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Letter from the Editor

ELLEN SEITER

Our topic for this special issue of *Global Storytelling* highlights the paradox of media studies today. Scholars of television streaming must, of necessity, reach back to the eighteenth century and beyond to consider the precedents to seriality that our issue gestures toward. At the same time, the development of streaming platforms demands that scholars tool up their comprehension of algorithms and financial markets and stocks, the deterministic role of server capacity, and the vigorous attempts at expansion by corporations with quite different endgame strategies. Streaming is not only a moving target but a topic that prompts scholars to chase headlines, thus finding the big picture difficult to capture. While some of the essays collected here revisit core concerns of television studies as a field, streaming also has pushed scholars from the comfortable niche of television studies as a close cousin of film studies—both mere infants when compared to most academic disciplines—to join sociologists, neuroscientists, artificial intelligence experts, and the broad array of disciplines who comment on the Internet. I see this as a healthy sign. The world of media studies can be surprisingly claustrophobic, engaged with questions of theory that are a bit too microscopic to yield insight. Before introducing this collection of essays, I wish to turn now to a few elements of narrative and genre theory. The study of long-form series produced for streaming platforms requires two types of knowledge: genre histories from print, tabloids, stage, and radio as well as a broader perspective on media economics. Let me offer a few examples here of how these larger contexts can enrich our understanding of streaming.

In 2017, Netflix's original series *13 Reasons Why* became its most-watched series to date, not only in the United States but in South and East Asia. As a serial narrative, the show and its success provide a powerful

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reminder of just how old generic roots and serialization strategies are when viewing today's streaming successes. In the show's first season, narrator Hannah Baker records thirteen tapes before committing suicide, and she leaves instructions to share the tapes with her peers at the high school she entered as a student new to the area about a year ago. The tapes neatly structure each episode, while explaining—one might say, directly accusing—those she knew as contributors to her feelings of isolation, abandonment, humiliation, and despair. Past and present are linked like a murder mystery as the protagonist Clay, a socially awkward sophomore who worked alongside Hannah at the local movie theater, attempts to understand how he impacted Hannah's life and ultimately her decision to commit suicide.

13 Reasons Why, as a teen show liberated from the strictures of network television and thus able to show more graphic sexual content as well as a darker, more pessimistic view of high school itself, is also a coming-of-age story or what literary critics refer to as a *Bildungsroman*. The first spectacular success of the coming-of-age genre was published in Germany in 1774 at the height of the *Sturm und Drang* period of Romanticism—an aesthetic and lifestyle movement emphasizing a rejection of the norms of bourgeois society, the importance of the individual, and the truths to be gained from communing with nature. *The Sorrows of Young Werther* catapulted the poet Johan Goethe to notoriety. Like *13 Reasons Why*, the protagonist Werther, a newcomer to a small town, relates his story through a series of letters, what is called "an epistolary novel": how he falls in love with Lotte, a young woman about to be engaged to a boring, insensitive partner and experiences of both the suffocating dullness of small-town life and liberating escapes into the natural environment. He becomes so critical of the social mores that compel Lotte to marry his rival that he comes to see the prospect of assuming his expected place in adult society as intolerable. Once there is no hope left of uniting with Lotte, Werther shoots himself in the head.

While the comparison between a contemporary Netflix series and seventeenth-century German literature might seem a stretch, the comparison usefully illustrates how TV serials (and nearly all television genres) borrow—if not directly adapt—conventions from novels, plays, tabloids,

magazines, and feature films. In many cases, the core conventions of the genre are largely unchanged, despite the fact that contemporary productions dress up their plots with crimes or social problems "ripped from the head-lines," with new levels of nudity or explicit sexual content; fashion, includ-ing clothing, makeup, and hairstyles; and the most current popular music (some enhancing the budget through product-placement fees). *13 Reasons Why* shares with *The Sorrows of Young Werther* several notable features: it is disappointment in love and disillusionment with the older generation and the conventions and hypocrisies of the social structure that drive the pro-tagonist to despair. Because the reader/viewer experiences the story with the foreknowledge that the narrator "speaks from the grave," there is heightened pathos to each and every aspect of the account.

Both *Werther* and *13 Reasons* enjoyed unexpectedly, spectacularly high levels of success while instigating widespread discussion in the press about suicide and its prevention—fueled by media panic over copycat suicide at-tempts by devotees of the stories and whether, by romanticizing suicide in the narrative, the creators actually encouraged it. Both prompted an out-pouring of fan fiction and alternative endings, and both made instant ce-lebrities of their authors. Jay Bushman designed a transmedia tie-in for the show that demonstrates how digital media can now extend, complicate, and personalize the viewer's relationship to serial narratives.[1] Transmedia such as this strives for intimacy between characters and audience by having them call their phones, a development of second-screen strategies.

