Watchmen* recycles events, themes, and storytelling tactics from the first scene and identify what these repetitions reveal about the show's theory of its own serial form.

As soon as the opening scene ends, *Watchmen* moves into its first repetition, cutting from the newly orphaned Will looking down the road to the fires behind him to another shot on the same road, only 98 years later. This scene features a white man in a pick-up truck speeding away from the former location of Black Wall Street. He is listening to music by the Black rapper Future when sirens suddenly interrupt him. The beginning of this scene thus replicates that of the first, with a new Black media object, a different motivation for its enjoyment, and a different reason for the disruption.

A Black police officer in a mask approaches the white driver. The officer sees that the driver is nervous, likely concealing something. The officer notices a mask in the man's glove compartment—a reproduction of the one worn by Rorschach, the antihero of the 1986 comic series. In the TV adaptation, a white supremacist terrorist faction called the Seventh Kavalry (a

⁸⁵ Reiteration with difference tracks both the Deleuzian definition of repetition in *Repetition and Difference* and Eco's characterization of seriality in "Interpreting Serials."

successor to the KKK) has adopted the Rorschach mask as a symbol of resistance to racial desegregation. Here, the series comments for the first time on the repetition that inheres in its status as a sequel. The mask explicitly ties the antihero's paranoia, nihilism, and casual bigotry to the overt racial violence it engenders, just as it connects the present-day white supremacists to their forebears, the perpetrators of the Tulsa Massacre.

The scene depicts the first of many comparisons to the Bass Reeves' plot: a white criminal, a Black lawman in a disguise, and so on. Like the child in the first scene, the police officer does not get to inhabit the fantasy of the film's universe. Instead, he is hamstrung by protocol, unable to access a firearm that needs to be unlocked by the central office. Before he can unlock his gun, the villain dons his own mask (a precondition to committing violence in this version of the *Watchmen* universe) and shoots the officer. Through this dark turn—which takes place nearly one-hundred diegetic years in the future, but only minutes of screen time later—the scene no longer simply recapitulates the film, but also the tragic puncturing of the film's colorblind fantasy.

After the Kavalry member shoots the officer, a lively melody bridges a cut to an all-Black cast performing the musical *Oklahoma!* in the now renovated Dreamland Theater. It is still 2019, the show's diegetic present, and the same theater that opened the series plays yet another colorblind reversal of the Western genre's conventional representation of race. Here, the cinematography displays more elements that are retained and reconfigured from the first scene. Instead of duplicating the unbroken camera movement that introduces the lone enrapt child, for example, the camera cuts from the stage to a packed, mixed-race audience. Then, it returns to a more familiar movement, mimicking that of the earlier shot by panning across a few empty seats before it rests on the face of this scene's protagonist. This time, he is a white man, soon

identified as Police Chief Judd Crawford. In contrast to the child's enthusiastic interaction with the screen, this shot captures Judd locked in an inscrutable, unsmiling expression. The cut visually disconnects the performance from its audience and underscores the chief's relative detachment from what he putatively watches. This editing technique, Judd's cynical distance from the musical, and other cues (including the fact that the chief shares his name with the musical's villain, Jud Fry) subtly signals Judd's disingenuousness. His posture as an audience member differs both from the boy's rapture in the cinema and the driver's passive consumption of Black music. Like the others, however, his aesthetic experience is quickly aborted by an act of violence, when he is called away to the hospital to deal with the shooting. The pattern established in the opening scene now appears in triplicate: a popular and positive representation of Blackness; a consuming audience; and a violent interruption of audience consumption.

Taken together, these first three scenes establish a recursive mode of seriality, which unfolds thematically, cinematographically, and formally in repetitions of the trauma that opens the series. In this manner, the mechanics of *Watchmen*'s storytelling resemble Sigmund Freud's account of psychological trauma in that both are organized around injuries from which new events, symptoms, or storylines spring. In his 1914 essay, "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through," Freud demonstrates how, in the repression of trauma, "the compulsion to repeat" replaces "the impulsion to remember." Repetitions take the form of imperfect recapitulations of the core trauma, which threaten to lock subjects within ceaseless repetitions of the injurious event. These repetitions accrete around and slowly transform the meaning of the irretrievable originary trauma, transferring it from an event or events in the past into elements of a subject's "manifest personality" (150-151). The repressed trauma structures the variety of symptoms and expressions that ensue, which take place through memories, dreams, flashbacks,

neuroses, and other intrusive symptoms.⁸⁶ From a narratological perspective, these symptoms accord with one definition of serial plotting as a practice in which “the same story is worked over to appear to be different” (Eco, “Interpreting Serials” 92). While we of course cannot and should not conflate all seriality with a generalized explanation of psychological trauma, *Watchmen* appears to be alive to the structural correspondences between seriality and trauma responses, which it pursues through acts of both retelling and rewatching. Will’s relationship with his personal trauma, therefore, serves as a metalepsis that represents not only Tulsa’s collective relationship with the massacre, but also the traumatized expression of the show’s own serial narration. As such, the formal composition of *Watchmen* enacts its own thematic tension between the aspirations of traumatic resolution and the living legacies of anti-Blackness.

Epigenetics and Intergenerational Trauma

Watchmen recognizes that traumatic repetitions do not just unfold linearly in a single life or narrative. They bleed out; they sprawl; they spread throughout communities and across generations. Just as the show leverages its mode of serial narration to demonstrate the intergenerational ramifications of trauma, it also characterizes intergenerational trauma using the terms of seriality. *Watchmen* represents its legacies of trauma largely through concepts associated with epigenetics, a field of research that explains how lived experiences can modify the expression of a person’s genes in themselves and in their descendants.⁸⁷ In a move that bears

⁸⁶ See the *Diagnostic and Statistics Manual, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)* diagnostic criteria for PTSD.

⁸⁷ See Brent Bezo and Stefania Maggi’s qualitative research in intergenerational trauma; an APA overview on the topic by Tori DeAngelis; and Shelley Berger et al. for an operational definition of epigenetics. See also Yael Danieli, *International Center for MultiGenerational Legacies of Trauma*, for a thorough examination of how trauma survivors’ coping mechanisms might impact their descendants. For examples of behavioral patterns associated with intergenerational trauma, see in particular Danieli’s “Inventory of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma,” which asks participants to rate responses to prompts such as: “At times, my mother/father would suddenly look as if she/he

troubling implications, the series emphasizes epigenetic trauma responses primarily within its Black characters. In this section, I will discuss how *Watchmen* broadens its discussion of seriality and trauma to encompass a problematically racialized view of inheritance as a kind of genetic sequencing that both emerges from and reproduces trauma.

At the center of *Watchmen*'s claims about intergenerational trauma are the parallels between Will Reeves and his estranged granddaughter, Angela Abar. Because the series is framed through Will's biography, Angela, the show's chief protagonist, is not introduced until almost one-third of the way through the first episode. Before we see her face, the camera frames her hands in close-up as she cracks an egg—an enduring and overdetermined visual motif throughout the series.⁸⁸ She is in the middle of a baking presentation in the elementary school classroom of her adopted white son. While showing the children how to bake cookies, her narration strays from its main topic and towards disclosures that introduce her character and storyworld. We learn that she was born in Vietnam before it became an American State and became a police officer while living there. She moved to Tulsa, and worked in the police force until she was attacked in her home through an act of racially motivated violence called the “White Night.” This was before police were allowed to wear masks, so the perpetrators knew who she was and where to find her. After being shot in her abdomen, she decided to retire from police work and open a bakery. More than simple worldbuilding, her opening monologue connects Angela to the act of breaking eggs, potent symbols of, among other things, fertility. Combined with the

were far away;” “I was taught to fight against injustice;” “Our home was full of sadness;” “My parents’ house was always stocked with food;” and many others.

⁸⁸ The motif of eggs is thoroughly overdetermined in *Watchmen*. Although I will return to it later, the show deploys this motif in more ways than this chapter could accommodate. For our purposes, it represents fertility, origination, and the arc of cyclical time. When broken, the egg can symbolize infertility, the eye of the Cyclops (the show's precursor to the Seventh Cavalry), cellular nuclei (especially in relation to Doctor Manhattan), the fracturing of protective barriers in egg shells and egg white proteins, and, eventually, the breaking of a cycle.

attention she draws to the location of her bullet wound (over her internal reproductive organs) and the visual confirmation that her white son is likely adopted, the series suggests that she is unable to have biological children.

The scene ends when her son attacks a classmate for impertinently asking whether she paid for her bakery with “Redfordations,” the show’s portmanteau alluding to President Robert Redford’s institution of reparations.⁸⁹ Through Redfordations, *Watchmen* underscores its investments in epigenetic theories of intergenerational trauma. To discover whether they qualify for Redfordations, people can visit a DNA analysis station in a memorial located in the Greenwood Center for Cultural Heritage, which is both an educational site and economic resource for descendants of racial violence.⁹⁰ The necessity for such a service speaks to the enduring impact of the Tulsa massacre, which, in the real world as in *Watchmen*’s fictional one, fractured and separated families, destroyed the homes of ten-thousand Black people, and prompted mass exodus of Greenwood’s Black residents. Combined with the purposeful suppression of the massacre in papers and historical documents, it makes sense that some descendants of Black Wall Street’s residents may need genetic information to know about their family history. As Nicole Simek argues, the series’ emphasis on distributing Redfordations produces two “major effects”:

First, it recognizes the multigenerational impact of trauma on every, interconnected level of wellbeing, emotional and economic, and it repairs some measure of the damage done to wealth and security. Second [...] it suggests that inheritance is the primary vector by which equity – in both senses– should be maintained. (398)

⁸⁹ In the *Watchmen* universe, Richard Nixon remains president for several terms and is succeeded by Robert Redford (an actor, like Ronald Reagan, but a Democrat).

⁹⁰ Of interest to humanities scholars, the DNA station features the voice and likeness of Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who is the United States Treasury Secretary in the *Watchmen* timeline.

Noting that reparations cannot possibly accommodate people whose family histories or genetic information are inaccessible, Simek frames *Watchmen*'s overarching purpose as an attempt to answer questions about the meaning of inheritance in the afterlives of targeted mass killing. Through its program of Redfordations, we can see the U.S. government's political answer to this question of inherited trauma and the fact that it privileges genetic lineage as the authenticating expression of legitimate (or "reparable") trauma. Consequently, this stance excludes adopted children and grandchildren of survivors because of the generational limits imposed by the program's exclusively biological understanding of trauma. Therefore, when her son's classmate confronts Angela by asking whether she bought her bakery with Redfordations, it racializes her genetic lineage as an indication of a trauma that is, on the one hand, mockingly portrayed as privilege (through Redfordations) and, on the other, wielded toward reinjury (by marking her racial identity as the target of scorn). The question also raises the implicit question of her fertility by underscoring the genetic difference between Angela and her adopted son. Through the conversation about Redfordations, this interaction links race to trauma and the genetic transmission of trauma to ongoing vulnerability.

At this point in the story, neither Angela nor the viewer is aware of her relationship nor similarities to the child from the opening scene. Yet, when she and her son return home from school, she is quickly called away to "the bakery." When she gets there, she walks straight through the backdoor of the bakery to a secret locked room, where she changes clothes and picks up a badge. We quickly learn that she is not, in fact, a retired police officer, but a high-ranking police detective, working under the costumed alter ego, Sister Night. Swept up in Angela's detective drama, viewers temporarily lose sight—literally and figuratively—of the opening massacre. Necessarily, Angela's experiences as a civilian and as her masked alter-ego connect

the series to Tulsa's buried history, as the specter of the massacre irrupts between the seams of her casework. When, later in the season, we see Angela's backstory, it only comes after the episode in which overdoses on a drug named *Nostalgia* that permits her to enter her grandfather's memories. The placement of Angela's backstory at this moment in the show's plot enables *Watchmen* to splice fragments of her grandfather's memories into the analepses of her own traumatic childhood, making it appear as though her grandfather's life experience exists within her own childhood memories. This disorienting move not only underscores the resonances between their origin stories, but also troubles the concept of chronology, alluding to Doctor Manhattan's temporal omnipresence and foreshadowing Angela's inheritance of his powers at the end of the season.

As with her estranged grandfather, Angela's origin story opens with her eyes fixed upon a representation of her childhood idol. It's the cover of a VHS tape featuring a character named Sister Night, "THE NUN WITH THE MOTHERF%&\$ING GUN." Similar to Bass Reeves, Sister Night becomes the fictional hero whose name Angela eventually adopts for herself. Moments after she rents the video, a bomb explodes, leaving her, like Will, orphaned by an act of collective violence. Later, when her career endangers her (through the "White Night"), she, like Will, opts to continue working toward criminal justice and exchanges her uniform for a mask and hood. Punctuating her own recollections with relevant images from Will's past explicitly connects her experiences as a Black orphan in Vietnam to his as a Black orphan in Tulsa.

Without knowledge of her biological ancestry, she inadvertently repeats her grandfather's choices, developing the blended identity of police detective/vigilante and even fashioning a similar disguise to that of her grandfather, albeit with a few notable differences. To his red cape,

she wears a black one. To his black shirt, she wears a white. Where he belts himself with rope, she dons a six-pointed badge.⁹¹ Where he paints a white mask over his eyes; she sprays hers with black. Given that the series only shows us Hooded Justice in black and white memories, the visual effect is to make Sister Night appear as her grandfather's negative. If the similarities between the two characters weren't clear enough, the editing technique makes them harder to overlook. And the distinctions between them puts their differences on display, just as they highlight the ways Will and Angela are identified with one another so precisely.

Centering the connections between the lives of Angela and Will, *Watchmen* leverages the trope of the origin story to declare the urgency of finding and retrieving elements of repressed trauma. This effort is reduplicated in the backstories of many of the show's other characters (Sister Night, Looking Glass, Dr. Manhattan, and Lady Trieu foremost among them) and arguably of Tulsa itself. As these backstories collide with one another, *Watchmen* sketches a network of its alternate history—a genealogy of trauma originating in 1921 on Black Wall Street and extending at least until 2019, the diegetic present of the show. By identifying Will as the patriarch of *Watchmen*'s timeline, affecting innumerable lives, the show suggests that each of the other characters carries the capacity to inaugurate their own new timelines. The implications of this timeline rupture offer an imaginative exercise in the expanding scale of personal and collective trauma.

Watchmen links genetics to its narrative form through its characterization of heredity as a means not just of genetic reproduction, but also of the intergenerational reproduction of behaviors. DNA, which is comprised of a self-replicating sequence of nucleotides that carry instructions for how a living organism develops, offers a felicitous metaphor for the show's

⁹¹ The badge alludes to that of Bass Reeves, which *Trust in the Law* displays in close-up during the show's first scene, and thereby highlights Angela's continuing trust in the law against her grandfather's loss of faith.

narrative structure.⁹² *Watchmen*'s story of its alternate timeline takes the shape of a single DNA strand: if uncoiled, essentially a string of information; whereas the twists and turns of its plot resembles the coils of a DNA strand. Contextualizing the show as part of a self-replicating franchise further engages the felicitous metaphor. It is likewise worth noting research in epigenetics indicating that trauma can cause DNA coils to tighten, much like the coiling of the show's serial plotting, which returns time and again to the symbols, themes, and patterns of its opening scene.⁹³ Thus, the show's complex narrative form mimics these properties through a structural allusion to DNA sequencing. As with other complex TV series, *Watchmen* traffics in doublings and details, constructing a puzzle that invites its audience to become "amateur narratologists" who "engage actively at the level of *form*... exploring the possibilities of both innovative long-term storytelling and creative intraepisode discursive strategies" (Mittell, *Complex TV*, 52). It delivers its clues in repetitious patterns and carefully distributed motifs. It invites fans to become detectives alongside Hooded Justice and Sister Night, just as it encourages us to playact psychoanalysts by giving us access to their unconscious and unspoken connections with one another and by tying those correspondences to a broader conversation about the origins of inheritance.

