Book Reviews

The Serial Will Be Televised: Serial Television's Revolutionary Potential for Multidisciplinary Analysis of Social Identity

Reviews of *Birth of the Binge: Serial TV and the End of Leisure* by Dennis Broe, Wayne State University Press, 2019, and *Gender and Seriality: Practices and Politics of Contemporary US Television* by Maria Sulimma, Edinburgh University Press, 2021

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No individual who has used a smartphone, laptop, television set, personal gaming device, or cinema screen would argue against the idea that we live in an age of multitudinous media, an epoch populated by a mise-en-abyme of screens whose repetitions offer constant entertainment, distraction, and engagement. Media, in our present era, is increasingly defined by its omnipresence and omnidirectionality. Not only are the technological apparatuses of media affording greater interactivity and portability and demanding more constant attention but the narrative elements of these media appear increasingly complex, saturative, and demanding of new modes of reception. Seriality, in particular, seems to be a defining characteristic of both the structure and the content of contemporary entertainment media. But how does one begin to examine a form as composite, recursive, and transmedial as seriality? What affordances does seriality as both technology and narrative mode offer an established field of study like media studies?

In their efforts to understand the impact of seriality on contemporary tele-vision, two recent books also seek to bring media studies into dialogue with other research areas and disciplines. Both Dennis Broe's *Birth of the Binge: Serial TV and the End of Leisure* and Maria Sulimma's *Gender and Seriality: Practices and Politics of Contemporary US Television* present the study of seriality as a nec-essarily multidisciplinary valence for doing media studies work. Broe's work, in particular, explicitly aims to expand the field of television studies through engagements with "philosophy, sociology, psychoanalysis, political economy, aesthetics, and art and literary theory,"[1] which allows him to draw from a wide range of critics and scholars throughout his text. Thus, Broe proposes that the study of seriality offers television studies the ability to comprehensively estab-lish the discipline by enlarging its multidisciplinary theoretical and analytical elements. Similarly, Sulimma's book illustrates the generative capacity of doing interdisciplinary work within media studies and further shows how television studies might inform and be informed by considerations of intersectionality of gender studies and media studies. Sulimma aims to generate a dialogue on the affordances of both fields' theoretical bases to examine the impacts of television seriality on the concept of identity. Both books thus expand television studies through the multidisciplinary needs of examining seriality. These two texts also examine how seriality, as both narrative practice and technological apparatus, and serialized cultural products serve to dialectically reproduce or resist social inequalities, particularly in the context of the United States.

A cursory glance at a Broe's *Birth of the Binge* might lead one to think that it would utilize the consumptive mode of binging television as a lens through which to critically examine neoliberal capitalism. While the text does accomplish this, it also takes on quite a bit more. The book aims to inspect "Serial TV" as a Derridian Pharmakon,[2] which is not only the per-petuation of symbolic accumulation in the hyperindustrial epoch but also

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1. Dennis Broe, *Birth of the Binge: Serial TV and the End of Leisure* (Wayne State University Press, 2019), xi
2. Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination* (London: Athlone Press, 1981), 61–172.

"the purveyor and even harbinger within the belly of the beast of a more enlightened mode of being."[3] Organized into three parts, "Metaseriality,"[4] "Serial Specificity,"[5] and "Serial Auteurs and the Possibilities of Industrial Resistance,"[6] Broe engages in an analysis of seriality that is informed by Bernard Steigler and Karl Marx while also establishing the formal, aesthetic, and philosophic history of serial as mode. Additionally, this text investigates how serial television might serve as a site for potential resistance through its narrative complexity and industrial entrenchments.

In the first section of *Birth of the Binge*, Broe makes use of the work of Steigler, Heidegger, and others to vividly illustrate the socioeconomic moment spanning from the Regan era to the present as neither neoliberal nor postindustrial but rather "hyperindustrial." Broe argues that this hyperindustrial, digital age does not exceed the logics of the factory but rather intensifies these logics through technical domination and capitalist saturation.[7] Tracking the twinned growth and parallel history of serial television's evolution with the progression of the hyperindustrial era, Broe makes a convincing case for the rise of the "second golden age of television, that of Serial TV"[8] and its nascent mode of consumption, binge-watching, as symptomatic of the subsumption of leisurely prime time into ever-more fragmented and industrialized flex time. This eradication of leisure encourages consumers to be constantly distracted, constantly training, and constantly fractured. Using vivid case studies to reinforce and explicate the alternately fragmentizing or totalizing capacity of the common but increasingly complex serial mode across network, cable, and SVOD platforms, this monograph cogently posits serial television as a site of hegemonic struggle. For example, Broe examines the serial show *24* as both an industrial contrivance of delivery and a