More recently, critics have noted that many original series on streaming platforms appear to extend the drama in order to maximize the number of episodes. Plotlines are becoming padded, diversions to minor characters or episodes occupying an entire episode or more in service of reaching a larger total number of episodes. For example, the celebrated series *Ted Lasso* added two more episodes to its second season after the first season did well in awards season. This, too, is a centuries-old problem authors faced with

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1. Jay Bushman, "*13 Reasons Why*: 'Talk to the Reasons' Interactive Episode," accessed April 26, 2022, https://www.jaybushman.com/work/13-reasons-why-talk-to-the-reasons.

novels published in installments. In the streaming environment, it is important to note the distinction between Netflix's strategy of releasing all episodes of a series at once and HBO or Apple or Disney+ releasing one a week or two or three episodes at a time. Audiences have clear preferences for how episodes are meted out, which is another factor in Netflix's success. The slower rollout of episodes, however, provides more opportunity for fans to discuss, forecast, and engage in what Umberto Eco called "inferential walks,"[2] thus expanding participation and sharing by leaving time for the viewer to consider other kinds of intertextual knowledge to support a hypothesis about the ending. Costlier streaming platforms struggle with "churn": customers cancelling once their favorite program finishes a season, hence HBO's ambition, for example, to launch *Westworld* to appeal to subscribers who had followed *Game of Thrones*. The episode bloat is more common with lower-budget series without marquee names and is occurring with docuseries as well as fictional series. Doubtless it has also been fueled by the push to satisfy audience demand for new series while confined to home due to COVID-19 restrictions. A second strategy is ending the long-form series with unanswered questions or unexplored character arcs that leave open the possibility of another season or multiple seasons. Original series on streaming platforms finish production not knowing whether or not they will be extended. Often there are practical issues of actor availability, of budget and salary negotiation, casting doubt on whether a series is even possible. The higher the marquee value of the cast, the more difficult it becomes to coordinate their availability for a cast reunion.

Salary negotiations are also at issue: unlike network television, where residual payments for after-broadcast showings in syndication, on cable, and in foreign markets could secure huge income for actors, there are no residual payments for streaming productions. For everyone involved, the paycheck at the end of production is all the money that will be made. Ironically, while streaming series have much higher prestige value than broadcast television,

2. Eco, 1979, 32.

an actor appearing in one hundred episodes of a network sitcom (one hundred being the required number of episodes produced for a series to succeed in syndication) can retire for life from the proceeds. The staying power of broadcast sitcoms has extended to streaming platforms: a clear example is *Friends* retaining its place as one of the most watched (and fought over for licensing) television series in the world.

Reports of subscriber numbers—on a global scale—between platforms typically validated Netflix, with its advantage of being the early and defining entry into streaming, what's called "winner take all effects" despite its many failures abroad and years of operating in the red.[3] COVID-19 was initially a boost for Netflix, but in 2022, the stock plunged 35 percent in one day after reporting a loss of subscribers. In a shareholders' statement, Netflix explained: "The Big growth in streaming entertainment has led legacy competitors like Disney, WarnerMedia and Discovery to compete with us in new ways which we've been expecting for many years. This is in part, why we have been moving so quickly to grow and further strengthen our original content library across a wide range of genres and nations."[4]

Indeed, the last few years have brought powerful competitors into the streaming business, and their success and failure are instructive. Disney+ continued a paid subscription model for so long their introduction of a streaming platform could have been fatally delayed. Yet its launch exceeded projections, likely due to the fact that they rescinded their licensed content to Netflix and other competitors. Disney+ has the massive advantage of possessing live sports (ESPN), a vast library of movies and programming, and ownership of two of the most sustainable sources of new IP: *Star Wars* and Marvel Comics. Disney's success furthered the demise of cable subscriptions, whose problems have grown from cord cutting to a generation of cord-nevers: a generation who have never felt the need for a cable subscription. Prime-time network viewing in the United States experienced a 21 percent decline in audience despite the viewer

3. David P. Nieborg and Thomas Poell, "The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Cultural Commodity," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 11 (2018): 4277–78.
4. Netflix, Q4 shareholder letter, January 19, 2021.

spike caused by quarantine, and the remaining viewers were overwhelmingly over fifty-five years of age—not a demographic sought by advertisers.

Other platforms have been less fortunate when compared to the successful rollout of Disney+. The most spectacular failure in the streaming marketplace has been Quibi. Quibi stands for "quick bite." The formula was based on established celebrities, high production values, and a ten-minute episode rolled out weekly. What CEOs Jeffrey Katzenberg (the former Disney CEO) and Whitman (the former eBay CEO) failed to reckon with is that a globally successful quick-bite app already exists: it's called YouTube. While it took some years to arrive at the most successful formula, the big sensations on YouTube are often a minute long instead of ten, feature amateur vloggers instead of known stars, and are shot by novices. YouTube builds its viewership and its ad revenues by the fact that popular videos are shared billions of times. One of the smartest moves Google ever made was to buy YouTube in 2006 for what seemed at the time the unfathomable price of $1.65 billion. Today it is estimated that YouTube accounts for about a third of Google's value. The fourth most valuable corporation in the world, Google had a market capitalization in April 2022 of $1.894 trillion.