In so doing, it advances some troubling ramifications concerning race and biology. As Keith Wailoo points out, while it is doubtful that the bulk of geneticists consider themselves champions of regressive theories of biological racial difference, their research has nonetheless "provoked a resurgence in race thinking... building new notions of racial difference for a new

⁹² The precedent for this conversation emerges from the comic series, in which Jon Osterman, following an accident in a nuclear science experiment, becomes Doctor Manhattan by reconstructing his genetic code, atom by atom. See the fourth issue of the *Watchmen* comics (7-9).

⁹³ See Hunter Howie et al., "A review of epigenetic contributions to post-traumatic stress disorder." The article came out the same year as *Watchmen*.

era” (3). The outcomes of cutting-edge genetics research introduces what Wailoo calls a “paradox of genetics and the unsettled past,” with bivalent repercussions:

in relying upon genetic analysis to resolve historical mysteries or clear the way for restitution and healing, we are at the same time manipulating and transforming the already politicized notions of race and the past, and implicitly making claims about the social, political, and personal significance of biological human difference. (4)

So, while the DNA station at the Greenwood Center for Cultural Heritage redresses one enduring problem about the epigenetic heredity of traumatic injury, it stokes the flames of deeply entrenched white supremacist ideologies of racial difference. To be fair to the show, *Watchmen* acknowledges these issues as quickly as it introduces Redfordations, with the altercation between Angela’s son Topher and his resentful classmate as one example.

Watchmen also sets up a troubling dilemma that it can only resolve by making Angela infertile. In so doing, it likens the problem of inherited trauma to the problems of seriality itself. From its invention in the nineteenth century, seriality has been motivated to maximize profit by holding the attention of its consumers, ideally for as long as possible.⁹⁴ As such, the consequences of decisions established during a series opening continue indefinitely—as long as the series does. We might think of a series pilot as the genetic blueprint for the episodes that succeed it, which means that issues introduced in the beginning of the series tend to persist through its entire run. By locating racialized violence at the foundation of a traumatized universe, the series bears the genetic markers (i.e. instructions for development) that reinscribe its original trauma as a progressively entangled narrative that both expands the scope of traumatic repercussions and seeks their closure. If, then, trauma is both the source of the narrative and the problem it must solve, what options are there to rectify the harm that passes from generation to generation and from episode to episode? *Watchmen*’s answer is unnervingly eugenicist,

⁹⁴ I discuss this dynamic in more detail in the first chapter of this dissertation.

suggesting that one fundamental component of the solution is to end the reproductive cycle of trauma by ending the reproduction of traumatized DNA—to stop having children.

What does it mean to exist within a history where the only solution to the biological reproduction of trauma is to end the biological sequence itself? This resort to the most drastic and absolute separation of the self from its context stands in stark contrast to the cultural entrenchments that seem to necessitate it. *Watchmen* treats Angela's infertility as a partial solution to the intergenerational perpetuation of trauma because the root cause of that trauma is not, in fact, her biology but the consequences of anti-Black violence that emerge from preexisting institutional, systemic, and interpersonal racism. The series depicts these broader sociopolitical antagonisms in the way it characterizes the inheritance of Tulsa's white supremacists, who pass their hostility and entitlement from one generation to the next. This is most overtly introduced in episode two, when Angela discovers a Ku Klux Klan robe in the closet of her deceased police chief—the closeted legacy of his family's allegiances. Even the name of the Seventh Cavalry, which is the white terrorist offshoot of the Cyclops organization, itself a branch of the KKK. The name of the Seventh Cavalry harkens to an earlier period of white violence in Lieutenant General George Armstrong Custer's 7th Cavalry Regiment during the American Indian Wars; the idiosyncratic spelling of the contemporary group's name alludes to the KKK and draws an explicit connection between twenty-first century anti-Black racism and the foundational anti-Native racism of America's nation building project. Cavalry member Senator Joe Keene explains the terror group's rationale, claiming that their mission is “about restoring balance at those times when our country forgets the principles upon which it was founded” (“Episode 7: An Almost Religious Awe”). His admission betrays the group's investment in the country's deep and unbroken legacy of white supremacy, which is as old as the

arrival of European settlers on western shores. Speaking these lines from an underground bunker, Senator Keene laments the fact that his organization has been pushed underground while simultaneously confessing to its perpetual endurance. In its project to imagine an end to the serial perpetuation of trauma, then, the series puts itself in the position of having to address not only the genetic lineage of traumatized victims of racial violence, but also the intergenerational transmission of white supremacy that gives rise to that violence in the first place.

Historical Seriality

Through its psychoanalytical and genealogical investments, *Watchmen*'s sets itself an agenda to retrieve and redress an outsized historical wound. *Watchmen* is therefore a series unlike many others in that it must reach backward rather than forward. Its program is diagnostic, which is why it so painstakingly layers its characters' origin stories atop one another. The world-shattering consequences of white terrorism act as the mortar binding the real-world history of the Tulsa massacre with the fictional history of the *Watchmen* universe. In revisiting the timeline through this lens, *Watchmen* serializes that trauma. It literalizes this seriality through the show's dual status as a sequel and television series. It also theorizes seriality by foregrounding the resonances between the serial transmission of content from one narrative installment to the next with the transmission of trauma from one person, generation, or community to the next. In this section, I will discuss how *Watchmen* characterizes its history of the present as a serialized record of trauma. Because it posits serialization as both part of the solution and the perpetuation of a traumatized history, its attempts to remediate that history involve the reformation of its narrative form.

One way to describe the violent history around which *Watchmen* hinges is as a *hyperobject*, a term coined by Timothy Morton to describe an object “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (1). He applies the term to the phenomena of ecological crisis—global warming, Styrofoam, radioactive deposits—in which the consequences are so broad and long-lasting that we cannot possibly comprehend them. The hyperobject encompasses our entire field of perception, yet we can only experience it in fragments because our consciousness is constrained by the perceptual limits of our embodiment in time and space. In *Watchmen*’s configuration, the Tulsa massacre is not an object in itself, but rather a fragment of the broader set of conditions that constitute the hyperobject of white supremacy, which, in its sublime enormity, remains both untellable and untold.

Events become historical through transmission, and when white Tulsans suppressed the story of the massacre in 1921, just their ancestors had suppressed the stories of the Black communities that preceded them, they also suppressed the story of Black Wall Street—its tragedies *and* its triumphs. The processes of history-making balance admissions and erasures, and events become histories by the permission of history’s gatekeepers. “Every historian of the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved,” Saidiya Hartman reminds us, “is forced to grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor” (*Wayward Lives*, “A Note on Method”). The historical event is inherently perspectival and inevitably circumscribed by the structures that govern access. Consequently, the resulting “event” is one that cannot possibly speak truthfully. Even assuming maximum inclusion, the truth-value that informs the archives of historical awareness is both constituted and constrained by the observable and the narratable.

Given these contingencies, what does it mean to be an event? When does an event begin, and when does it end? Did the massacre begin with the first gunshot, or with the white man who falsely accused the Black teenage Greenwood resident of assaulting a white woman? Did it start with Jim Crow, or slavery, or the invention of racial capitalism? Did it end when the last shots were fired that day, when the embers of the fires finally died down, or with the dispersal of its Black citizens? Will the massacre end when its last survivors die, or when their last descendants die? To recount acts of violence as though they are isolated incidents shifts attention away from the way violence replicates and how its impact endures. The hyperobject offers a better account of this replication because its scale of historical force exceeds any single perspective but includes each of them, at least conceptually. Conceiving violent events as manifestations of a broader, serialized hyperobject gives credence to both the particularity of individual truth in historical time and space while also establishing the extent of that truth as non-total. Thinking about the reality of historical trauma as a hyperobject locates the Tulsa Massacre in its broader context, while simultaneously gesturing towards the unknowability of that context.

In his 1940 essay “Theses on the Concept of History,” Walter Benjamin, as a Jewish refugee seeking escape from the imminent threat of death, reflects on the meaning of history. “There is no document of civilization,” he says, “which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (“Theses on the Concept of History”). Benjamin was imperiled by a different manifestation of white supremacy than the victims of the Tulsa massacre; however, writing from within the threat of present danger, the particularity of his experience gives him insight into the force of white supremacy. In Vichy France and in Tulsa, Oklahoma, white supremacy sustains itself not just through violence and intimidation, but also by controlling the historical narrative, silencing subaltern voices. From the beginning, systems of white supremacy have vandalized and

buried records of violence, of the conditions that provoke that violence, and of the generational and global consequences of incidents such as the Tulsa Massacre.

Since *Watchmen* cannot possibly account for the massacre's entire web of causes and effects, its plot unfolds in disjointed snapshots that toggle between more than two-dozen time periods. The massacre becomes the nucleus of an atomic weapon, with the fragments of disrupted timelines exploding from its traumatic core. The result is disorienting. Flashbacks, flashforwards, and flash-sideways decenter the main plot line. In so doing, *Watchmen* destabilizes the temporality of the event, positing it as a symptom and cause for something that always already was, without beginning or end. Fictions of trauma are often conveyed through experimental narrative structure and "nonlinear temporality" (Aris Mousoutzanis, 97). The temporal fragmentation of *Watchmen*'s narrative form gestures both toward the conditions from which the massacre erupts and toward the compounding of its repercussions over time. In this way, its complex serial form reflects the depth and complexity of the personal and collective trauma from which it stems.

To *Watchmen*, the repercussions of the Tulsa Massacre are so immense that to narrate them means to depart the borders of realism, engaging what Michael Clune refers to as "anti-mimetic" (195) properties. Through the anti-mimetic affordances of science fiction, *Watchmen* attempts to capture the magnitude of the massacre's ripples—cataclysms of racial violence so impactful that they result in multi-dimensional rifts, colonies in outer space, a second term for President Richard Nixon. The trauma of the Tulsa massacre, in other words, has metastasized through the body of the *Watchmen* universe. Lacking the capacity to excise that trauma, the show instead contains its reverberations within the bounded infinity of its alternate timeline. In the science fictional boundaries of the show's narrative, dimensional and temporal fragmentation

offers a means of retrieving the stories of the victims and survivors of this and other atrocities, which, though they may be lost to history in our world, perhaps stand at the center of other worlds, other possibilities for ways of being. Our vantage outside of the alternate history of the *Watchmen* universe in turn makes the unrepresentable immensity of the Tulsa massacre's impact in our world more legible to us. In other words, *Watchmen*'s experiments in scale and perspective attempt to make an untellable story more tellable.

History is not comprised of a string of discrete events, but we often treat it as though it is. This is because historical narration is fundamentally serialized. Of the historical record, Walter Benjamin explains: "just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another" (256). In his serialized account of history, the victors of history's conflicts prune the branches of the story to ensure the ongoing growth of its trunk. Thinking about history in this way opens up space to regard the fact of historical mis-tellings and erasures. The victors' historical record is one which combines their investments in the present with their interpretations of the past and their hopes for the future, and its mode of storytelling depends on a particular kind of serialized logic that translates linear determinism into an impression of inevitability. By its very nature, this historical record must be a partial and selective account told in service to the interests of the already powerful.

To resist this mode of history and strive toward an ethical intervention that accounts for the realities of historical trauma, Benjamin argues for methods of storytelling that "brush history against the grain" (257). Benjamin describes this process through a figure he calls the "Angel of History," a figure whose "face is turned toward the past" while the storm of history catches his wings and "irresistibly propels him into the future" (257). From this vantage, the Angel sees what we cannot: "Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which

keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (257). For our purpose, the salient element of this thesis involves the comparison between sequence and composite, where the practice of teasing out cohesive through-lines represents a form of myopia that privileges events (crises, triumphs) over conditions. That myopia abuses the past to serve the present and secure the future, so it needs to understand the passage of time in the terms of a narrative of past, present, and future. If *Watchmen* is to brush history against the grain, then it must do much more than recover the event of the Tulsa massacre and enter it into circulation; it must also recognize the problems inherent in trying to do so through television seriality.

As embodied intellects, we can only glimpse time episodically, but the wreckage of history exists in simultaneity. How, then, can we approach it with the limitations of our human senses? To this conundrum, *Watchmen* supplies the character of Doctor Manhattan, who comes to exist outside of linear time and localized space following a nuclear accident in which his body is disintegrated and slowly reformed, atom by atom. Doctor Manhattan’s disembodiment is the precondition for his capacity to observe time synchronously. It changes his ontological structure and bestows the ability to view the passage of time from a perspective outside of time. This position mirrors the external perspective of *Watchmen’s* viewing audience while also providing a diegetic parallel to Benjamin’s Angel of History. Like the Angel, Dr. Manhattan apprehends the totality of history’s wreckage, and observes without intervening.

The show offers Doctor Manhattan’s backstory, especially his childhood experiences fleeing the Jewish Holocaust, as a roadmap for how he chooses to inhabit his omnipotence. He and his father find refuge in the British countryside. In one of the series’ many puns on its title, Jon’s father is a watchmaker, and as he sets about repairing a broken watch, the young Jon wanders the halls of the manor, where he finds a terrarium of butterflies, which the adult Doctor

Manhattan describes as “a sealed atmosphere of itself” (“Episode 8: A God Walks into Abar”). Through the motif of the terrarium, the series expresses a stance on its serial temporalities. The terrarium is perpetually self-sustaining, but available for observation only to external entities. From a distance, butterflies are born, they live, they die, and so the cycle continues, but there is a gap between the butterfly’s hyperlocal experience of life and death and the outside observer’s transtemporal vantage on the butterfly life cycle. Zoomed in, their lives unfold linearly; zoomed out, generations recur cyclically.

Doctor Manhattan’s expansive perspective has the effect of freezing him in apathy. In this, the TV show picks up on a conversation begun in the comic. Pressed to use his power to intervene in events of catastrophic violence, Doctor Manhattan refuses. “We’re all puppets,” he explains, “I’m just a puppet who can see the strings” (“Chapter IV” 5). The frame in which he speaks this dialogue positions him and his interlocutor beneath a giant clock. Foregrounding the cogs, the image speaks to the way he chooses to inhabit his powers. He alone sees the hands of history’s clock as they turn, but he remains willfully independent of their movement.

When he interfaces with the human world, Doctor Manhattan must step into time. The temporality he inhabits is one of a looping, rather than linear seriality. The recursive series emerges in the terraria he observes and creates, but is most clearly represented through, once again, the persistent visual metaphor of the egg. Similar to Angela, Doctor Manhattan, when he first enters the television series as himself, is first shown to us in sustained close-ups on his hands. This camera work acts in part as a sleight of hand—his face needs to remain hidden until the show can reveal that we already know him, disguised as a human in the form of Angela’s husband Cal. The sleight of hand becomes a sustained pun after Angela challenges him to prove that he can indeed create life, when Doctor Manhattan performs, with a wave of his hands, the

magic trick of producing an egg. The circumference of an unbroken egg shell forms its own infinite loop, which sets up an analogy where we can observe the eggshell through the same distance that Doctor Manhattan observes time. In a series so occupied in the explication of origins, the egg also provides its paradoxical punchline to the question “Which came first?” To Doctor Manhattan, origins don’t matter. All he sees is the loop.