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3. Broe, *Birth of the Binge*, 244.
4. Broe, 13–133.
5. Broe, 137–205.
6. Broe, 209–39.
7. Broe, 19.
8. Broe, 10.

narrative architecture, which not only provides social metaphors for the dissolution of personality and personal time but also actively encourages these socially alienated conditions through addictive consumption.[9] Yet, as Broe asserts with some sense of dramatic irony, the fetishized, addictive capacity of serial television provides its own antidote to the mundane, accumulative, passive-viewing logics of hyperindustrialization.

Of particular utility is chapter 4, "Seriality and Political Economy: Flexibility and Dominance in the New Television," which dexterously combines the work of television scholars like Amanda Lotz and Jason Mittell, textual analysis, and industry studies to examine the rising dominance of the serial form across all three television arenas. Charting the "take your kids to work day" trope across successful serials *The Office* (NBC), *The Larry Sanders Show* (HBO), and *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix), Broe demonstrates how the move from network to cable to online streaming routinizes the serial from a mode, which he argues previously challenged commercial imperatives by calling attention to the greed of industry and redistributing power to creative showrunners. The chapter concludes by positing that a more contentious program executed by a serial auteur's production, such as showrunner J. J. Abrams's *Fringe*, has the power to resist this routinization through ongoing battles between creative and profit concerns.

Following this logic of the revolutionary potential of seriality as mode (especially when executed by a serial auteur), the second section of the text deploys Nietzsche and Hegel to establish two temporal philosophical aesthetics: that of addictive, mundane repetition and that of progressive flows of repetition that aim for totality. In delineating the philosophical underpinnings and aesthetic history of seriality, this section serves to reassert Broe's argument that the serial form (and especially serial TV) "is both a palliative and progressive force."[10] The final section of the book focuses on establishing the idea of serial showrunners as Jamesonian "authors in discourse"[11]

9. Broe, 85.
10. Broe, 244.
11. Broe, 210.

who possess the creative and industrial power needed to craft critical seriality, which manages to inject critiques of the socioeconomic landscape of hyperindustrial America into increasingly compelling and complex texts. Here Broe looks to film auteurs who made successful forays into television (David Lynch, Lars Von Trier, and Jane Campion) to posit J. J. Abrams and Joss Whedon as emblematic of serial auteurs whose works demonstrate the potential of serial TV to resist hyperindustrial encroachment.

Birth of the Binge will prove exciting reading for those interested in television studies as well as for those interested in how narrative and neoliberal logics intersect to shape neural and social attachments to temporality. The text is accessible enough that many of its passages might serve as solid introductory readings to television studies while also being provocative enough that it should prove illuminating to those already well versed in the field. Further, the book's inclusion of a periodized critical appendix of "One Hundred Seminal Serial Series"[12] provides an extensive overview of serial TV's growth, both in the United States and globally. Seriality, as examined through its aesthetic and philosophical history alongside seminal serial television case studies from *Lost* to *Silicon Valley* to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, is, in Broe's own words, "a purposefully addictive . . . mode of digital engineering but may also be, in the way it challenges the commercial imperative, a model pointing toward liberatory viewing."[13]

If Broe's monograph demonstrates that serial television is especially equipped to alter the social habitus of consumers, Sulimma's *Gender and Seriality: Practices and Politics of Contemporary US Television* takes this a step further by showing how the serial television form can encourage preferred modes of gendered engagement and identification. Sulimma engages in a "practice-focused approach"[14] to both seriality and gender, which she argues allows both concepts to be examined as recursive feedback loops of

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12. Broe, 247–49.
13. Broe, 1.
14. Maria Sulimma, *Gender and Seriality: Practices and Politics of Contemporary US Television* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 1.

"reception, series, and production"[15] that exist between consuming subjects and popular-culture objects to generate serial collectives of identity. In her aim to effect a multidisciplinary dialogue on seriality between the disciplines of media studies and gender studies, Sulimma emphasizes the interdisciplinarity of a practice-focused approach as well as the critical intersectionality requisite to examine not just gender *in* seriality but gender *as* seriality. Drawing on the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, Iris Marion Young, Judith Roof, Amanda Lotz, and others, Sulimma's introduction builds a strong theoretical framework for examining the ideological parallels between seriality and gender. Sulimma draws these two issues into productive dialogue and highlights the necessity of deploying discourse analysis, qualitative content analysis, paratextual engagements, reception studies, and industry studies to more richly examine the practices necessary to engage with both serial television and gender identities.