This brings me to my final point about streaming platforms: the differences in capitalization and core business between Netflix or WarnerMedia—and rivals Amazon, Google (YouTube) or Apple—are vast. Understanding these firms' very different positionings, scale, and vulnerabilities requires an understanding of "network effects" as a business model: exponential growth occurs when interactions (matching a service or commodity with a user) and payment are restricted to the platform, when data acquisition is maximized (through credit card data, search history, and location tracking), and when producers and consumers are not only matched on the platform but can function in both roles. Netflix and WarnerMedia are subscription-based distributors and lack the capacity for the two-way match, where consumers can also be producers. This makes their platforms less "sticky" and less profitable than their rivals. The entertainment trade press has traditionally emphasized the horse-race aspect of media competition: Who won weekend

box office? What channel had the highest viewership last night? Who gathered the most awards? Seen in this way, Amazon Prime gets treated as a close competitor of Netflix. But it is necessary to keep in perspective the gigantic differences between the two in market capitalization, diversity of holdings, long-term strategies for expansion, and overall scale. YouTube is the property of Google, the parent company being Alphabet Inc., which was created through a restructuring of Google. Google is in the advertising business and Amazon is in the retail, transport, and server business, as well as countless others. Both of these have amassed such astonishing profits that the scale of their business overshadows Netflix. Amazon is the fifth largest corporation in the world, with a market capitalization of $1.71 trillion as of April 2022. Netflix is approximately one-tenth the size of Amazon. Amazon Prime, a video streaming service, is a small part of Amazon's massive holdings, almost a loss leader to get customers signed up for the Prime fee-based delivery service. Amazon Web Services, which provides server space to other firms, is one of its most profitable businesses. Netflix, ranked sixty ninth, with a market cap of $173 billion, leases from Amazon. Amazon, the fifth largest company, with a market cap in the trillions, rents nearly all of its server space from Amazon Web Services for nearly all of its operations. Netflix issues Security and Exchange Commission (the US regulatory agency) mandates that Netflix issue risk warnings about the arrangement to stockholders.

In her visionary book *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?*, McKenzie Wark differentiates between the early days of platformization, when it appeared that there was a possibility that new technologies of information might "escape the confines of the existing relations of production" and the point at which CEOs such as Jeff Bezos at Amazon, Sergey Mikhailovich Brin of Alphabet, and Larry Page of Google began to dominate through an exploitation of information asymmetry. They not only exploited all classes of lower socioeconomic standing but the former ruling class itself by owning the "vectors of information": the algorithms, the computational speed and scale, the intellectual property (both their own and what they

capture from users), the logistical and data systems, and finally financial instruments(Amazon and Google Pay). Wark explains: "It exploits the asymmetry between the little you know and the aggregate it knows--an aggregate based on information you were obliged to 'volunteer.'"[5] It is worth noting that as early as 2002, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos described the firm as an "artificial intelligence company."[6]

The articles in this special issue reflect an array of critical lenses that we might apply to studies of serialized media in the streaming era. First, Jake Pitre's "Platform Strategy in a Technopolitical War: The Failure (and Success) of Facebook Watch" explores the social media company's foray into what Pitre terms "experiential seriality." Pitre's essay shows robust television studies can become when the challenges of interdisciplinary are fully embraced. Next, Jia Tan's "Platformized Seriality: Chinese Time-Travel Fantasy from Prime-Time Television to Online Streaming" brings together television studies and platform studies to consider the Chinese subgenre of *chuanyue* (time-travel historical fantasy). Specifically, Tan examines how these time-travel narratives, as they move from prime-time television serials to streaming platforms, open a productive space to explore representations, temporality, and new modes of engagement. Continuing with this consideration of engagement, Anne Gilbert's "Algorithmic Audiences, Serialized Streamers, and the Discontents of Datafication" turns its attention to audiences of these platforms and texts. Focusing on Netflix's interface and recommendation algorithm, Gilbert suggests that growing demands on consumer labor to curate programming, coupled with the "serialized" nature of how these databases are organized and presented, creates both a lack of transparency on how these choices are measured and valued but also barriers to collective viewing experiences.

Kelsey Cummings's "Queer Seriality, Streaming Television, and She-Ra and the Princesses of Power" and Paige Macintosh's "Transgressive TV:

5. Mackenzie Wark, Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse? London: Verso, 2021.M59.
6. J. Cassidy, *Dot.con: How America Lost Its Mind and Money in the Internet Era* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), 2002.

Euphoria, HBO, and a New Trans Aesthetic" both address the intersection points between streaming platforms and representation on serial television series. Cummings theorizes that the intimacy and effect produced by the experience of streaming media makes it a ripe space for generating what the author terms "queer seriality." Mcintosh, meanwhile, focuses on trans representation through a close formal analysis of the HBO series *Euphoria*, drawing aesthetic connections to Gen-Z social media use and values and the ways in which "edgy" programming has become synonymous with both streaming platforms. Finally, Oliver Kroener analyzes the impact of pandemic media-production practices on one of the most enduring and popular forms of serialized television programming: professional wrestling. Kroener's article, "Then, Now, Forever: Television Wrestling, Seriality, and the Rise of the Cinematic Match during COVID-19," considers the emergence of "cinematic" pandemic matches, which played to empty arenas, arguing that it represents the next phase of serialized storytelling in wrestling.