The series stages its opposition to Doctor Manhattan’s passivity through his relationship with Angela. Doctor Manhattan is drawn to her because she demonstrates the capacity to comprehend the way he experiences time while pushing back against his policy of non-intervention. When he explains, during their “first” meeting, that he is “already in love” with her, she bristles, asking: “So there’s no moment... when you realized ‘oh shit, I’m in love?’” The question doesn’t challenge Doctor Manhattan’s experience of time so much as his philosophy of time. Whether simultaneous or linear, time is composed of moments. Where Doctor Manhattan concerns himself with the totality of time—inaccessible to any being but himself—Angela cares about moments, which is where choices matter. As with the butterflies in the terrarium, the difference between their philosophies comes down to issues of scale and perspective. Zoomed in, we can see an infinite possibility for how we inhabit the moments of our lives; zoomed out, we appear helpless against the tides of history.

The responsibility of the spectator is one of *Watchmen*’s core concerns. To regard the unbroken loop of the egg shell from the uninvolved distance of Doctor Manhattan’s spectatorship forecloses the potential for change. Instead of appreciating the egg as a symbol for the possibility of new life, Doctor Manhattan contemplates its smooth, continuous, unbroken shell. The continuity of the egg as a loop stands in opposition to futurity it symbolizes. In other words, the victims of *Watchmen*’s historical traumas will not be able to move into a more

nourishing future until they break the egg—or, in yet another one of the show’s punchlines, they can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs.

Watching, Witnessing, and Recognition

Watchmen begins in an act of witnessing a collective trauma and it reaches toward repairing the wounds the event has opened—wounds that haunt the series just as they haunt American history. As with all hauntings, the echoes of the massacre stem from a sense that wrongs were committed that remain unresolved. The first step in resolving those wrongs is to see, or, in the program’s parlance, to *watch* them. But the problem that emerges lies in how to watch what is unseeable. Faced with this conundrum, Saidiya Hartman turns to the speculative, peering into the spaces between the historical archive to retrieve and recreate the voices and sensory experiences of young Black women in the twentieth century. She calls her method a “radical imagination and everyday anarchy of ordinary colored girls, which has not only been overlooked, but is nearly unimaginable” (*Wayward Lives*, “A Note on Method”). The speculative act of telling stories of trauma introduces the peril of sustaining the reverberations of trauma in ways that cloud the originary wounds from our view. *Watchmen* seeks to heal what it regards as an unhealable injury by telling what it identifies as an untellable story. This concluding section of the chapter locates *Watchmen*’s response to this paradox in its posture towards seriality itself. It becomes a series that argues against its own serialization and seeks, above all, to end.

It is important that, for Will, the massacre doesn’t just interrupt the security of his daily life; it interrupts his immersion in a version of an American dream—a fictionalized black and white fantasy, given to him through the genre conventions of serialized narrative media, designed to carve out space for Black masculinity that does not exist for him in reality. The

dream represents safety that the world denies, so as a child he locks himself within that waking dream, in Dreamland. Through Freud, we can understand trauma as “a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli,” which prompts the need to “master” the flood of stimuli (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 23-24). When the mob breaches the literal barrier of the Dreamland theater, it penetrates Will’s imaginative framework and interrupts his ability to dream otherwise. The interruption of the film permanently forestalls its narrative resolution, which has the effect of serializing Will’s interpretations of the world around him.

From that point on, Will’s imagination fails him. As he moves through the “real” world, he patterns his choices on the internal logic of the unfinished film. The initial introduction of the trauma into the space of his dreamland leaves that space unavailable for Will’s subconscious. For Freud, the dreams of traumatized people function “to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 26). Although Freud writes of the dreams of sleep, Will’s waking dream functions much the same way. Truth and fantasy become so thoroughly integrated, that he is left no other dreamscape within which to learn to retrospectively master the stimulus. He needs to wake up. He needs the fiction to end.

In the penultimate scene of the final episode of the series, Will finally returns to the Dreamland Theater, one century later. It is a reversal of the first scene. This time, Tulsa burns around him in cleansing fire, destroying the remaining leadership of the Seventh Cavalry and putting an end to their plans. The descendants of the white supremacists who razed his neighborhood have died, and he sits watch over Angela’s adopted children. When Angela enters, she joins him in the rows, gazing towards the children, who are sleeping on the stage of his

originary trauma. Will and Angela discuss the memories she witnessed. “Now you know everything. My origin story,” he says:

Last thing I saw before my world ended was Bass Reeves, the Black Marshal of Oklahoma, fifteen feet tall in flickering black and white. “Trust in the law,” he said. And I did. So I took his name after Tulsa burned. He was my hero. That’s why I become a cop. Then I realized... there was a reason Bass Reeves hid his face, so I hid mine too... You can’t heal under a mask, Angela. Wounds need air. (“Episode 9: How They Fly”)

His advice articulates a portion of the solution to the trauma from which the storyworld erupts: take off the mask, return to the scene of the original trauma, master it, and heal. But this is not the end of the series, because the return to the Dreamland only addresses Will’s trauma, not the ones that have spread through generations and communities. The series still has to grapple with the insufficiency of the serial form in the completion of the psychoanalytic process of healing.

The act of bearing witness is an important step in remediating both personal and collective trauma, and to that end *Watchmen* pulls together the structural resonances between history, trauma, and narrative seriality under the rubric of witnessing, ultimately making a case about the urgency of re-forming narrative. Philosopher Kelly Oliver calls witnessing “a process of reinventing experience, of making experience what it is, through witnessing the structure of the logic of repetition driving the psyche, particularly the psyche of victimization, is transformed” (*Witnessing and Testimony* 93). In her account, the witness must see not only the survivor’s recollections of the traumatic injury, but also the “logic of repetition” that drives the ongoing replication of the trauma following the event itself.

According to Oliver, “witnessing has both the juridical connotations of seeing with one’s own eyes and the religious connotations of testifying to that which cannot be seen” (Oliver, “Witnessing, Recognition, and Response Ethics” 483). The double meaning of the term distinguishes witnessing from the formulation of “recognition” that feminist theorists such as

Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva use to describe the recognition of mutual vulnerability, which, as Oliver notes, preserves “the binary logic of liberal theory” that unevenly distributes vulnerability and its converse, autonomy, among different groups (478). “Recognition alone,” she claims, “is not enough. Along with knowing or seeing as, we need *pathos* or empathy to act on what we recognize” (481). Witnessing calls forth an “ethical responsibility to imagine life otherwise” (478). It advances a politics of spectatorship, of “seeing with one’s own eyes” a localizable historical event with the testimony of that which cannot be seen, and it is the only means by which “we can move beyond repetition of trauma,” to “reestablish subjectivity,” and “demand justice.” (Oliver, *Witnessing and Testimony* 92).

To illustrate her point, Oliver turns to Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman’s *Testimony*, which demonstrates the distinction between recognition and witnessing. A Holocaust survivor remembers an uprising in Auschwitz in which prisoners set fire to four chimneys. Her testimony was technically incorrect; historians had established that only one chimney had exploded. Where historians argued her testimony should be discounted because she had clearly misremembered the facts of the uprising, psychologists paid attention to something they regarded as more important: “the seemingly unimaginable occurrence of a Jewish resistance at Auschwitz” (Laub and Felman, 61-62). Taken together, these reflections on recognition and witnessing articulate the same entreaty *Watchmen* makes to its viewers: witness the trauma; witness its serialization through the lives of people, communities, and generations; witness also the resistance to its ongoing injustices; and then let the story end.

Thematized within the content of the series, the philosophical tensions between Doctor Manhattan and Angela work out a theory of ethical spectatorship that enacts Oliver’s configuration of witnessing. Where Doctor Manhattan’s powers enable him to watch and even

inhabit any given moment in time, his empathy fails to move him to intervene on behalf of the vulnerable. Angela, on the other hand, spends the bulk of the series engaged in detective work that reveals to her not just the man who murdered her police chief, but also the generational network of white supremacy and Black resistance that set the stage for his lynching.

Both Angela and Doctor Manhattan are children of collective white supremacist traumas—the Tulsa Massacre and the Jewish Holocaust, respectively. Despite these similarities, they carry diverging reactions to their inherited trauma. Angela, as with her estranged grandfather before her, attempts to correct the injustices she sees in the world around her; whereas Doctor Manhattan distances himself from the world that makes these injustices possible. Ultimately, however, she shows him the value of her perspective—the hope that inheres in the moments we inhabit as they flow through time and space. Just before Doctor Manhattan is captured and ultimately killed, he tells Angela: “This is the moment [...] I just told you that you can’t save me, and you’re going to try to anyway. In the bar the night we met, you asked me about the moment I fell in love with you. This is the moment” (“Episode 9: See How They Fly”). He recognizes within her character an orientation toward change which he has always lacked, even before his apotheosis—no matter the outcome, she will try.

Despite the warmth of Doctor Manhattan’s words, his delivery is dispassionate. Even the structure of his declaration of love typifies his impassive vision of the cyclicity of time and the cycles of his life, beginning and ending with the same statement: “This is the moment.” As Angela walks into the streets to fight for his life, he transfers his powers into the organic material of an egg. He does not yet tell her what he has done, but sprinkles their conversations with easter eggs (another pun) to lead her to discover his purpose. Because he dies before he sees her decision, he embraces the free will she represents to him. In so doing, he rejects the resignation

that has characterizes his attitude since his rebirth as Doctor Manhattan and gives her the power to choose her own fate.

Against Doctor Manhattan's static passivity towards the events he observes, Angela embodies the dynamic energy that the remediation of injustice demands. In the aftermath of Doctor Manhattan's death, the elderly Will Reeves, now united with his granddaughter, remarks: "He was a good man. I'm sorry he's gone. But considering what he could do... he could've done more." It's the final diegetic dialogue of the series, and it voices one of the series' concluding arguments: against the catastrophic weight of recurring violence and trauma, we should always strive to imagine otherwise. This is why it is important that Doctor Manhattan transfers his powers to Angela through the conduit of the egg, which Angela must break and eat. To become food, the walls of the egg must be broken, just as the many barriers that mask the traumatic injury need to be broken before the injury is healed.

The formal horizons of contemporary prestige seriality enable *Watchmen* to bear witness to the Tulsa massacre and amplify its testimony, yet the pattern of contemporary prestige seriality is to compulsively open crises that cannot or will not close. *Watchmen* ultimately insists that, if trauma is serialized, we need new methods of narrating trauma. The problem can't be solved by inserting the story into the existing structures we have for telling such stories; the problem is the way those stories are constructed in the first place. The event is a symptom of entrenched anti-Black racism embedded in the very founding of the nation. To do the story justice means to examine the roots of injustice for which the massacre is a symptom, and *Watchmen* locates these roots in the structures of storytelling and reception that prioritize certain kinds of stories while disadvantaging others.

Finally, we must witness our own participation in the perpetuation of a traumatizing form and enter into an awareness that to end the serial loop we must disengage from it. This is what Angela does and what she represents. But, unlike Doctor Manhattan, who disengages to watch, her mandate is to “do more.” Angela becomes our new Angel of History, and *Watchmen* enables us to witness this transformation while simultaneously disabusing us of the temptation to believe that mere spectatorship can solve the problems of history. In other words, to be a spectator is to be a perpetuator. To bear witness, is to recognize that the process of healing reaches toward resolution. *Watchmen*’s parting message to us is that its testimony is finished, and it is time to stop watching.

In the final scene of the series, Angela returns to her kitchen, where broken eggs cover the floor. As she begins to clean, she notices a single unbroken egg. A voiceover flashback returns us to her first meeting with Doctor Manhattan, when he creates an egg. Angela asks him whether his children would inherit his powers, and he says he would never let that happen without consent, adding: “I suppose I could transfer my atomic components into some sort of organic material. If someone were to consume it, they would inherit my powers.” To this, Angela asks: “So, you could put them in this egg, and if I ate it I could walk on water?” She remembers this conversation as she examines the egg, and suddenly understands the choice presented to her. She walks to the edge of her pool, cracks and consumes the egg, rolls up her pant legs, and takes a step toward the water. Before we see the result, the screen cuts to black, while a cover of The Beatles’ “I am the Walrus” plays. Its lyrics, “I am the egg man. We are the egg men,” drive the point home. We meet her with a close up of her hands and leave her with a close up of her feet, as she steps toward her fate. She will become the *Watchmen* universe’s new Angel of History, but with the injunction not just to observe, but also to break the cyclical repetition of history’s

traumas. Her celestial ascension to her role as the guardian of history is marked by change, nourishment, and, ultimately, hope.

CHAPTER 4: TEACHING TELEVISION SERIALITY

Why Teach Television?

A brief glance at television industry statistics underscores the scope of the medium's role in our lives. In 2021 alone, the number of series released across all U.S. broadcast and streaming platforms reached an all-time high of 559 shows.⁹⁵ Nor does that number account for the bulk of programming available for consumption, as networks reinforce their offerings with expansive back catalogues of second-run series. As of April 2022, American consumers have online access to more than 817 thousand unique programs.⁹⁶ Beyond these unique series, viewers can also watch films, news, and sports programming through their televisions, computers, tablets, or smartphones. The sheer volume of content available for on-demand consumption ensures that audiences can never run out of television to watch.

Although critics and cultural theorists of television have always asserted the medium's cultural dominance, technological convergence has only intensified TV's influence. In particular, the transition from analog to digital television, which prompted the spread of online streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, Paramount+, Disney+, Apple TV+, HBO Max, Amazon Prime Video, YouTube TV, and more, has popularized the activity of binge-watching, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as the "practice or activity of watching multiple episodes of a

⁹⁵ See Rick Porter, "Peak TV Update."

⁹⁶ See *Nielsen Media Research*, "State of Play."

television programme consecutively or in rapid succession.”⁹⁷ According to recent insights from the Nielsen ratings agency, video-on-demand (VOD) platforms currently pull almost 34 percent of all viewing time—an all-time high.⁹⁸

These staggering statistics speak to the reality of how much TV we really *do* watch.⁹⁹ Most Americans devote the majority of our leisure time to television, watching on average between three and a half to more than five hours of programming per day, which is more time than we devote to any other leisure activity.¹⁰⁰ These statistics hold across nearly all demographics, applying to 86 percent of the United States total population and accounting for differences across sex, age, employment status, income percentile, family make-up, and marital status.¹⁰¹ Putting these numbers in context, the Nielsen 2022 Annual Report boasts that “Americans streamed more than 15 million years’ worth of video content in 2021” (18). The United States, in other words, is indisputably a television nation.

Like the radio or the automobile, television has proven itself to be one of the great, foundational American industries. From its commercial expansion in the 1950s, the medium has provoked in equal measures the visionary dream of a united American public and standard technophobic anxieties about TV’s power over our habits and imaginations. More than anything

⁹⁷ Even though the history of binge-watching tracks back to the introduction of “time-shifting” technologies such as the VCR, DVD, and DVR in the 1980s and 1990s, the trend became so pronounced by 2015 that lexicographers at Collins English Dictionary named “binge-watch” their “word of the year.” See Alison Flood for more.

⁹⁸ See *Nielsen Media Research*, “Streaming claims more than one-third of total TV time in June and hits fourth straight monthly viewing record.”

⁹⁹ Americans spend more time with media than another other country, and the bulk of that time is devoted to television viewing. See “Media Use in the U.S. Statistics & Facts” for more information.

¹⁰⁰ See Richter’s “Peak TV Update,” *Statista*’s “Television in the United States” report and the *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*’ “American Time Use Survey News Release” for detailed statistical accounts.

¹⁰¹ See Eleanor Cummins, “5 graphs that reveal how Americans spend their free time,” and the *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*.

else, however, television has provided countless hours of entertainment for its viewers, who turn to it for comfort, pleasure, escape, distraction, education, and more. While it is theoretically possible to exist outside of television, few if any Americans do. And yet, despite its undeniable cultural, economic, and political power, television remains underrepresented in the academy. Considering television's outsized role in our daily lives, the paucity of instruction about its meanings and uses represents a critical oversight.