With this theoretical framework established, Sulimma proceeds to argue that serial television "showcase[s] that studying the serialisation of gender *in* popular culture . . . requires the consideration of gender *as* popular culture."[16] To develop the methods and terminology needed to advance future research of serial television and serial gender, Sulimma structures her text around detailed readings of three serial television franchises she identifies as exceptional in their capacity to demonstrate how intersectional identities are read, enacted, and understood in the present sociopolitical context of the United States. Looking specifically at *Girls* (HBO), *How to Get Away with Murder* (ABC), and *The Walking Dead* (AMC), Sulimma develops models for examining the omnidirectional interaction between audience, serial text, and gender performance. In chapters 1, 4, and 7, Sulimma combines reception studies, textual analysis of each text's formal elements, and critiques of neoliberalism to formulate three models of seriality as defined by audience engagements with her chosen texts. *Girls*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, and

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15. Sulimma, *Gender and Seriality*, 15.
16. Sulimma, 17.

The Walking Dead are representative of what Sulimma defines as thinkpiece seriality[17], looped seriality,[18] and paratext seriality,[19] respectively. In devising these formally specific modes of seriality, Sulimma underscores the recursive and discursive impacts between audience engagements and the modes through which serial television shapes and imagines its preferred audience.

Of particular note here is chapter 4, "The Looped Seriality of *How to Get Away with Murder*," which considers fan memes and GIFs as serial practices in their own right. Sulimma nimbly examines how insidiously this interactive reciprocity gets commercialized through ABC's ritualized consumption practices endorsed by their Thursday night Shondaland programming in ways that remain pleasurable and engaging to audiences. Chapters 2, 5, and 6 deploy textual analysis of each case study to propose three spatiotemporal models of serial gender: the *carousel* model,[20] which circulates without progress and invites active audience analysis through controversy and frustration (*Girls*); the *outward spiral* model,[21] which thickens cultural meanings, responds to audience desires, and creates recognizable identities that have not been shown on network television previously (*How to Get Away with Murder*); and the *palimpsest* model,[22] which relies on continuous paratextual overwriting and active audience comparison to generate accountability (*The Walking Dead*). Finally, chapters 3, 6, and 9 examine the specific sociopolitical discourses each serial text positions itself in response to as a means of asserting the particular series' identity as well as the identity of its preferred audience. These three chapters establish the commercialized co-optation of each text's mode of address with its intended audience and demonstrates the ways in which serial television serves to impinge on audience address to render "potentially disruptive ideas"[23] as tamed, profitable artifacts.

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17. Sulimma, 28.
18. Sulimma, 95.
19. Sulimma, 154.
20. Sulimma, 47.
21. Sulimma, 113.
22. Sulimma, 176.
23. Sulimma, 222.

Rather than despairing at the grim prognosis for the minimal potential of commercial serial television to offer disruptive ideas that upend neoliberal marginalizations of identities, Sulimma effectively underscores the urgent need for continued "sophisticated theoretical-methodological approach[es] to the gendered practices of US-American television" as a means of examining the mutually influential operations of seriality and gender within popular culture. With thoroughly researched, engaging, and lucidly argued models for such ongoing theoretical and methodological pursuits, Sulimma has provided ample material for continued engagement with the interaction between seriality, gender, and popular culture. *Gender and Seriality* is a provocative text, offering an interdisciplinary, intersectional methodology that deepens both the disciplines of gender studies and media studies through sophisticated analyses of seriality. Its accessible language, cogent formulations, and stimulating proposals will make excellent reading for anyone interested in gender and media.

Birth of the Binge and *Gender and Seriality* aim to broaden the theoretical basis for seriality and in so doing provide provocative analyses of how seriality, and especially serialized television, serves to shape social identity and relationality. Both authors make compelling cases for the impacts of interactivity between the neoliberal/hyperindustrial era and the unique formal aspects of seriality as both apparatus and evolving narrative. As Sulimma notes in her conclusion, "Critical scholarship has to be serial, it has to strategically remember, and it must strategically forget."[24] Accordingly, Broe and Sulimma have analyzed seriality as a mode that has the competing demands of closure and continuity. Both of these books offer compelling studies of the social impact of seriality and serve as starting points to inspire further scholarship in the multidisciplinary study of serial television.

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24. Sulimma, 223.