In addition, this special issue includes three book reviews and a film review, all further expanding on the topic of digital seriality. Briand Gentry reviews *Birth of the Binge: Serial TV and The End of Leisure* by Dennis Broe and *Gender and Seriality: Practices and Politics of Contemporary US Television* by Maria Sulimma, both of which excellently delineate how serialized cultural products dialectically reproduce and resist social class or gender inequalities in the context of the United States. Grace Elizabeth Wilsey narrows down the streaming platforms in her review of Ramon Lobato's book *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution*. The Australia-based scholar Lobato demonstrates how US-based platform Netflix becomes a global platform that is both transnational and national. Asher Guthertz provides a review of Shawna Kidman's *Comic Books Incorporated: How the Business of Comics Became the Business of Hollywood*. It highlights how the various legal, social, and industrial infrastructures influence the ebbs and flows of comic books. Finally, Anne Metcalf reviews the feature film *Zola*, tracing the significance of its origin in Twitter seriality and outlining director Janicza Bravo's radical attention to race and the female gaze.

Acknowledgments

Research Articles

Transgressive TV

Euphoria, HBO, and a New Trans Aesthetic

PAIGE MACINTOSH

Abstract

While television shows *Orange Is the New Black* (*OITNB*) and *Transparent* have made headlines for their inclusion of trans performers and their debatably authentic takes on trans experiences, *Euphoria* signals a new era in trans representation, one that is defined by a "cool" trans aesthetic that epitomizes multiplatform television's investment in trans as an edgy brand marker. Where HBO differs from Amazon's *Transparent* and Netflix's *OITNB* is in its investment in a new type of trans representation that disrupts the cinematic and television tradition in which trans characters remain closely associated with tragedy or are relegated to the recent past. While HBO utilizes both cable and video-on-demand (VOD) streaming services, its recent investment in trans discourses is in part a response to Netflix and Amazon Prime's successful trans programming and indicative of the competitive value trans content offers content producers in the multiplatform era. *Euphoria* breaks new ground by offering a new aesthetic treatment of trans identity that invokes Gen Z's ubiquitous use of social media, creative application of makeup, and nuanced approach to gender and sexual identities. The show's stylized aesthetic, represented through hypermobile cinematography and surreal lighting, reflects this transgressive approach while also highlighting the show's hypersubjective framing. Finally, *Euphoria* illustrates the crucial role of showrunner auteurs for HBO and, more specifically, the function of transgressive trans characters in Sam Levinson's auteur brand.

Keywords: HBO, transgender, transgressive, multiplatform television, Euphoria

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In August 2019, an article in the *Guardian* summed up the response to a new HBO show with the headline " 'It Triggered Mass Panic!'—Is *Euphoria* the Most Shocking Teen Show Ever?"[1] Drawing on the wave of controversy surrounding the show's debut, the article references the now infamous "30 penises scene" before describing the "provocative" show's exploration of "sex, social media, anxiety and addiction."[2] Recalling the controversies associated with teen dramas such as *Skins* and *Kids*, *Euphoria* depicts harsh realities long associated with teen life, including teen sexuality, mental illness, and substance abuse. But where *Euphoria* breaks new ground is in its unapologetic focus on Gen Z youth culture and its success at tapping into contemporary discussions about gender and sexuality. While the show's central narrative arc follows the queer cisgender character Rue as she deals with drug addiction and mental illness, it also focuses on her increasingly complex romance with the new girl in town, the transgender Jules. Through the character of Jules, the show explores questions of identity, authenticity, and the complex relationships between gender and sexuality that increasingly inform youth culture—all while avoiding the focus on transition that typically characterizes transgender characters' narrative arcs in mainstream media.[3]

While television shows *OITNB* (Netflix) and *Transparent* (Amazon Prime) have made headlines for their inclusion of trans performers and their debatably authentic takes on trans experiences,[4] *Euphoria* signals a new

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1. Martha Hayes, "It Triggered Mass Panic!—Is Euphoria the Most Shocking Teen Show Ever?" *Guardian*, August 3, 2019, http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/aug/03/is-euphoria-the-most-shocking-teen-show-ever.

2. Hayes, "It Triggered Mass."

3. Lukas Dhont's 2018 film *Girl* exemplifies this tradition, with its focus on a young girl's medical transition. Netflix acquired the film's distribution rights after its success at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival, further demonstrating how the streaming service profits off (at times problematic) trans narratives. Danielle Solzman outlines the film's controversial reception among trans critics in her article "The Transgender Drama 'Girl' is Earning Awards Season Buzz—Here's Why it's Infuriating Trans Critics," Slate, December 7, 2018, https://www.slashfilm.com/562805/girl-controversy/.

4. It is worth noting that Netflix's investment in trans content does not preclude it from hosting transphobic content, as demonstrated by the release of Dave Chappelle's stand-up special *The Closer*.

era in trans representation, one that is defined by a "cool" trans aesthetic. The show cast trans performer Hunter Schafer as the now iconic Jules but appears less interested in debates about the perceived authenticity of trans identities than in employing transness as a marker of transgressive youth culture. And although Schafer's involvement indicates that trans casting remains a relevant issue for trans media, its understated emphasis in paratextual conversations demonstrates a marked distinction between trans cinema and trans television. For instance, while cinematic projects such as *Girl* and *Rub & Tug* continue to face backlash over casting decisions, shows such as *Euphoria* have effectively moved past these debates by unreservedly promoting trans-affirmative hiring practices and treating trans identity as sophisticated and fashionable, so that the show subsequently frames Jules as a symbol of youth culture and an emblem of HBO's edgy aesthetic. In fact, *Euphoria* ultimately grounds its representation of youth culture in genderqueer practices that reframe trans identity as an authentic celebration of self that remains congruent with Gen Z culture and essential to a developing Gen Z aesthetic. In the case of *Euphoria*, trans identity has shed the tragic cinematic associations of the past and is reconstituted as an edgy celebration of transformative identity practices and woke culture. However, the show's innovative treatment of trans identity is complicated by showrunner-auteur discourses that foreground cis creator Sam Levinson over the show's trans creatives.