The fundamental issue this chapter addresses is how television, despite its ubiquity and cultural impact, remains drastically understudied in the American academy. The purpose of this chapter is thus threefold: first, it makes a case for the incorporation of television studies into university curricula; second, it addresses barriers to the adoption of such a curriculum; and finally, it provides resources to assist instructors in the creation of either a stand-alone television studies class or a television studies unit that can be incorporated into a film, media studies, or general education course.

Expanding the Curricular Canon

Undergraduate course catalogues tell a story about what our culture deems necessary or fit for study. The course catalogue for the English and Comparative Literature department at my institution, the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, offers classes in fiction, poetry, film, theory, and criticism organized by period, region, minority group, genre, or theme. This admittedly diverse range of offerings, now typical of many universities across the country, represents a clear and deliberate shift from prior eras in curriculum design. Where the canon once stressed British literary classics, it grew in the middle of the twentieth century to include film studies and, subsequently, in the twenty-first century, to include comics, digital media, and

more popular and minoritarian literatures.¹⁰² This curricular evolution invites analytical questions as to “what kind of thing literary study is supposed to be studying: texts or contexts, literature or history” (Martin 16). Now, we tend to study all of the above; however, medium-specific courses generally focus on either fiction or film (with some exceptions), and television, if it is taught at all, is introduced in the context of a comparative class, usually centering on shared identity categories or genres. This is despite television’s status as the dominant narrative medium of the past seven decades. That said, the gradual expansion of the curricular canon in literary and media studies opens up space for instructors to begin assigning texts they never before would have considered.

Curricular shifts in university-level liberal arts education have actually primed the field to pursue television studies curricula. Obviously, there are many good reasons why departments have prioritized courses in minoritarian literature and culture. While the purposes for including more courses in race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and disability are to acknowledge and bolster changing demographics, such courses also often elevate formerly subaltern texts to objects considered worthy of academic study. So, even though television shows are usually overlooked in the construction of a college course syllabus, the overall movement toward diversity in the types of texts we assign is a good thing for television studies. It’s true that canon revision does not necessarily make a commercial medium (such as television) teachable; as John Guillory argues, the first impulse visible in the pedagogy of the changing canon has rendered the academy “precisely not the site of mass cultural production and consumption” (8). In other words, the narratives that remain understudied are exactly those with which the majority of students spend the bulk of their free time. Instead, identity-based classes prioritize work-bound (i.e. non-

¹⁰² See Jeanne Dyches, “Critical Canon Pedagogy” for a discussion of the first generation of secondary education in the humanities and Martin, *Contemporary Drift*, for an analysis of courses on popular genres.

serialized) objects of special merit, which naturally excludes serial mass media like television. Still, broadening the canon reconfigures the values of liberal arts education, making it easier to not just expose students to texts that they *ought* to know, but also to help them parse the media they *already* know.

In its ideal form, a liberal arts education can help students learn to recognize and analyze media content. It helps them think about the ethics and social implications of the content they consume and create. It gives them access to the artistic output of humans from different times, places, and social groups. It develops their awareness of their own experiences vis a vis the books they read, films they watch, and so on. The humanities are therefore uniquely suited to address the role of television in contemporary life; however, most teaching and research about TV comes from fields outside the humanities.¹⁰³ Coursework in the humanities can and should work to supplement what the sciences and social sciences tell us about television with the aim of helping students develop critical skills to understand how, why, and what they watch.

Television Studies and Studies of Television

Television studies scholars Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz make a distinction between “television studies” and what they call “studies of television.”¹⁰⁴ The former refers to the subfield housed within the liberal arts that leverages the analytical methods of literary and media studies, and the latter refers to television research that takes place outside of humanities departments, in the sciences and social sciences. Television studies and studies of television rarely enter into conversation with one another, but doing so would undoubtedly enrich both

¹⁰³ See Theodore Martin’s book, *Contemporary Drift*.

¹⁰⁴ See Jonathan Lotz and Amanda Gray’s book, *Television Studies*.

approaches and likely increase collegiate instruction in the ubiquitous and culturally potent medium of television.

Studies of television help us understand the physiological, psychological, social, and political impacts of our viewing habits. With notable exceptions, these studies are generally pessimistic about the medium's role in our lives. Media psychology research, for instance, indicates that a majority of Americans identify as binge viewers, who report inability to stop watching television when they want. Additional studies compare binge-viewing to substance addiction inasmuch as it triggers dependence. Neuropsychological research confirms that television viewing activates neurochemical reward responses associated with addiction through the interplay of cortisol, dopamine, and oxytocin. Among its more deleterious effects, binge viewing has been found to correlate with: poor sleep quality and increased fatigue; higher levels of loneliness, anxiety, and depression; heightened feelings of aggression and paranoia; lower body image; deficits in social skills; cognitive deficits, which worsen with age; obesity; decreased cardiovascular fitness, elevated cholesterol, increased instances of heart disease; and even a higher risk of mortality from cancer.¹⁰⁵ From a sociocultural standpoint, research has also established that television has the power to generate or exacerbate social biases and dictate purchasing behavior.¹⁰⁶ Taken together, this prodigious body of research articulates an argument about television addiction as a public health crisis severe enough to compel immediate intervention.

This alarmism is not confined to scientific and social scientific studies of television. The discourse that frames binge watching as an issue of public health reflects and contributes to both

¹⁰⁵ See articles by W. Schultz., Vera Tobin, Alexander Ort et al., L. Exelmans et al., Guiseppe Forte et al., and Steve Sussman et al.

¹⁰⁶ See T.D. Hoang et al., Sarah Keedle et al., Exelmans et al., and Sussman et al.

public and academic anti-television cultural critique that has surrounded the medium since its introduction. Jerry Mander's 1978 book-length denunciation of television offers a typical set of concerns. In it, he blames television for the spread of cognitive and emotional deficits among the American public. The medium threatens, he claims, to render one's experience of nature "irrelevant," making people lose "the ability to feel it, tune into it, or care about" (16). In the work place, he perceives a trend in which "new muddiness of mind was developing. People's patterns of discernment, discrimination were taking a dive" (25). In a 1954 essay, Theodor Adorno calls television "a medium of undreamed of psychological control" (206) that aims "at producing or at least reproducing the very smugness, intellectual passivity, and gullibility that seems to fit in with totalitarian creeds" (222)—an argument David Foster Wallace rearticulates in the 1980s and 1990s as "malignantly addictive" (164) and a source of psychic poison.

A humanistic approach to this discourse enables us to appreciate the much deeper root of so many of these arguments, which have accompanied the introduction of not just new media, but also a new narrative form for print media—seriality. The serial form, to which most of this dissertation is dedicated, was a literary capitalist invention shaped around the bankability of fiction addiction. Designed first and foremost to sell periodicals, the serial fiction of the nineteenth-century is the earliest precursor of the television show, which makes the cultural critique of the phenomenon of literary seriality the progenitor of twentieth and twenty-first century anxiety about television. As early as 1844, Thomas Arnold delivered a sermon using the same rhetoric that invigorates subsequent critique, calling serials an enormous evil afflicted the "minds of young persons" who are threatened with losing their "appetite for intellectual exercise." Arnold's culprit for such dastardly evil is the self-same narrative form responsible for gluing people to their television screens in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: "an

abundance of the most stimulating and least nourishing food possible” in the guise of an addictive ongoing story. Here, the analytical techniques of literary historicism and rhetorical analysis allow us to see how scientific and social scientific “studies of television” bear a history substantially older than even the medium. This doesn’t necessarily undermine the studies’ findings; if we, however, place them in conversation with “television studies,” we can better understand the meanings, uses, and implications of both television and television critique.

While it is, in fact, undeniable that televisual seriality deploys a host of deliberate and statistically reliable tactics to engage and even addict its audiences, it is also important to mention that these attitudes tell only a partial story of what television is, does, and can do. Jason Mittell helpfully details the many pitfalls of a discourse of addiction with regards to television viewing. Among them, the TV-as-drug metaphor: “delimits the possible meanings of television within our culture” (217), participates in a “racialized and classed social identity of both drug use and heavy television watching” (233), and constructs television as “a scapegoat for social ills” (235). For one, emphasis on the negative impact of television viewing elides some of the benefits it supplies. For example, there is a smaller, but much more optimistic strain of social science research suggesting that TV viewing helps build beneficial coping strategies among people dealing with medical concerns or psychological pain.¹⁰⁷ It also provides opportunities for ongoing “parasocial” relationships involving unreciprocated intimacy with fictional characters and celebrities, which, although often considered maladaptive, can also prove beneficial.¹⁰⁸ Some researchers maintain that such one-sided interactions can assist introverted or socially

¹⁰⁷ See Lisa Perks, “Media Marathoning and Health Coping.”

¹⁰⁸ Sociologist Donald Horton and psychiatrist Richard Wohl first introduced the concept of the parasocial relationship in a 1956 coauthored paper entitled “Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction.”

anxious people in meeting interpersonal needs that they cannot access through normal social interaction.¹⁰⁹ Television also frequently acts as a social lubricant for individuals who identify as fans of the same series, and even generates entire communities organized around mutual fandom.

While attitudes are mixed, the body of research for television studies in the humanities, when taken together, suggests we take more nuanced approaches to the relative merits and perils of the medium. Lynn Spigel has drawn attention to the polarization of TV studies research, characterizing it in terms of utopianism and dystopianism (*Make Room for TV*, 3). To be fair, at the time of her writing, the peak era of prestige television had yet to elevate the medium to its loftier perch, so the discourse of which she writes mostly captures the tension between alarmists, such as Adorno and Wallace, and the Marxist utopians, such as those who worked within the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the 1970s. The writings of Birmingham School thinkers Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall shift the focus away from what television does to viewers and more toward how viewers can choose to interact with television. They identify within the mass medium's breadth and reach a surplus of potential meanings that offer opportunities for counterhegemonic viewing. These arguments are best exemplified through Stuart Hall's language of "encoding" and "decoding," in which the act of creating a TV show encodes a host of intentional and unintentional meanings, and the act of watching a TV show decodes, or makes sense, of that content.¹¹⁰ In Hall's analysis, the act of decoding is just as important as that of encoding. As opposed to many "studies of television," which abstract audiences into data points, these methods of cultural studies that run through "television studies" redirect the conversation toward emphasizing the experiences and choices of real humans. These

¹⁰⁹ See David C. Giles, "Parasocial Interaction," for a more recent review of the literature on parasocial relationships.

¹¹⁰ See Stuart Hall's essay, "Encoding, Decoding."

methods also plainly point us to the usefulness of television pedagogy: if we accept that meaning is created equally between the television and its watchers, then teaching people how to watch television through a critical lens becomes even more imperative.

Taken together, the polarized attitudes within television studies speak to the urgent need to train students in televisual media literacy because *television is constantly training them* in how to watch it and understand its stories. “At its most basic level,” argues Toby Miller, “television is a scientifically managed institution for the mass production of entertainment, a bureaucratically organized regime of pleasure [which is] designed to capture audiences and deliver them to advertisers” (189). Miller’s account of television is one in which the forces of science, business, and bureaucracy collaborate in the production of narratives designed precisely to compel us to consume them. The proliferation of complex television seriality in the twenty-first century only exacerbates TV’s demands upon its audiences. This paradigm of televisual storytelling requires audiences to keep track of expanding casts of characters, deeply convoluted narrative plotting, and often the subtlest details of mise-en-scene.¹¹¹ In the pedagogically intensive process of consuming contemporary complex TV, the television industries comes to rely on “procedural literacy,” which requires consumers to master the “underlying procedures” and the narrative “protocols” (Mittell, *Complex TV* 54) of each series’ expression of its narrative form. More often than not, procedural literacy requires audiences to build auxiliary research and networking skills—searching wikis; viewing featurettes, previouslies, and previews; reading recaps, essays, and interviews; participating in fan fora; and so on. Viewers are thus compelled to build *televisual serial literacy* in order to enjoy the most popular and acclaimed series available to them.

¹¹¹ See Mittell’s chapter “Orienting Paratexts” (261-291) in *Complex TV*.

In debates about whether television is hegemonic or counterhegemonic, prosocial or antisocial, harmful or beneficial, scholarship tends to omit one of the central reasons for its breadth of influence: people like it. Just as it would be remiss to disregard the television industry's more cynical, profit-driven tactics for engineering screen addiction, it would also be disingenuous to admit no merit in people's interactions with TV programming. The argument that television viewership is in itself a site of resistance may be overblown, especially when applied to the twenty-first century attention economy; still, there is undeniable value in enjoying entertainment objects, perhaps especially when a growing subset of prestige programs is increasingly revered as genuine artistic expression. At some level, it really doesn't matter whether television liberates or enslaves us because we will continue to consume it either way.

The purpose of this review of quantitative and qualitative assessments is neither to denigrate nor extol television. Instead, I hope to offer a series of questions, rather than answers, that proceed from an acknowledgement of television's role in American culture. Why not equip TV watchers with an awareness of this informal education? Why not help them build the critical skills and information to help them understand what, why, and how they watch. For these reasons and more, it neither makes sense nor serves us to leave television studies out of academic instruction. While I am not so naïve as to propose that the expansion of television studies pedagogy will solve the myriad problems associated with deeply entrenched liberal economic politics of either the contemporary university or the television industry, I will argue that such courses are a precondition for a more liberatory curriculum or, for that matter, a more critically engaged public. Although a medium-specific course would need to spend time with the longer history of television and possibly the serial form, I contend that the overarching focus of an introductory-level television studies curriculum should remain trained upon the types of series

students are most likely to consume, which is to say contemporary television. In such a class or a unit, students will be prompted to consider what kinds of stories can and cannot be told through a television series; how the economic structure of the industry shapes televisual content, narrative form, and viewer experience; what possibilities exist for how viewers interact with content; and what it means for the United States to be hooked on TV.

Overcoming Institutional Barriers

Despite television's impact on the lives of our students, there are several institutional obstacles that may make it difficult to integrate television studies into a course catalog, especially considering that most of the academic disciplines that could house TV studies have historically excluded the medium, or even defined themselves against it. In this section, I will discuss some of these obstacles, to provide information both about what instructors may encounter in attempting to institute a TV studies curriculum and how they might respond to these challenges.

Like most universities, my institution, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has no television studies department. To introduce a new standalone college-level television studies course, an instructor would have to follow a process involving anywhere from three to five rounds of approval, which would include, at minimum, the department chair, college or school administrators, and the registrar, and which may also involve student services managers and a curriculum committee. At each level, course proposals are evaluated for their ability to generate student interest across multiple disciplines, contribute to major and minor requirements, fit into existing course offerings, and avoid detracting from departmental needs for existing faculty course loads. A proposal for a television studies course fulfills some of these requisites

more readily than others. For example, it is easy to make a case for student interest in television studies, especially in light of the viewership statistics I offer above. Likewise, television studies' disciplinary hybridity, despite the challenges it poses, makes it impossible to ignore the subject's applicability not just in the humanities, but also fields like business, marketing, journalism, history, and other social sciences.

Despite substantial barriers toward the creation of new television studies courses, there are compelling arguments in favor of creating new courses in addition to methods for integrating television into course design for their other courses. Should faculty or graduate student instructors want to offer television studies within the existing curriculum, the easiest way to do so would be to fold a week or unit of instruction into general education, major, or elective courses. For some of the reasons I discuss below, very few instructors choose to do so, but this doesn't have to be the case. This chapter is designed to provide interested instructors with information and resources they can use to pitch, structure, and successfully teach television studies courses, or to structure a television studies unit for use within another course.