As I demonstrate below, *Euphoria* signals a shift in trans representational practices while reiterating multiplatform television's investment in trans as an edgy brand marker. Edge refers to a media text or genre's "ability to establish clear taste boundaries among demographic groups,"[5] but it is also a crucial generator of prestige for channels like HBO and streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime. Edge, in other words, reflects an investment in transgressive elements that push social boundaries and represents

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5. Timothy Havens and Amanda Lotz, *Understanding Media Industries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 255.

HBO's appeal to young audiences. It is worth noting that these "transgressive" elements are not necessarily transgressive in a political sense but represent transgression as brand identity. *Euphoria*'s engagement with morally troubled characters and complex seriality further contributes to HBO's distinctive brand, known for its investment in what Amanda Lotz refers to as "phenomenal television"[6] (a programming category trading on contemporary cultural issues in an effort to achieve the "watercooler status" of earlier broadcast television) while demonstrating the importance of buzz for HBO and its success at tapping into relevant cultural discourse. Where *Euphoria* differs from Amazon's *Transparent* and Netflix's *OITNB* is in its investment in a new type of trans representation, one that disrupts cinematic and television traditions whereby gender dysphoria (and trans identity more broadly) remain a ubiquitous source of tragedy and suffering for trans characters. While HBO utilizes both cable and VOD streaming services, its recent investment in trans discourses is in part a response to Netflix and Amazon Prime's successful trans programming and indicative of the value trans content offers content producers in the multiplatform era. In a crowded television market where exhibiting prestige dramas commercial free is no longer a major asset, HBO (and its streaming partner HBO Go) must invest in phenomenal TV[7] that pushes social boundaries to compete with the many complex serial dramas now screening on streaming services worldwide. *Euphoria* breaks new ground by offering a new aesthetic treatment of trans identity that invokes Gen Z's ubiquitous use of social media, creative application of makeup, and nuanced approach to gender and sexual identities. The show's stylized aesthetic, represented through hypermobile cinematography and surreal lighting, reflects this transgressive approach while also highlighting

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6. In *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, Amanda Lotz describes "phenomenal" TV as a "particular category of programming that retains the social importance attributed to television's earlier operation as a cultural forum despite the changes of the post-network era." See Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

7. Lotz, *The Television Will*, 42.

the show's hypersubjective framing. Finally, *Euphoria* illustrates the crucial role of showrunner auteurs for HBO and, more specifically, the function of transgressive trans characters in Sam Levinson's auteur brand.

Television scholarship has theorized that in the narrowcast era, "edge" has become a productive marker for cable channels and service providers aiming to distinguish themselves as an in-demand source of original programming. The term *edgy* is often used in association with words such as *original*, *complex*, and *sophisticated*[8] and therefore privileges a certain kind of serialized storytelling now often associated with streaming services. While it is important to note that "not all media industries seek edgy media texts under all conditions," most media corporations carry a "combination of both edgy and broad-appeal programming, or they own media outlets that reach a variety of narrowly defined groups."[9] In the case of HBO, edgy content has historically been a useful avenue for developing their reputation as an in-demand cable channel. HBO specifically draws on the correlations between edge and darker, more transgressive content to promote themselves to younger audiences as a cooler, more relevant brand. While the term *edge* broadly refers to works that establish clear taste boundaries among demographic groups, its early association with television shows like HBO's *Sex and the City*, *Six Feet Under*, *The Sopranos*, or *The Wire* (and other controversial and provocative content) suggests a specific appeal to the most coveted demographic: young adults. Dubbed "early adapters," these consumers "tend to be heavily influenced by marketing campaigns and strive to be on the leading edge of trends"[10] and are therefore highly valued by advertisers and television networks alike.

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8. Michael Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2012), 81.

9. Timothy Havens and Amanda Lotz, *Understanding Media Industries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 196.

10. Meg James, "Edgy TV Shows Harder to Sell," *Chicago Tribune*, August 9, 2004, http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2004-08-09-0408090107-story.html.