Academic Prioritization

The first barrier toward creating a new TV studies course unsurprisingly involves money. If a proposal meets all requisites for inclusion in the course catalogue, it still requires funding, and, as we know, the humanities are chronically underfunded. Over the past several years, universities across the country begun restructuring curricula to emphasize course offerings that concretely prepare students for the demands of the twenty-first century job market, which tends to prioritize the more lucrative STEM fields. Administrators often promote changes in humanities curricula under the euphemistic buzzword of "academic prioritization." This trend

toward academic prioritization reflects “a logic that paves the way for converting non-revenue-generating disciplines into service-oriented disciplines” (Dutt-Ballerstadt). Academic prioritization drives even greater budget cuts in the arts and humanities—a process that has only been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic downturn.¹¹²

The issues facing humanities funding are especially severe at public institutions, especially those in states with Republican-led legislatures such my own, where former North Carolina Governor Patrick McCrory has been recorded saying, “If you want to take gender studies, that’s fine. Go to a private school and take it. But I don’t want to subsidize that if that’s not going to get someone a job.”¹¹³ Nor are these attitudes limited to the South. Iowa State University, for example, recently announced \$15 million in budget cuts to be enacted by 2026, predominantly impacting the liberal arts, where television studies might most easily find its home. UNC and Iowa State’s cuts reflect broader trends at both public and private universities across the nation about how to manage budget shortfalls.¹¹⁴ In general, proposals for how to structure these cuts (by, for example, ending funding for already undercompensated graduate work) actually fail to offer meaningful budgetary differences. This is because the motivation for academic prioritization is not simply financial, but political.¹¹⁵ And the upshot for the humanities is that universities cutting graduate labor means tenured faculty, adjunct instructors, and other contingent faculty will have to teach more entry-level courses, thereby disincentivizing specialty

¹¹² See Anne Dennon, “Colleges Cut Liberal Arts Majors Due to COVID-19.”

¹¹³ See Mark Binker, “McCrory: Fund higher education based on results,” and John Hinton, “McCrory will push UNC system to teach its students job skills,” for reporting on McCrory’s remarks. See Kevin Kiley for a discussion about implications of these remarks for liberal arts education.

¹¹⁴ See Anne Dennon, Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt, the Best Accredited Colleges report, the College Art Association of America (CAA) report, and the Eastern Michigan University 2020-2021 Budget Cut Announcements.

¹¹⁵ See Kevin Kiley, Henry Giroux, and Dutt-Ballerstadt.

liberal arts courses such as television studies. Many academics have already forwarded convincing arguments for the need to protect the humanities, so I won't rearticulate them here. It is possible that the likelihood for high enrollment in television studies courses can supply departments a meaningful source of revenue to bolster their arguments against further cuts.

For those hoping to teach television content through an underfunded humanities department, this chapter suggests one of two strategies. The first strategy is to seek cross-listing with better-funded departments. The second, much simpler, strategy is to incorporate television studies into other coursework. For this approach, I include a set of curricular material, in the form of a five-week television studies unit, designed to help students complete their own video essays. These carry the benefit of introducing students to the most urgent literacies regarding media ethics. Although students won't be exposed to the depth and range of television's meanings and cultural impact, the unit can help them quickly reframe their relationship with the audiovisual media that consume so much of their attention.

Curricular Requirements and Teaching Assignments

Many universities even lack independent film studies departments—the most likely home for television studies courses. At UNC, the most likely way television studies courses might be offered is if they were folded into the recently introduced film studies concentration. The description of the concentration includes the claim that film studies courses should help students explore “relationships between film and other artistic forms, including literature, painting, photography, television, and digital video.”¹¹⁶ Most courses in the film studies concentration are housed with the Departments of English and Comparative Literature or Communications, and

¹¹⁶ See UNC's English and Comparative Literature Major, B.A. Requirements.

among these courses, only one course, “Introduction to Writing for Film and Television,” includes the term “television” in its title, and it focuses less on evaluating television content than on creating it.

Instructors wishing to teach standalone television studies courses may be expected to shoulder the department’s curricular burden for standard introductory film and literary studies courses, disincentivizing the incorporation of television studies content, or, at best, relegating it to one or two weeks of another syllabus. This can especially overburden professors who are needed to teach general education and major courses in addition to their existing research and service requirements. Tenured professors have more latitude to create and teach new courses, but the rewards of such an undertaking are likely to be insufficient unless they possess strong internal motivation to teach television. As Professor Timothy Havens has noted, his television studies courses at Indiana University amount to “a labor of love” (174) inasmuch as he can only offer such courses by assuming a teaching overload. Obviously, such an arrangement offers any number of roadblocks for television studies education, not least of which is the fact that early-career faculty, who are often the most tuned in to trends in television storytelling, criticism, and theory, are deprived of both the time and financial resources necessary to produce curricular materials from scratch. These issues will be especially exacerbated for instructors with extra-academic burdens like childcare, eldercare, medical or cognitive disabilities, or other such circumstances.

The materials I provide at the end of this chapter attempt to ameliorate some of these challenges for anyone interested in and positioned to be able to teach television studies. My fifteen-week course design is highly flexible, such that instructors could remix, replace, and rethink sections of the course. The five-week unit also includes all the work sheets and reference

materials necessary for an instructor to step in and teach it with little prior preparation. Ideally, these materials offer the flexibility for instructors either to tailor their courses according to their interests and aptitudes without having to devote as much time to course preparation.

Disciplinary Indeterminacy

Despite the ubiquity and cultural, economic, and political impact of television programming on contemporary life, television studies remains a niche field. As a result, each of the departments that could conceivably house a TV studies scholar are likely to prioritize other fields of study. The liberal arts subfield of television studies thus lacks the resources and faculty of other, more established fields, like film studies, or area specialties in literature, like Victorian or Romantic literature. Despite a brief moment in the first half the 2010s in which media studies and other humanities departments sought out television studies scholars, these jobs have become increasingly rare.¹¹⁷ “Now,” according to Jon Kraszewski, “jobs that mention the teaching of television often ask the candidate to have a hybrid identity and to teach television with a combination of other media—usually film or new media” (Kraszewski 167). Without television studies hires, it is understandably difficult for television studies, much less its associated curriculum, to thrive.

For departments that have been able to invest in a television studies hire, that instructor will probably be the only area specialist at their university. Without multiple dedicated television studies faculty, instructors will lose out on the opportunity to benefit from in-house curricular material, targeted professional development workshops, or informal collaboration with television studies colleagues. By way of example, Professor Timothy Havens laments that he is “the lone

¹¹⁷ See Jon Kraszewski, “Hybridity, History, and the Identity of the Television Studies Teacher.”

TV scholar in my department,” (173) whose “disciplinary isolation” (177) requires him to shoulder the burden of deciding what aspects of the field to privilege or exclude in his instruction and how to fold his pedagogical goals into students’ curricular requirements regarding different traditions in Media Studies.

Where Havens’ speaks of “disciplinary isolation,” others, such as Lynn Spigel, have used the term “disciplinary hybridity” to refer to television’s unique position in the academy. As Spigel notes: “Television studies in the humanities has always been a hybrid, interdisciplinary venture, drawing on fields of inquiry that often are at odds with one another” (8). Where, for example, psychosocial research into television emphasizes its (often deleterious) impact on viewers, fields like business, political science, and marketing foreground how different interests can capitalize on television’s considerable economic, sociopolitical, and cultural influence. Where journalism and media studies departments may seek to equip students with the ability to seek careers in television production, other humanistic approaches may attempt to expose students to methods for analyzing television programming from sociohistorical, media technological, aesthetic, narrative, and other perspectives.

These two expressions—of TV’s disciplinary “hybridity” or “isolation”—provide alternative interpretations of the selfsame disciplinary conditions, which I am calling TV’s *disciplinary indeterminacy*. Television studies finds its home in disciplines within which it only partially belongs or to which it can assimilate. Television studies content often piggybacks on other classes in media or literary studies or special topics. In such cases, courses generally lack the time to situate contemporary television in its larger context, meaning that such units must either center specific genres, periods, or platforms or else focus on the history industry, or technology of television. Each of the above approaches has its benefits and limitations, which I

will discuss in more detail in a section below. Television studies' disciplinary indeterminacy may also yield a potential "denigration of the field" (167) that "helps support the idea that anyone can teach television—even those with no background in the field" (168), possibly resulting in instruction that fails to acknowledge the full complexity of the medium and often the sophisticated artistry that goes in to constructing not just its messaging and marketability, but also its aesthetics. The materials I include attempt to obviate that issue by providing some scaffolding for teachers interested in approaching the topic of television in their courses.

Even though TV's disciplinary indeterminacy poses challenges, it also provides benefits. Principally, it helps courses meet several of the aforementioned criteria for a successful proposal by appealing to students from multiple disciplines and opening opportunities for cross-listing or collaboration with other departments. In other words, TV studies is as dynamic and flexible as television itself, possessing the capability to shape itself to the markets that open themselves up to it.

A "Bad Object"

For most of its history, TV has been considered low-brow. It is "a classic bad object, associated with commercialism, consumerism, lack of authenticity, and the destruction of both family life and traditional working-class communal values" (Brundson "Is Television Studies History?" 128). The rise of complex TV over the past two decades has troubled the boundary between high and low television programming. At first, complex TV baffled critics, who, astonished at the complexity and subtlety of *The Wire*, could only describe its narrative and

aesthetics as “novelistic.”¹¹⁸ Reaching outside of television toward literature and journalism, *The Wire* achieved sufficient status to enter the classroom, when universities like Duke, Middlebury, and Harvard began offering electives on the HBO series.¹¹⁹ As more complex programs followed suit, this type of series earned the appellation “prestige” or “quality” television—a rhetorical gesture that elevates certain programs above the majority of other series.

Even if television may no longer be such a “bad object,” the liberal arts retain relatively stable areas of specialty that prevent it from fitting into any clear disciplinary home. And where steadily increasing emphasis on cultural studies and digital media in the Humanities opens the range of academic or teachable objects, it often prioritizes intermedial, topic- or theory-based courses and/or newer media. Despite these barriers, contemporary complex television has done much to legitimize television as a subject worth teaching, and television studies’ disciplinary indeterminacy means that it can find purchase in a variety of departments.

Learning Outcomes

Television is a topic that urgently demands to be taught. Americans spend the more time watching television than consuming any other narrative medium; yet, it receives astonishingly little academic instruction in comparison to other media like literature, theater, film, and even comics. Television governs our habits, colonizes our imaginations, transforms our consumption into salable data points, and carries profound implications—both harmful or helpful—for our psychological, social, and physiological well-being. Through its serial form, it actively works to

¹¹⁸ See Caryn James and Noah Berlastky for comparisons between *The Wire* and Victorian novels. See Laura Miller and the *PopMatters* staff for counterarguments. See Babette Tischleder for a more nuanced critical treatment of this phenomenon.

¹¹⁹ See Drake Bennett, “This Will Be on the Midterm. You Feel Me? Why so many colleges are teaching *The Wire*.”

stoke addiction within its viewers. It can arguably act as a site of either indoctrination or resistance. With the rise of the platform wars, it costs viewers increasing amounts of money in subscription fees across increasing numbers of services. And, in the absence of critical television studies pedagogy, it teaches us how it wants us to watch it. Encouraging more widespread television literacy gives us an opportunity to ameliorate some of the social concerns and representational problems to which television exposes the American public while simultaneously permitting people to continue to enjoy it. Taken together, these reasons compel more widespread academic attention to television studies. Finally, from a pedagogical perspective, television studies also offers a number of pedagogical opportunities to meet valuable learning outcomes.

Relevance to Students

From an institutional perspective, the clearest and most obvious benefit of incorporating television studies in the undergraduate curriculum is that it will ensure bodies in seats. From an instructional perspective, the subject of television gives teachers a potent site for meeting students where their interests already lie. Put simply, television matters to students, and they will likely to come to class eager to engage in both informal and critical discussion about the range of TV shows they have heard about or seen.

An abundance of educational research has established that student motivation is a crucial prerequisite to academic success.¹²⁰ The “MUSIC” model of academic motivation, which stands for empowerment, usefulness, success, interest, and caring, identifies student “interest” as one of its five key components (Jones 272). Tapping into student interest also cultivates what Carol

¹²⁰ The “MUSIC” model of academic motivation identifies student “interest” as one of its five key components. MUSIC is an acronym developed by Brett D. Jones, which stands for empowerment, usefulness, success, interest, and caring. See Jones, “Motivating Students to Engage in learning: The MUSIC Model of Academic Motivation.”

Dweck calls “growth mindset beliefs,” which stand in opposition to “fixed mindsets.” According to Dweck, people with fixed mindsets tend to avoid challenges, give up easily, undervalue their effort, ignore constructive feedback, and feel intimidated by the success of others; whereas people with growth mindsets embrace challenges, persist through difficulties, value their effort, learn from feedback, and find inspiration in the successes of others (Dweck 246). The ideal role of educators within this model is to encourage growth mindsets, which support deeper learning and better performance. Yonti Friesem has also established that, when used in educational contexts, social media and television only give students “tools to analyze media messages and reflect on their effects” if they can “emotionally be present and motivated to do it” (*The Routledge Handbook*, 516). When classes cover issues that already tap into students’ internal concerns, students are more likely to spend more time on their projects, pay better attention to classwork and homework, build deeper compositional and media literacies, thoughtfully engage in online civic discourse, and simply enjoy their work.¹²¹

Television studies curricula also support learning goals for students from diverse backgrounds. It is well established that members of certain marginalized demographics are less likely to attend college and that, among members of those groups who do, are less likely to graduate.¹²² Often, first year writing and other introductory courses act as gatekeeping classes, but they can also become “gateways” (Yancey 306). TV studies gives students the ability to think and write about what is already meaningful to them, inviting rather than challenging them

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² As of September 2022, for example, Black students have a five-year graduation rate of 40.5 percent; Latinx students have a five-year graduation rate of 41.5 percent; Native American students have a five-year graduation rate of 39.3 percent; and multiracial students have a graduation rate of 50.4 percent. See Imed Bouchrika, “Number of College Graduates: 2023 Race, Gender, & State Statistics.” See also the National Center for Education Statistics for more detailed breakdowns. Finally, see Ruth Samuel, “UNC-Chapel Hill has a problem retaining Black male students,” for a profile of an article discussing this issue at my university.

to stay enrolled. Assignments that lend themselves to TV studies (such as the video essay, which I discuss in more detail below) also permit students to compose using linguistic and aesthetic conventions that are more familiar and relevant to their interests and behaviors. The popularity of television across every demographic, along with the possibility to give students assignments that tap into their personal experiences, equips instructors with an in-built framework for eliciting and sustaining student interest, helping students of any background to engage meaningfully in collaborative class discussions and their own individual work.

Multimedia Composition

Just as digital technologies have transformed how television is created, distributed, and received, they have also enabled media scholars to begin composing critical material using some of the same audiovisual production techniques that constitute their objects of study. These new critical genres reconfigure traditional rhetorical modes of academic critique and reflect four declarations offered by Elizabeth Daley, dean of the University of Southern California School of Television & Cinema:

1. The multimedia language of the screen has become the current vernacular.
2. The multimedia language of the screen is capable of constructing complex meanings independent of text.
2. The multimedia language of the screen enables modes of thought, ways of communicating and conducting research, and methods of publication and teaching that are essentially different from those of text.
2. Lastly, following from the previous three arguments, those who are truly literate in the twenty-first century will be those who learn to both read and write the multimedia language of the screen. (33-34)

My course and unit designs align with Daley's arguments in that they both propose video essay assignments in which students articulate arguments about the audiovisual medium of television through the audiovisual medium of video. This mode encourages students to shape their

arguments around the affordances and limitations of audiovisual communication in ways that prior courses have not, while simultaneously responding to guidelines from the Modern Language Association recognizing how “humanists are adopting new technologies and creating new critical and literary forms and interventions in scholarly communication.”¹²³

Video essays are a “real-world genre” that people can access through video-sharing platforms like YouTube, Vimeo, and others. As such, they participate in what Kathleen Blake Yancey calls “newly imagined communities,” in which members have learned “to write, to think together, to organize, and to act within these forums—largely without instruction and, more to the point here, largely without *our* instruction” (301). Her final emphasis on the paucity of formal instruction in these genres points equally toward: the self-organization and self-education of these literacies, which carry within them all the promises and dangers of digital communication; and the opportunity for college instructors to offer meaningful guidance to support those promises and minimize those dangers.

Because public-facing genres like the video essay exist in the “real world,” they provide useful templates to guide students in producing their own multimedia content while also tying into the learning outcome of supporting student motivation and authenticity in the communication of original research and analysis. We often ask students to complete writing assignments unrelated to their post-baccalaureate lives, and, as instructors, we tend to be their sole audience. But, within the very origin of the word *communicate* is its etymological root in the Latin *communis*: communication, in its natural form, requires community, circulation, meanings held in *common*. As Yancey says: “Texts circulate: they move across contexts, between media, across time. Writers compose in the context of other writers and thinkers and speakers” (312).

¹²³ See the MLA’s “Guidelines for Evaluating Work in Digital Humanities and Digital Media.”

Asking students not just to write only to us, but to practice writing as though it only has one reader, sterilizes the communicative process and risks devaluing writers' perceptions of the labor involved in composing their texts. At the end of the semesters, students will upload videos to private YouTube playlists, but those who choose may even upload their videos to public fora, giving them the opportunity to not just mimic the creators of similar projects but actually enter the conversation.

While there is obviously great value in more traditional writing assignments for practicing communication skills and developing critical thought, it is my contention that the video essay retains the value of the analytical essay while demonstrating how students may apply academic skills outside of their academic work. Students will build auxiliary competencies in conducting primary and secondary research among both traditional and alternative spaces of media research, performing close-reading, practicing oral delivery, navigating issues of intellectual property, exercising their creative and artistic skills; and building other core competencies. Adapting the old maxim, "writing about music is like dancing about architecture," video essays address the innate challenges associated with textual interpretation of audiovisual content by allowing them to interpret audiovisual content in an audiovisual medium.

Serial Literacy

Of particular pertinence to my doctoral work on the serial form, television represents the clearest avenue into an understanding of seriality, which has become the predominant form of narrative expression in contemporary life. Widely recognized as inextricable from the processes of capitalist modes of production, seriality implicates *audiences as consumers*. Seriality is distinct among narrative forms in that it is uniquely open-ended. Whereas comparatively slow

publication cycles for work-bound texts necessarily position them outside the daily, weekly, or monthly rhythms of life, ongoing series differentiate themselves by being able to respond to both seasonal and unexpected events, such as popular holidays and natural disasters. Meanwhile, immediate feedback by means of quantitative sales data and qualitative fan response trains serial publications to shape content and formal characteristics to consumer desires. By studying the economic applications of seriality, students will gain a better understanding of how television packages their consumption behaviors as products that networks and production studios sell to advertisers and subscription services. They will learn about the role of algorithm in taste-making and the way television and its interactions with other media manufacture hegemony, while simultaneously identifying methods for becoming more responsible consumers and creators. In other words, critical classroom engagement with television in the manner I suggest provides a crucial point of access for students to begin understanding media artifacts as sites in which the multidirectional relationships between economics, sociopolitics, media production, and media consumption merge.

From the perspective of humanistic inquiry, television provides a site through which students can build analytical skills concerning serial storytelling, popular genres, visual communication, media ecology, and more. By using a contemporary mass medium to access these topics, television studies instruction is able to connect the aims of courses in the liberal arts to the aims of civic engagement, which most current research in the field of media literacy prioritizes. Television studies elicits challenging prompts by which students can be invited to think about and interact with cultural and political events and economic trends. Although analysis of TV news might provide the most obvious avenue into such discussions, engagement with the history of popular seriality and of the television medium also helps demonstrate the

facility with which both scripted and “reality” programs can interact with external events, often as they unfold.

Media Literacy

Media literacy is arguably the most valuable learning outcome teaching television studies offers, and it encompasses the learning outcomes I’ve already described. Media literacy refers to “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and communicate using a variety of objective forms, including, but not limited to, print, visual, audio, interactive, and digital texts.”¹²⁴ These skills have become especially crucial in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, in which it has been established that a broad-ranging group of Russian citizens and political actors worked together on a variety of tactics designed to undermine the American election system. Among their strategies, one of the most notorious involved spreading propaganda on social media networks.¹²⁵ The success of this campaign taps into issues surrounding our near constant exposure to media content, as exacerbated by social networking—a fact leading to the *Oxford English Dictionary* naming “post-truth” as its 2016 word of the year.¹²⁶ Since 2016, researchers have identified an epidemic of so-called “fake news” in both official mainstream and social media outlets.¹²⁷ Often, these stories are also encoded or rearticulated in popular television series.

¹²⁴ This text is taken from the Illinois Public Act 102-0055, cited in “Our Media Literacy Framework” from the *Illinois Media Literacy Coalition*.

¹²⁵ See Abigail Abrams, “Here’s What We Know So Far About Russia’s 2016 Meddling.”

¹²⁶ See Katy Steinmetz, “Oxford’s Word of the Year for 2016 is ‘Post-Truth.’”

¹²⁷ See E.S. Herman, “Fake News on Russia and Other Official Enemies.”

As a pedagogical objective, media literacy will receive increasing priority in the future. In fall 2022, for example, an Illinois law went into effect that requires public high schools to institute a media literacy curriculum. The purpose behind this law is to help students ask and answer questions about who makes media content, how they do it, how it affects them and the world around them, and what their own roles in media engagement may be. According to Yonty Friesem, a civic media professor and one of the bill's coauthors, such curricula help students learn how to: assess the trustworthiness of media content; analyze or deconstruct media representations; convey coherent messages while creating media; assess the impact of media on oneself and others; and adopt socially responsible civic behaviors.¹²⁸ Importantly, the objectives of such curricula require several techniques that my proposed television studies coursework supports: 1) it taps into preexisting interest in television; 2) it motivates students to grapple with the meanings embedded in the content they consume; 3) it contextualize the cultural and economic conditions that give rise to such meanings; 4) it underscores the role of the interpreter in the impact of media content; 5) through assigning a multi-modal project, it teaches students about how medium, form, and platform impact content; and 6) it empowers students to become more conscious creators and consumers of media.

Course and Unit Planning

Once we overcome the institutional barriers to teaching television, we face the practical issues concerning the fact that television is hard to teach. In the first place, beyond its related institutional barriers, television's disciplinary indeterminacy makes it difficult to identify any unified approach to such an ample, diverse, and dynamic content area. Secondly, the fact that

¹²⁸ See Yonty Friesem's *NPR* interview by Rachel Martin, "Illinois now requires media literacy instruction in its high school curriculum."

television programming is by nature serial, and seriality is by nature long and open-ended, makes it difficult to assign television series in their entirety. And, moreover, even should a course be able to assign a series in its entirety, the breadth of types of serial narratives is so vast that a single semester could hardly scratch the surface. Any holistic attempt to teach television would require an entire department devoted to different periods, genres, reception practices, and formats, and even that would certainly fall short of representing the array of TV's uses and meanings. Finally, there are issues of how to assess student learning outcomes, given so few existing non-expert compositional genres devoted to television analysis. In the section below, I will detail each of these barriers and suggest solutions for how instructors may address them.

Choosing an Approach

Timothy Havens' article on creating the "lone television studies seminar" at his university offers a useful case study in how tricky it can be to structure a course about television. His journey toward solidifying his approach has been one of trial and error. As he explains, one might choose to "structure a course around distinctive theoretical perspectives" (173); however, in the course of trying this approach, Havens found that "throughout the course it was clear that students were just as interested (perhaps even more) in the practice of television criticism" (174) and tended to produce textual analyses for their final papers, thus overlooking the "distinctiveness of television theory" (174) in favor of exercising analytical training they acquired from courses in other media. His second approach targets television criticism, partially to counter a relative paucity of quality television criticism in the academy, which, for him, resulted in more disciplinarily relevant student work, but only at the cost of decreasing coverage of important strains in television theory. His third and final approach for an "ideal" seminar

“tries to identify important theoretical and conceptual questions in broadcast-era Television Studies [...] and traces their applicability in an era of all-digital, high-definition home theaters and the digital circulation of televisual clips” (176). Despite notable challenges to such a strategy, especially in finding current readings to directly engage these topics, this type of course offers the benefit of exposing students to the tradition of theoretical and critical approaches toward television across the history and breadth of televisual storytelling.¹²⁹

I will venture to add two additional approaches to Haven’s initial catalogue. First, an undergraduate course on television might center analytical approaches to specific television programs, the way a course on literature or film might. Scholars have noted a dearth of this kind of textual criticism of television, which of course contributes, if only partially, to why so few of the instructors who teach television examine specific series beyond selections of illustrative episodes, which they use to elucidate cultural, theoretical, or critical topics.¹³⁰ Second, a syllabus may focus on one era (e.g. TV’s Golden Age), format (e.g. Satellite TV), or television genres (e.g. Westerns). Given the range of potential approaches, along with a current paucity of applicable pedagogical material, the task of putting together a course is understandably daunting.

Choosing an approach for the materials I compile at the end this chapter was perhaps my most difficult challenge. Should I cover global concepts like the history, technology, or industry practices of television? Or should I emphasize close analysis, as many film and literature courses do? Perhaps I should cover the major theoretical or sociocultural responses to television, or instead help students think about how they themselves participate in television culture.

¹²⁹ Timothy Haven also articulates his desire for a central website whereby instructors could crowd-source materials and students pursuing television studies could sign up for courses offered at other universities (176). This resource has yet to exist, but my hope is that this chapter might eventually contribute to such an undertaking.

¹³⁰ See Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell, *How to Watch Television*.

Ultimately, I settled on a combination of these tactics, prioritizing media literacy skills over niche content areas (see fig. 2). My design for a five-week video essay unit lets students select from a menu of approaches to support their own self-guided primary and secondary research.

Figure 2: Organizational Schema for a Standalone Course

Approach	Key Benefit	Possible Barriers
Theoretical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> addresses the histories of television, cultural studies, and media ecology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> fails to address demand for better critical work in television studies poses high barrier to entry
Critical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> prepares students for academic publication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> relies on a small and often non-rigorous body of scholarship may require instructors to tailor their viewings around existing scholarship, rather than instructor or student interest
Analytical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> develops media literacy skills with few barriers to entry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> may lack academic rigor for upper level students risks deprioritizing medium specificity
Historical Period	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> permits greater depth and focus regarding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sacrifices breadth for depth de-emphasizes longer-term evolution of TV technology, storytelling mechanics, and visual style
Genre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> supports comparative media studies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> risks deprioritizing medium specificity sacrifices breadth for depth
Narratological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> addresses seriality, the most dominant narrative form across commercial media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> requires significant abstractions, as the serial form makes it impossible to observe many objects in their entirety over the course of a single semester
Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> enables instructors to pick and choose key elements from each of the above organizational strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> lacks in-built organizational focus requires more up-front labor in course planning

Assigning Viewings

The most obvious practical problem for instructors has to do with the basic problem of seriality itself. The overwhelming majority of televised programming is serialized, and it is the nature of seriality to accumulate staggering amounts of narrative content. Most series cannot be assigned in their entirety. This issue is most easily addressed for anyone organizing their television studies curriculum around television that emerged before the digital revolution of the twenty-first century, as these series were almost always either mostly episodic in nature, following formulae organized around sets of relatively static, recognizable characters and settings (as in sitcoms like *I Love Lucy* or 30-minute adventure dramas like *The Lone Ranger*), or involving the slowly plotted multi-episodic arcs of daytime soap operas, which relied on highly repetitious dialogue to cater to distracted viewers. Contemporary TV, however, tends to rely on longer, multi-episodic serial arcs and therefore resists a five- or fifteen-week semester structure, as students can hardly be expected to watch months- or years-worth of content of even a single program, much less multiple series, over the course of a single semester.

Instructors may choose to manage this issue in five basic ways: first, they might screen pilot episodes, which focus on establishing key characters, settings, and themes; second, they might screen representative episodes to illustrate certain themes, topics, or perspectives on form, genre, or aesthetics; third, they might structure an entire course around a single series, which students will watch slowly over the course of the semester, as has been done with *The Wire* and other seminal television shows of the early convergence era; fourth, they might choose to devote one to three weeks to limited series and/or single seasons of multiple series, which may help them more closely mimic the viewing load associated with standard film courses; finally, they may choose a mixed model, combining any of these approaches.

Figure 3: Approaches to Viewing Assignments

Episode Selection	Benefits	Limitations
Pilot Episode	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no barriers to entry • fits easily into a syllabus • establishes key characters, settings, and themes • outlines the rules of the storyworld 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • makes it more difficult to discuss the impact of the serial form on TV storytelling
Special Episodes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can often be viewed without much knowledge about the events of the series as a whole • fits easily into a syllabus • often experiments with genre • usually emphasizes chosen themes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • makes it more difficult to discuss the impact of the serial form on TV storytelling
Key Episodes Illustrating Pertinent Course Theme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fits easily into a syllabus • offers flexibility to instructor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • makes it more difficult to discuss the impact of the serial form on TV storytelling
Entire Limited Series	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • enables students to discuss a serialized narrative in its entirety • can be completed in one to two weeks • permits students to consider issues of aesthetics, theme, and form 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • requires at least two weeks of course time
Single Season of Multi-Season Series	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • permits students to consider issues of aesthetics, theme, and form • especially when paired with limited series, offers students the ability compare expressions of television seriality between ongoing and limited series 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • requires at least two weeks of course time
Multiple Seasons of a Multi-Season Series	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • permits students to consider issues of aesthetics, theme, and the serial form to a much greater degree • is the only option that enables classroom analysis of a shared series regarding the impact of contemporary seriality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • entails focusing an entire course on a single television series • sacrifices depth for breadth

Each of the above methods (fig. 3) carries benefits and limitations. Obviously, the more series a course assigns, the more coverage students will receive regarding the staggering variety of programming available for consumption. The problems of using exemplary episodes of many series, however, are multiple. First, there are practical issues stemming from the fact that contemporary televisual seriality produces a substantial subset of television shows that resist legibility for casual or one-off viewing experiences. An instructor may address this problem by assigning pilot episodes, which, to secure network funding, need to “introduce fresh characters in a new setting; establish the show’s time frame, narrative style, themes, and dramatic structure; tell a compelling story; and show proof that the series has legs (i.e., the potential to run for many—perhaps eighty or more—episodes)” (Smith, 58). Prioritizing series pilots works better for some series than others. For example, many contemporary shows are incentivized by attentive and prolific fan communities to structure their seasons around plot twists, meaning that the early parts of a season may be largely devoted to setting up premises that will later be complicated or undermined. Thus, even they cannot represent a series or even a season in its entirety. Focusing a syllabus around pilot episodes may also, and perhaps unwittingly, produce a course that assumes a pedagogical approach to television seriality that deprioritizes many of the nuances of television form dictated by either subscription to or defiance of the economic motivation for a series to be able to continue *ad infinitum*.