Content traditionally associated with edgy programming (i.e., explicit depictions of sex and violence, morally ambiguous characters, etc.) have long been a hallmark of HBO's distinctive style and have since become a prestigious indicator for the network. Their development of original television drama was originally "augmented by an active marketing campaign whose purpose was to produce 'an Aristocracy of Culture' for the network and its dramas."[11] HBO therefore cultivated a reputation as a distinguished source of culturally relevant dramas that rejected the low-brow aesthetics associated with network television. Their brand of cultural distinction is effectively summed up in their 1996 slogan: "It's Not TV. It's HBO." According to Trisha Dunleavy, this tagline "exhumed historic perception of television as the cultural inferior of theatrical cinema as well as invoking longstanding aesthetic differences between TV dramas and feature films."[12]

But this reputation for quality television was always tied to HBO's interest in transgressive and provocative content, as evident in shows like *Sex and the City*, *Six Feet Under*, *The Sopranos*, and *The Wire*. HBO, according to Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, "makes a virtue of its autonomy from the constraints and restrictions limiting network television. Institutional power comes from asserting pleasure in scandalising and flouting, from pushing the boundaries by broadcasting profanity, brutal violence and explicit sex scenes not seen (until recently) elsewhere."[13] Breaking cultural taboos then off-limits for traditional broadcast networks productively elevated HBO above its conservative competitors, but in an era where streaming services dominate the television market (services that are also not beholden to advertisers), HBO must push social boundaries even further to distinguish

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11. Trisha Dunleavy, *Complex Serial Drama and Multiplatform Television* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 79.

12. Dunleavy, *Complex Serial Drama*, 82.

13. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, "Sex, Swearing and Respectability: Courting Controversy, HBO's Original Programming and Producing Quality TV," in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 66.

itself. Although HBO "stakes its reputation on consciously violating codes policing the illicit,"[14] it also envelopes this transgressive content within institutional discourses of quality. Courting controversy has therefore "been institutionalised by HBO, embedded in and through its original programming, as a distinctive feature of its cultural cachet, its quality brand label and (until recently) its leading market position."[15]

This investment in provocative content and edgy themes productively draws on transgressive capital to distinguish HBO as a prestigious and culturally relevant brand. Summer Pennell's definition of transgressive capital sheds light on the correlation between edge and prestige. Transgressive capital describes how cultural transgression (particularly in the context of queer culture),

> seeks to interrogate the limits placed on people by mainstream society. To transgress is to point out that social constructions are a way to control those who do not fit neatly into normalized ideas of individuals and cultures. By pointing out limits, transgression can then go beyond them to create more nuanced, robust understandings of identity.[16]

While Pennell's work discusses queerness as a form of transgressive capital, a broader interest in pushing social boundaries as a means of accruing cultural capital signals the attraction of provocative content for television producers. Just as some media providers consider queer themes taboo, televisual depictions of underage sex or drug addiction often invite controversy and, when screened with other markers of quality television,[17] can effectively challenge

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14. McCabe and Akass, "Sex, Swearing and Respectability, 70.
15. McCabe and Akass, 63
16. Summer M. Pennell, "Queer Transgressive Cultural Capital," in Critical Concepts in *Queer Studies and Education*, ed. Nelson M. Rodriguez, Wayne J. Martino, Jennifer C. Ingrey, and Edward Brockenbrough (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 321.
17. McCabe and Akass's book *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond* productively outlines some of the early debates about quality television.

the status quo while also attracting attention and prestige for the associated networks.

Göran Bolin's work on media industries further attests to the value of controversial content in drawing interest and establishing brands, as he argues that controversial media often sparks cultural discussion that boosts the reputation and reach of that same media. According to Bolin, for a media text to have

> a strong distinctive power, the symbolic value of the commodities struggled over must be distinct, and worth the while and engagement to argue over. This means that the more controversial this value is, the harsher the discussion and arguments will be over its worth (or worthlessness), and the higher the stakes for arguing this value.[18]

HBO has a long history of courting controversy, and its interest in content that sparks fierce debate speaks to the network's investment in "buzz." According to Amanda Lotz, "Buzz was—and remains—central to HBO's strategy" and how the network evaluates the success of a series.[19] It uses a metric that accounts for the "dollar value of the visibility HBO receives from press coverage."[20] Controversial media is therefore valuable to content producers like HBO, as it offers a kind of transgressive capital that the network can use to promote their distinctive brand of edgy, original programming. Although this strategy was increasingly underutilized in the years following *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* (both shows completed their run by 2008), the rise of streaming services and ad-supported cable channels like Amazon, Netflix, and FX—who mastered HBO's strategic use of controversial content—in the multiplatform era sparked a return to "prestigious" and transgressive

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18. Göran Bolin, *Value and the Media: Cultural Production and Consumption in Digital Markets* (London: Ashgate, 2011), 78.
19. Amanda Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 41.
20. Lotz, *We Now Disrupt*, 41.

programming for HBO (for example, *Game of Thrones* and *Westworld* were widely regarded as a return to form for the network).

Euphoria is a culmination of both HBO's investment in transgressive quality TV and the rise of complex serial dramas more broadly, as the proliferation of morally ambiguous characters and taboo subjects like underage sex contribute to networks' accrual of transgressive capital in the competitive contemporary streaming landscape. As Pilot Viruet notes in their review for the *Observer*: "Euphoria is a dark, hard-to-watch and often overwhelming drama with a lot of moving parts that only occasionally seem to work together. So in short: It's definitely HBO."[21] The show's frequent depiction of teenage nudity—including "dick pic etiquette" and locker room scenes that feature multiple close-ups of penises—invites controversy while simultaneously critiquing porn's impact on teenager's sexual experiences. And while the show resists portraying Rue naked, her drug addiction often compels her to lie, steal, or verbally attack her loved ones. Her transgressive actions are explicitly tied to her struggles with addiction, yet her behavior also fits with the "morally ambiguous" protagonist that characterizes HBO (and complex serial drama more broadly), which Tony Soprano initially epitomized but that AMC's prestige programming cemented with *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White and *Mad Men*'s Don Draper. Although early iterations of this character type were almost exclusively men, it has since been embodied by women in complex serial dramas such as *Killing Eve* and *Sharp Objects*. For Michael Newman and Elana Levine, the "predictability with which HBO programs include taboo words and nude scenes attests to their eagerness to distinguish the 'freedom' of the ad-free format from the kinds of constraint faced by their less culturally legitimate competitors."[22] So thus, while HBO's transgressive content has historically illustrated the network's cultural legitimacy, more recently its use