From the opposite angle, centering a course around a single series offers a number of benefits, especially to instructors hoping to prioritize close reading skills. It can also provide a useful avenue into discussing the ins and outs of television as an industry, the cultural conditions and impacts of television’s representations, and the collaborative creative dimensions of texts that emerge from the combined efforts of not just showrunners and producers, but also directors,

staff writers, cast members, cinematographers, editors, title sequence artists, special effects teams, sound and set designers, and other crew members.¹³¹ In the past, professors at schools like Harvard, Berkeley, Duke, Middlebury, and others have famously offered such courses on prestige series such as *The Wire* and *Game of Thrones*.¹³² One of the major drawbacks of organizing a course in this manner involves the fact that one can hardly argue that a single-series course offers much coverage concerning the varied and dynamic medium of television. Standalone single-series courses are unlikely to provide much help for general curricula. For ongoing series, the class may also quickly mark its own obsolescence, especially if, as the series continues, it falls out of critical favor, as was especially the case as *Game of Thrones* as it neared its disappointing finale. This approach, however, proves incredibly useful in organizing a single unit within a non-television-centric class.

The third approach, focus on individual seasons of either ongoing or limited series for one to three weeks at a time, is in some ways the most practical, given how it strikes a balance between depth and breadth. This tactic maintains the same issue of being unable to provide a tangible object for analyzing the full implications of serial open-endedness. In recent years, the creative consequences of serial open-endedness have also become increasingly obvious even to casual viewers, and the disappointment expressed by fans concerning what often feels like the inevitable decline of the quality of long-running television series over time has been well documented by media journalists and even showrunners.¹³³ At least one data scientist has even

¹³¹ Title sequences in particular are often overlooked in television criticism. See Kaeley Boyle for an assortment of examples of many of the most famous title sequences in television.

¹³² See articles by Laura Bradley, Drake Bennett, Amanda Bell, and JoAnn DeLeau for more discussions of this phenomenon.

¹³³ See Damon Lindelof, Daniel D’Addario, Amy Armsden, Shyla Watson, Logan Rapp, and the staff of *The Playlist* for just a small sampling of criticism on the tendency for ongoing prestige series to decline in quality.

quantified this phenomenon.¹³⁴ Truthfully, there is no good way to address such a feature of television seriality within a single semester, so a course focusing on individual seasons might broach these topics through theoretical and critical readings.

Most existing standalone television studies courses, at least the ones for which I could locate publicly-available syllabuses, tend to be organized around genres or theoretical concepts, using representative episodes each week to demonstrate those concepts. Some adopt a mixed approach, either threading episodes from entire seasons of one or two series through the semester alongside one-off episodes from other series, or else devoting one or two units to theory, history, or criticism, and at least one unit to go into more depth concerning specific series.

Figure 4: Possible Viewing Assignments by Course Type

Viewing Assignment	15-Week Television Studies Course	1-5 Week Unit in Film or Media Studies Course	5-Week Unit in General Education Course
Selected Episodes	yes	yes	yes
Limited Series	yes	yes	maybe
Single Seasons of Completed or Ongoing Series	yes	yes	maybe
Completed Series	maybe	no	no
Ongoing Series	maybe	no	no

In designing my own course materials for the purpose of this chapter, I experimented with most of the above formats, eventually settling on a mixed model. In an attempt to make my selections optimally useful, I focused on using series that theorize their own medium and form—two of which, *Westworld* and *Watchmen*, I use as case studies in the second and third chapters of this dissertation. *Westworld* proves particularly helpful in thinking about the position of the

¹³⁴ See Amanda Moreno, “Are series getting worse over time?”

contemporary complex television series vis a vis other narrative media, including but not limited to other TV series. The HBO limited series, *Watchmen*, itself a sequel of an earlier comic book series, likewise theorizes the cultural impact of popular seriality, specifically in visual media like comics, film, and television. *Watchmen* is notable for the showrunner's emphatic refusal to produce the show as an ongoing series, which makes it an ideal series for discussing the consequences of open-ended audiovisual storytelling without having to manage the pedagogical difficulty of teaching such an unruly object. Other series my syllabus foregrounds, including *Fleabag*, *Dear White People*, *30 Rock*, and *UnREAL*, each offer commentaries on their own genres, media, and forms. *Fleabag* is useful in thinking about narration, *Dear White People* on race, class, and gender representations, *30 Rock* on the marriage between business and creative interests in television programming, and *UnREAL* on both reality television and complex melodrama. In addition to these series, my course includes a single episode ("San Junipero") from the anthology series *Black Mirror*, itself a detailed technophobic account of digital convergence, and *F-Boy Island*, an irreverently self-referential reality television series about dating, in which cast members, apparently unironically, begin referring to themselves as characters whose lives proceed according to seasons. Although I have organized the course schedule into a fifteen-week sequence, it can also easily be reconfigured, especially in the third unit, which highlights specific genres and subgenres of contemporary television. For example, one could easily substitute a week on police procedurals, or "copaganda," in place of a week on reality television.¹³⁵ The weekly breakdown also offers a menu, from which instructors who can only devote one to two weeks to television studies can select a pre-prepared set of viewing and

¹³⁵ See Skip Intro's excellent video essay series, entitled "Copaganda," which analyzes a variety of police procedurals from throughout television history.

reading assignments. This syllabus is therefore highly customizable according to ever-evolving interests of instructors and students alike.

My video essay unit, which is designed to fit into special topic or general education courses, attempts to address the above challenges by adopting a fifth, and more unconventional, approach. This unit asks students to produce critical content on any television series they choose. Each student is likely to use a different series as an interpretive object, so instruction depends more on secondary critical sources. To model different methods of television critique, instruction requires students to watch one or two episodes of the same series at the beginning of the course, so that they can practice several methods of interpretation with the instructor before attempting to complete their own video essay. Each class day, they will also be required to have selected, watched, and reported upon existing video essays about television, which they will use as models to guide their own analysis. While this tactic may appear to downplay the role of the instructor in guiding students toward responsible critique, assignments are structured through several steps such that students complete and receive feedback on their thoughts (from their peers and/or their instructor) at least twice a week. By the end of the unit, they will have developed a specific subset of interpretive skills according to their own self-driven interests and about their own choice of television series. See Appendices 1-3 for relevant teaching materials.

CODA: ITS CONTINUING MISSION

Space, the final frontier. These are the voyages of the Starship *Enterprise*. Its continuing mission: to explore strange new worlds; to seek out new life and new civilizations; to boldly go where no one has gone before.”

—*Star Trek: The Next Generation*

Series are better at beginning than ending. This is what distinguishes seriality from other narrative forms: rather than driving toward conclusions, it reaches for the infinite, ever expanding, experimenting, and adapting. Several years ago, I made an observation that, while it never made it to the body of my dissertation, nonetheless inspired my interest in the evolution of television seriality in the twenty-first century. What I noticed was that the *Star Trek* franchise, despite its enormous impact and output, appeared to have finally reached a limit to its “final frontier.” That is, the *Star Trek* timeline had stalled out somewhere around the year 2379, in a film that began development in November 2001 and came out in December 2002. That film, *Star Trek: Nemesis*, is the final installment of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (TNG). It takes place one year after Captain Kathryn Janeway, of *Star Trek: Voyager*, flies her ship into the symbolic and operational center of an enemy alien species—an eerie anticipation of the September 11 attacks, which would occur only four months after that episode’s airing. For nearly two decades following the finales of the *Voyager* and TNG, new *Star Trek* productions ceased to imagine the future of its Federation of Planets, instead returning to the origins of the storyworld through prequels and reboots.

I became fascinated with *Star Trek*'s "continuing mission." The famous narrative preamble is predicated upon newness—"new worlds," "new life," and "new civilizations." In interviews, *Star Trek* creator, Gene Roddenbury, confirms that investment in perpetual futurity, calling *Star Trek: The Original Series* a show that "speaks to some basic human needs: that there is a tomorrow; it's not all going to be over with a big flash and a bomb; that the human race is improving; that we have things to be proud of as humans."¹³⁶ It seemed to me that *Star Trek*'s foundational premise relied on a specific relationship to temporal progress. Roddenbury's dream is inherently serial—a vision of a future to which we might strive in increments. And, like seriality itself, *Star Trek*'s first thirty-five years was characterized by its mission to continue: not just to continue sending humans to explore the outer reaches of the galaxy; but also to ensure the continuing production of *Star Trek* properties.

Over the course of writing this dissertation, I came to appreciate narrative seriality as its own serialized object. The twenty-year pause in the *Star Trek* timeline didn't foreclose its temporal frontiers so much as redefine them. *Nemesis* and the finale of *Voyager* emerged at the threshold of a new paradigm of complex serial storytelling. *Star Trek*'s initially episodic seriality had allowed the franchise to obscure the consequences of Starfleet's benevolent imperial project. The starship crew could depose a dictatorial regime and leave without having to witness the violent fallout, or, for that matter, having to grapple with its own violent provenance. Among its many characteristics, the complex seriality of the Convergence Era tracks chains of causality—the sources, progressions, and repercussions of narrative events. Foregrounding narrative detail, it ceases to accommodate the elisions and abstractions central to utopian speculation. In attempting to negotiate this transition, the *Star Trek* franchise developed a nascent metaserial

¹³⁶ See Gene Roddenbury's interview on *Dailymotion.com* for more.

awareness that its mission could only continue once it revisited its timeline to reconstitute its origin story. Through reboots and prequels, the franchise prepared itself for a future that could make sense against the complexities of the present era. And, in 2020, as I was writing this dissertation, *Star Trek: Picard*, set twenty years following the conclusion of *Nemesis*, premiered, and the third season of the prequel *Star Trek: Discovery* launched its crew 900 years into the future. Once again, its mission continues.

While I save a deeper analysis of the *Star Trek* franchise's extensive series of series for another project, it nevertheless underwrites much of the content and ethos of this dissertation. In excavating the foundations and tracking the developments of the serial form through the past two centuries, I have witnessed the ways in which serial expressions coevolve with the politico-economic structures of capitalism, and how the narrative schematics of fictional worlds interact with the modes of production and ideological superstructures of our own world. I have also seen genuine efforts emerging from within the capitalist logics of seriality to explore counterhegemonic possibilities for cultural production—affirmative modes of serial storytelling that work within and against their own commercial investments. What the complex seriality of the twenty-first century shows us is that the future, just like the present, holds irresolvable contradictions. We can neither fully embrace nor reject the conflicting forces that train our hopes and fears. What we can do, and what this dissertation argues we *ought* to do, is to make ourselves aware of them.

APPENDIX 1: FIFTEEN-WEEK COURSE SCHEDULE

Objectives

This course will help students understand:

- how shows are created, produced, funded, circulated, and received;
- the affordances and limitations of serialized storytelling;
- how to become responsible consumers of televisual content; and
- how to become responsible producers of audiovisual content.

Unit 1: What is television?

Week 1: Contexts

Key Concepts: defining a medium; TV prehistory; media technologies; commercial/popular art

Primary Texts: *Flash Gordon* comic strip (1934), [selections](#) (14 pages); *Flash Gordon* radio serial (1935), episode 1, [On the Planet Mongo](#) (<15 minutes); *Flash Gordon* film serial (1936), Ch. 1, “[The Planet of Peril](#)” (<20 minutes); *Flash Gordon* TV serial (1954), episode 1, “[Flash Gordon and the Planet of Death](#)” (<25 minutes)

Other Readings: Jason Mittell, *Television & American Culture*, Introduction (pp. 1-18)

Week 2: Industry

Key Concepts: pitching; funding; production; distribution; sponsorship; advertising; revenue models

Viewings: *Glow*, season 1, episodes 1, 2, and 5 (Netflix, 2019); *30 Rock*, season 1, episode 5, “Jack-Tor” (Hulu or Peacock, 2006)

Readings: Jason Mittell, *Television & American Culture*, Ch. 1 (entire chapter) and selections from Ch. 2 (pages 55-69); Ethan Thompson & Jason Mittell, *How to Watch TV*, Introduction

Week 3: Aesthetics

Key Concepts: mise-en-scene; music design; key videographic techniques

Viewings: *Black Mirror* (Netflix), season 3, episode 4, “San Junipero”; *Mad Men*, season 1, episode 13, “The Wheel” (Prime Video, 2015); [How Stranger Things Conveys Tone and Style](#) by Lessons from the Screen Play

Readings: Mittell, *Television & American Culture*, selections from Ch. 5 (pages 176-212); Jeremy Butler, “*Mad Men*: Visual Style” in *How to Watch TV*

Suggested: [Mad Men – Layers of Meaning](#) by Lessons from the Screen Play

Week 4: Genre

Key Concepts: tropes and genre conventions; routines; narrowcasting; rhythms

Viewings: *Lovecraft Country* season 1, episode 1, “Here Be Monsters” (HBO, 2020); *What We Do in the Shadows*, season 4, episode 8, “Go Flip Yourself” (Hulu, 2022);

Readings: Jason Mittell, *Television & American Culture*, selections from Ch. 6 (pp. 213-258); *Television Genre Book* (ed. Glen Creeber), “Introduction: What is Genre?” (pp. 1-15)

Suggested: Vulture.com [interview](#) with the “San Junipero” creative team; [Lovecraft Country and the Fear of Racist Stereotypes](#) by Aisho

Week 5: Form

Key Concepts: seriality (episodic and multi-episodic); transitional media; time-shifting; digital television

Viewings: *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, season 5, episode 2, “Darmok” (Paramount+, 1991); *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*, season 1, episode, 1 “Strange New Worlds” (Paramount+, 2022); *Only Murders in the Building*, season 1, episodes 1-2 (Hulu, 2021);

Readings: Roger Hagedorn, “Technology and Economic Exploitation: The Serial as a Form of Narrative Presentation”; Frank Kelleter, “Elements of a Theory of Seriality”

Unit 2: Convergence Era Television

Week 6: Complex TV

Key Concepts: complex TV, prestige TV, metaseriality, operational aesthetic, convergence culture, forensic fandom

Viewings: *Westworld*, season 1, episodes 1-2 (HBO, 2016)

Readings: Mittell, “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television”; Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, Introduction (pp. 1-24)

Week 7: Television Literacies

Key Concepts: media literacy, serial literacy, representations, paratexts, title sequences

Viewings: *Euphoria*, season 1, episodes 1-2 (HBO,); [The Adorkable Misogyny of the The Big Bang Theory](#) by Pop Culture Detective

Readings: Monk-Payton, “Blackness and Televisual Reparations”; Timothy Havens, “The Biggest Show in the World”; selections from Jason Mittell, *Television & American Culture*, Ch. 8, “Representing Identity,” (pp. 305-3455)

Suggested Viewings: any video essays on [Confronting Stereotypes in Film & TV](#) playlist by The Take

Week 8: Binging

Key Concepts: consumption; addiction; indulgence; spectacle; melodrama

Viewings: *Euphoria*, season 1, episodes 3-4 (HBO, 2019); [Lighting With Colour: Euphoria](#) by In Depth Cine

Readings: Warhol, Robyn. “Binge-Watching: How Netflix Original Programs Are Changing Serial Form”

Week 9: Attention Economies

Key Concepts: screen culture; data mining; algorithms

Viewings: *Severance*, season 1, episodes 1-4 (Apple TV+, 2022); [Clickbaits Crazy Ending Explained – The Clickbaiting of Film & TV](#) by The Take

Readings: selections from Jason Mittell, *Television & American Culture*, Ch 2, “Exchanging Audiences,” (pp. 54-98) and Ch. 9, “Viewing Television,” (pp. 357-382)

Week 10: Interpretation

Key Concepts: audiences, fan theories, puzzle-box narratives, video essays

Viewings: *Severance*, season 1, episodes 5-9 (Apple TV+, 2022); [Severance – How to Write a Mysterious TV Pilot Perfectly](#) by Just an Observation; [SEVERANCE is Lost meets r/Antiwork](#) by Skip Intro

Readings: Stuart Hall, “Encoding, decoding”; Ellen Seiter, “Qualitative Audience Research,” in *The Television Studies Reader* (pp. 461-478)

Unit 3: Boundaries of Television

Week 11: Adaptation

Key Concepts: adaptation theory; visual narrative; franchising; creative copyright and intellectual property

Viewings: *Watchmen*, episodes 1-4 (HBO, 2019)

Readings: excerpts from *Watchmen* (Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, 1986-1987); Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, selections from Chapter 1 (pp. 1-32) and Chapter 2 (pp. 33-77)

Week 12: Limited Series and Serial Endings

Key Concepts: seriality and trauma; endings, cancellations, and finales; miniseries; limited series

Viewings: *Watchmen*, episodes 5-9 (HBO, 2019)

Readings: Jason Mittell, *Complex TV*, “Ends,” (pp. 319-338); Marco Ianniello and Craig Batty, “Serial offenders? Defining the boundaries of series and serial TV for screenwriting practice and theory” (pp. 55-74)

Week 13: “Reality” TV

Key Concepts: unscripted programming; people as characters; the commodification of personal identity; influencer culture

Viewings: *The Bachelor* (Hulu, 2019), season 23, episode 9; *UnREAL* (Prime Video, 2015), season 1, episode 1, “Return” (105 minutes total)

Listening: *This American Life*, “[Breakout Star](#)” (NPR, 2019) (20 minutes)

Readings: *The Television Genre Book*, “Reality TV” (pp. 159-174)

Week 14: YouTube

Key Concepts: YouTube; platform blindness; user-generated content

Viewings: *Burning Love*, season 1, episodes (YouTube,); [YouTube: Manufacturing Authenticity \(For Fun and Profit!\)](#) by Lindsay Ellis

Readings: Teresa Rizzo, “YouTube: the New Cinema of Attractions”; Patricia G. Lange, *Kids on YouTube*, Chapter 1 (pp. 8-31).