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21. Pilot Viruet, "Do HBO's Controversial 'Euphoria' Shock Tactics Have a Point?" Observer, June 13, 2019, http://www.observer.com/2019/06/euphoria-hbo-controversy-teen-drug-use-review/.

22. Newman and Levine, *Legitimating Television*, 135.

of explicit content attempts to distinguish the network from online ad-free distributors like Netflix and Amazon Prime. In *Euphoria*, the crossover investment in sexual content and drug use in a teen setting productively plays on the transgressive capital central to HBO's reputation as edgy content provider.

While controversial sexual and violent content—including queer themes—has always been a hallmark of HBO, *Euphoria* is unique for its investment in trans-as-transgressive content and its nuanced exploration of queer youth experiences. Pennell's concept of transgressive capital originally focused on queer content, and HBO's latest queer series taps into the steady expansion of cultural interest in queer and trans issues. The show challenges traditional identity categories by refusing to explicitly label either Jules's gender identity or her relationship with Rue. There are references in the dialogue to Jules being "trans," but the show avoids any "coming out" sequences or discussions about her identity with or between any of the cis characters. And while it is clear that Jules and Rue's relationship is more than platonic, neither character's sexuality is explicitly commented on and discussions about their budding relationship are intentionally vague, eliding labels in a favor of a more fluid representation of their developing intimacy.

A scene wherein Anna (played by nonbinary performer Quintessa Swindell) applies Jules's makeup during a trip to the city illustrates the series' overall commitment to identity and relationships as implicitly queer. The sequence includes tight close-ups of Jules and Anna, and the only wide shot of them together is reflected in a mirror, which instils both a sense of intimacy between the characters and the viewer's distance from them. Vibrant red lighting dominates the scene, lending the conversation a surreal dimension that contrasts with the deep blue that often illuminates the suburban scenes. In this moment, Jules talks intimately with Anna about her gender experiences while wholly avoiding the "born-in-the-wrong-body" trope familiar to trans characters.[23] Epitomized by Caitlyn Jenner in the reality TV show *I Am Cait*, the "wrong body" trope is "a

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23. Other examples include Maura Pfefferman in *Transparent* and Rayon in *Dallas Buyers Club*.

highly recognisable script of transgender subjectivity within contemporary popular culture: the notion that transgender people posses an authentic gendered core, which is located within an initially mismatched corporeality."[24] In contrast to the historical tendency to treat transgender identity as a set process with an explicit end goal, Jules describes transition as "levelling up," telling Anna that she hasn't yet reached her "full powers." The implication here is that Jules can continue to level up indefinitely, rejecting the traditional transition narrative for an infinite yet empowering journey. She also explains her past relationships with men: "In my head, it's like if I can conquer men, then I can conquer femininity." This is the most explicit discussion of gender and sexuality in the show's first season and is clearly anchored in the safe, explicitly trans space of the city. Even here, when trans identity is the focus of the conversation, gender and sexuality are never discussed as binary but rather as fluid processes of transformation.

The surreal space of the city is in many ways the antithesis of Rue's suburban home, where Jules must navigate cis-normative assumptions and face the possibility of trans violence. While she is clearly accepted and treated as "one-of-the-girls" by the other high schoolers, the presence of Nate and his father reminds viewers of the constant threat suburbia poses to nonnormative identities. As the only trans person in town, Jules is largely ostracized from her community until she returns to the city. Only in the city does Jules interact with other trans people, and only in this protected space does she open up in front of the camera. The club scene that follows Anna's introduction cements this formula of suburbia as cis/city as trans. The show's trans consultant (Scott Turner Schofield) filled this scene with eighty trans and nonbinary extras, a fact Schofield referred to as a "true moment of real trans infiltration."[25] In this space the queer and exuberant mise-en-scène matches

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24. Michael Lovelock, "Call Me Caitlyn: Making and Making over the 'Authentic' Transgender Body in Anglo-American Popular Culture," *Journal of Gender Studies* 26, no. 6 (November 2017): 676.

25. Palmer Haasch, "Euphoria's Trans Consultant on Why the Series Tells Authentic Trans Stories," Polygon, August 10, 2019, http://www.polygon.com/interviews/2019/8/10/20792118/euphoria-hbo-trans-actors-jules-scott-turner-schofield-hunter-schafer.

Jules's queer excess, represented through her alternative, high-fashion aesthetic.