Week 15: Student Video Essays

Key Concepts: audiovisual content production; media ethics; responsible media consumption and creation; serial sprawl; accessible scholarship; public intellectuals

APPENDIX 2: FIVE-WEEK UNIT

Assignment Description: All narrative media hold aesthetic and formal properties that determine what stories can and cannot be told, who will and will not be likely or even able to access these stories, and what revenue models work best for creating, distributing, and shaping narrative content. Television is currently the most frequently consumed narrative medium in the country: between broadcast, cable, streaming platforms, and pay-per-view services, Americans, as of 2023, have access to more than 817 thousand unique “television” programs, both old and new. Despite the medium’s unparalleled cultural impact, remarkably little accessible scholarship exists to help us understand what we watch.

In recent years, professional and public scholars have begun to compose video essays, which use some of the audiovisual techniques of television production to interpret film and television for the public. For this project, you will put together your own 5-10 minute video essay for a class-wide TV Literacy YouTube Channel. You will each select one television series and make at least one interesting argument, based on evidence you've pulled from the series itself and, possibly, from secondary sources (theory, philosophy, or other television criticism).

Your task is to offer an entry point for helping your viewers to understand the creative, technical, narrative, representational, and/or thematic aspects of your selected television series.

Rhetorical Chart

Genre	Purpose	Role	Audience	Rhetorical Situation
Video Essay	Produce an accessible, aesthetically-pleasing, and entertaining video essay about a TV series of your choice.	Public Media Scholar	YouTube users with an interest in your topic.	You are being asked to contribute content to a media-literacy YouTube station.

Skill Objectives: Through the course of this unit, you will practice several skills central to media literacy, including the following:

- critically analyzing television;
- performing humanities research using primary and secondary sources; and
- conveying creative and coherent messages through multimodal content creation.

A Successful Video Essay Will:

- produce complex, nuanced, and original analysis regarding a television series of your choice;
- substantiate claims with evidence pulled from the series and/or secondary critical or theoretical texts;
- display sophisticated understanding of the audio and visual possibilities of the videographic form;

- credit your sources in the narration and cite your sources in the video description;
- be free from noticeable errors in your language, recording, and mixing.

Step 1: Proposal (Ungraded)

For this step, submit the your responses to following prompts:

- a) your television series and why you're choosing it;
- b) a 2-3 sentence description of its pilot episode;
- c) a 4-5 sentence description of what happens in the remainder of the season;
- d) one or two examples of video essays (with links) you'd like to use as models;
- e) what elements of your examples you'd like to emulate (the organizational schema, the tone/intended audience, elements of the design, and at least two other aesthetic or narrative elements);
- f) 2 key passages from the readings I've provided that you think may help guide your interpretation;
- g) the number one main point you hope your video will get across; and
- h) a rough idea of what you think your "thesis" will be.

Feeder 1: Visual Script (Graded)

For this feeder, you will have to lock in a lot of your choices regarding: what content you include; what voice, or style, you intend to adopt; and a list of what shots, scenes, or stills from the television series you will use to illustrate your points.

Please note that every section of your script needs to be accompanied by purposefully-chosen visuals. Your visuals will likely include a mix of clips and frames from your series, quotes from your selected text(s), and, should you choose, video of yourself narrating your essay.

Because this assignment requires you to sketch out a mix of text you intend to speak into the microphone and pointers about the visual elements that will be displayed on screen as you speak, you will complete this assignment using PowerPoint, Keynote, Google Slides, or another slideshow or storyboarding application.

As you put together this script, you *must* include:

I. An introduction, with general information, such as:

- > who you are and the title of the project: "Hi, I'm Nicole, and this is Understanding TV with English 105."
- > series title,
- > showrunner(s),
- > network,
- > airing dates,
- > a basic overview of the premise,
- > any specific context needed to introduce your analysis (characters, themes, etc.),
- > a spoiler alert (where appropriate); and/or
- > any other relevant details.

II. A passage from a reputable secondary source (ideally pulled from readings I've provided), which captures the guiding principle of the major point you intend to make or a key premise needed to understand your argument.

III. Two or more content segments, including any combination of:

- › Scene or Shot Analysis
- › Narrative Analysis
- › Trope Analysis
- › Industry Context (and how that affects the show's content)
- › Creative or Production History (and how that affects the show's content)
- › Subjective Review
- › Some other relevant interpretation of your choosing (with instructor approval)

**Feel free to mix and match and/or organize this information in creative ways.

IV. A conclusion that first covers any of the following:

- › one or two major takeaways from your analysis,
- › suggestions about the best mindset to adopt when watching the series,
- › how the series might have been improved, and/or
- › what other series might learn from this one,

and then wraps up with:

- › a brief 1-2 sentence send-off that thanks your viewers for watching

Feeder 2: Video Essay Rough Cut (Graded)

Before any audio or video content creator completes their composition, they produce a rough cut. The rough cut enables creators: to get a feel for what their final project may look like; identify any issues with pacing, vocal performance, audio or video recording, overall organization, and other categories; map out challenges and opportunities for additional aesthetic elements; receive and incorporate feedback from reviewers.

Note: The logistics of capturing video and using video-editing software will be covered in class.

For this assignment, you will submit:

I. A rough cut of your video essay, which will include:

1. all of the segments in the order you intend to present them
2. moving images and/or stills roughly where you intend them to go
3. rough audio recording of your narration

**If you are planning to adopt a talking-head style for your video, you are likely going to want your initial take to be more polished, as it will have to correspond to your movements.

II. A note to help your reviewers understand your plans, which will include a bulleted list edits or additions you intend make before your final cut, such as music, specific sound effects, or other elements.

Unit Project: Published Video Essay (Graded)

Okay, everything's almost in place for publishing, but you still have a few items to cross off your to-do list. Now that you've received feedback from the consortium and some of your fellow content creators, you have to incorporate those suggestions and edit, title, and blurb your video essay to solicit views and maintain viewer attention. Follow these steps:

- I. Reconcile all of the feedback you've received with the intentions you set for yourself all the way up top in Step 1. Is your assignment successfully communicating your intentions to the breadth of your intended viewership? Revise your video with that in mind.
- II. Come up with a title that briefly informs viewers what they are likely to see when they click on your video.
- III. Draft a short blurb to go underneath that slightly elaborates on your title.
- IV. Proofread and polish! Make sure everything is exactly where it should be. This includes all aspects of audio and video editing and mixing.
- V. Upload to our YouTube Station Playlist.

Real-World Examples

[Breaking Bad – Crafting a TV Pilot](#) by Lessons from the Screenplay
[The Office: Embrace the Cringe](#) by Nerdwriter1
[Beyond True Blood's Sensationalism](#) by Feminist Frequency
[Lovecraft Country and the Fear of Racist Stereotypes](#) by Aisho
[SEVERANCE is Lost meets r/Antiwork](#) by Skip Intro
[How “The Boys” Deconstructs the Superhero Genre and Relates to the Scorsese-Marvel Feud](#) by The Ringer
[Deep Dive: How BLACK MIRROR Crafts Dystopia](#) by Skip Intro
[The Cool Girl Trope, Explained](#) by The Take
[The Adorkable Misogyny of the The Big Bang Theory](#) by Pop Culture Detective
[Mad Men – Layers of Meaning](#) by Lessons from the Screen Play
[Foreshadowing Is Not Character Development](#) by Trope Anatomy
[Severance – How to Write a Mysterious TV Pilot Perfectly](#) by Just an Observation
[Perspective as the Story in FLEABAG | Why You Should Watch \[No Spoilers\]](#) by Skip Intro
[Lighting With Colour: Euphoria](#) by In Depth Cine
[Clickbaits Crazy Ending, Explained – The Clickbaiting of Film & TV](#) by The Take
[Confronting Stereotypes in Film & TV](#) playlist by The Take
[How Stranger Things Conveys Tone and Style](#) by Lessons from the Screen Play
[What Makes the Haunting of Hill House a Masterpiece?](#) by Skip Intro

Other Helpful Resources

[How to Make a Video Essay: Writing](#) by Will Webb at Indietrix Film Reviews
[How to Make a Video Essay: Footage and Voiceover](#) by Will Webb at Indietrix Film Reviews
[How to Make a Video Essay: Editing](#) by Will Webb at Indietrix Film Reviews
[On Making Video Essays](#) by Patrick (H) Willems
[F for Fake \(1973\) – How to Structure a Video Essay](#) by Every Frame a Painting
[What Makes a Video Essay Great?](#) – video essay about video essays
[The Place of Voiceover in Academic Audiovisual Film and Television Criticism](#) by Ian
[Has the Video Essay Arrived?](#) by Peter Monaghan
[Videographic Criticism as Digital Humanities Method](#) by Jason Mittell
[The Video Essay as Art: 11 Ways to Make a Video Essay](#) by Conor Bateman – text and video
[Fair Use for Videographic Criticism](#) by Jason Mittell
[The Scholarly Video Essay](#) by Ian Garwood
[The Videographic Essay: Practice and Pedagogy](#) by C. Keathley, J. Mittell, and C. Grant
[The Cinefiles: A Scholarly Journal of Cinema Studies](#) (esp. Issue 15 *The Scholarly Video Essay*)
[25 VOICE OVER TIPS Explained with Examples](#) by Kevin – Basic Filmmaker
[How the Nerdwriter Writes a Video Essay](#) by Why It's Great
[Keywords in Media Studies](#) edited by Laurie Ouellette and Jonathan Gray
[Audiovisuality: An Online Forum for Videographic Film Studies](#)
[The Video Essay: Parameter, Practice, Pedagogy](#) by Tracy Cox-Stanton

Unit Schedule

	Tuesday	Thursday
Week 1	Activities: -Introducing the Video Essay -What is TV? -Analyzing a TV Show Assignment Due: -Read the introduction and first chapter of Jason Mittell's <i>Television and American Culture</i>	Activities: -Model Analysis Continued -Peer Review Workshop Assignment Due: -Choose your TV Series -Complete the Model Analysis Worksheet
Week 2	Activities: -Model Analysis Continued -Content Analysis Practice Assignment Due: -Summarize at least 2 reputable articles that discuss your series. -View " How to read mise en scene: Visual film analysis explained! "	Activities: -Grabbing Clips -Copyright and Citations -Peer Review Workshop Assignment Due: -Complete the Content Development Worksheet

	-View “ How to Make a Video Essay: Writing ”	-View “ How to Make a Video Essay: Footage and Voiceover ”
Week 3	Activities: -Peer Review Workshop -Crowd-Sourced Rubric Assignment Due: -Complete Feeder 1 Draft	Activities: -Recording Techniques -Finding Music and Sound Effects Assignment Due: -Submit your Feeder 1 Final -View How to Make a Video Essay: Editing
Week 4	Activities: -Peer Review Workshop Assignment Due: - Complete Feeder 2 Draft	Activities: -Oral Presentation -Editing, Mixing, & Mastering Techniques Assignment Due: - Submit Feeder 2 Final
Week 5	Activities: -Peer Review Workshop Assignment Due: - Complete Video Essay Rough Cut	Activities: -Final Peer Review Workshop -Titles and Blurbs Assignment Due: - Submit Unit Project Final

APPENDIX 3: VIDEO-ESSAY WORKSHEETS

Model Analysis Worksheet

Name:

Instructions: View at least three video essays. Then answer the prompts below. When you are done, upload your completed worksheet to the appropriate forum on Canvas.

I. Which three video essays did you view? Type out their titles and hyperlink to the videos.

- a) Video Essay 1:
- b) Video Essay 2:
- c) Video Essay 3:

II. Which video essay was your favorite and why? (Be specific about which narrative, audio, and/or visual techniques you found most effective.)

III. What in the other two essays did you like less than the one you chose?

IV. In the video essay you chose, describe the “thesis” or main argument in one sentence.

V. What supporting *claims* does the essayist make to support their argument?

VI. What kind of *evidence* does the essayist use to substantiate their claims?

VII. Does the essayist ever offer their own *opinions* about the quality, impact, or potential directions of the show or film they are reviewing? If so, what are they?

VIII. What assumptions does the essayist make about their audience?

IX. List two or three techniques the video essayist employed that you would like to include in your own project.

Content Development Worksheet

Name:

I. Select the television series you intend to critique, and then complete the following chart.

Title	
Showrunners	
Network or Platform	
Release Dates (mention if ongoing)	
Keywords	
Additional Relevant Information (Is it an adaptation, prequel, or sequel? Is it part of a franchise? Does it have any other crucial contextual elements you'll need to mention in your introduction?)	

II. Type out a brief paragraph covering your selected series' premise, major plot points, character, themes, and anything else that caught your interest. Don't worry about spoilers. You want the plot to be clear to someone who has not seen the series.

III. Close reading is a helpful analytical tool that demonstrates how a detailed analysis of a specific portion of a primary source can deepen our understanding of the work as a whole. What can you say about the series that wouldn't be so obvious to a casual viewer, yet still makes sense within the broader context of an episode, season, or series?

a. Pull up a scene from your TV show that you'd like to analyze. As you watch it, take notes about everything you notice. Don't worry if you miss some things, or are just describing the scene -- this is just a preliminary sweep. Type these notes below:

b. Now organize those notes under the following lists:

Time and Place (set dressing, location of scene, time of day, era)

-
-
-

Series Style (lighting, angle, duration of shots, lens, camera distance, editing techniques)

-
-

-

Audience (Where are we? In the room with the characters? Looking from the outside?
Looking at characters or seeing things from their perspective?)

-

-

-

Sound (music, sound effects, voiceover/narration, volume)

-

-

-

Characters (What are they wearing? How do they talk? How do they move? Are they
interacting with props? Who are the actors? What do you notice about their
performance?)

-

-

-

Plot (What happens in this scene? Where is it situated in the series/episode? How does it
extend the plot/themes/message of the work?)

-

-

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