Euphoria's explicit evocation of queer capital (treated in this case as transgressive) is particularly pertinent for younger generations and speaks to the increasing value of queer content. According to Lisa Henderson, only recently has queerness become central to culture (in contrast to, for instance, the significant but relatively marginal successes of the new queer cinema). She argues that "queerness has delivered cultural expansion, a new commercial horizon broadened beyond old typifications of queer marginality but well shy of heterosexual disarmament."[26] In the case of television, Henderson connects this to the multiplatform era in which

> smaller, more defined "niche" audiences acquire industrial value, cable outlets compete as targeted brands with each other and with traditional broadcast networks, and distinction relies on a combination of old formats (situation comedy, nighttime soap opera, family melodrama) and new themes and characters, queers among them.[27]

While Henderson addresses queer culture, her work does not discuss the proliferation of trans discourses in modern mass media. In fact, as queer characters became more prominent in mainstream television, trans identity inherited their previous function, becoming in turn the go-to marker of distinctive television trying to push boundaries and tap into contemporary cultural discourses about gender and sexuality. By adopting trans characters that radically challenge representational norms, networks like HBO capitalize on the transgressive capital associated with trans, creating buzz that enhances the network's brand and marking themselves as culturally relevant.

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26. Lisa Henderson, *Love and Money: Queers, Class, and Cultural Production* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 34.
27. Henderson, *Love and Money*, 34.

Euphoria's fluid depiction of gender and sexuality differs from shows like *OITNB* and *Transparent* in part because it explicitly ties these radical or transgressive ideas about queer and trans issues to Gen Z youth culture. According to Mary L. Gray in her research on queer youth in rural United States, young people have "a unique relationship to modern constructions of sexual and gendered subjects"[28] partly because of the Internet and its capacity to connect young rural queers. Bruce E. Drushel also explicitly connects changing queer youth culture to the Internet. He argues that "as the post-Stonewall period evolved into the post-web era, queers themselves changed: they self-identify as sexual minorities at a younger age and are more likely to reject labeling that is permanent and classifies them according to a single facet of their identity."[29] *Euphoria*'s fluid approach to gender and sexuality reflects this attitude toward identity politics, as both Jules and Rue avoid labelling their developing relationship or their own gender or sexual experiences. Schofield notes that there was some pressure from HBO to "really name the labels, whether it was [*sic*] Jules' labels or to label [*sic*] Jules' and Rue's relationship in a way that isn't really how we do things anymore. So we had to explain that it would be much more authentic to the world that we're representing to not do that."[30] There is therefore a sense that this vague treatment of queer identity, rather than signaling unwillingness to explicitly acknowledge queerness, speaks to contemporary approaches to identity labels congruent with Gen Z values.

Euphoria also reflects (and contributes to) mythologies about the increasing acceptance of queer identities and experiences by younger generations, most obviously by eliding the traditional cornerstones of queer youth drama: homophobic and transphobic bullying. Jules's presence in

28. Mary L. Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 91.
29. Bruce E. Drushel, "The Evolution Will Not Be Broadcast (or Published): Social Capital, Assimilation, and the Changing Queer Community," *Journal of Homosexuality* 66, no. 12 (October 2019): 1764.
30. Haasch, "Euphoria's Trans Consultant."

town—and the queer implications of her relationship with Rue—disturb only Nate and his father, and their anxiety is explicitly tied to personal struggles with queer sexuality and toxic masculinity. Within the show's suburban setting, Nate's father represents the traumatic repression of queer desire associated, in *Euphoria* at least, with older generations, a trauma Nate inherits and manifests through physical and emotional violence. Jules's problems with Nate do not extend to the rest of the suburban community, wherein characters openly talk about "sexuality [as] a spectrum" and never question Jules's identity or her presence in women's spaces. And while Nate presents a physical and emotional threat, Jules is never subject to transphobic slurs or misgendering. Her casual acceptance reflects the increasing visibility of queer identities among younger generations and the "wider variety of resources available to [queer youth], from specialised social media sites to support organisations in their schools and communities, as well as the suffusion of mainstream popular culture with varied queer images and role models."[31] The ubiquity of social media in the show signals this development of a new "safe space" for queer and trans teens, a digital space Jules frequently uses to find sexual partners accepting of her trans identity.

However, by representing younger generations as inherently accepting of queer and trans culture, the show resists acknowledging contemporary concerns facing the trans community in favor of a more simplistic celebration of Gen Z culture. While *Euphoria* depicts Jules's uncomplicated acceptance within the suburban community, recent reports from the Human Rights Campaign confirm increasing rates of antitrans violence[32] that suggest increased visibility is inevitably followed by increased vulnerability. While the show might use Nate as a stand-in for these concerns, his position as an

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31. Drushel, "The Evolution," 1764.
32. Madeline Roberts, "Marking the Deadliest Year on Record, HRC Releases Report on Violence Against Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People," Human Rights Campaign, November 19, 2020, http://www.hrc.org/press-releases/marking-the-deadliest-year-on-record-hrc-releases-report-on-violence-against-transgender-and-gender-non-conforming-people.

out-of-touch teenager reliving the trauma of earlier generations dismisses this violence as an old-fashioned concern, one that is antithetical to Gen Z values, an overly simplified approach to the issue of antitrans violence.

Embedded within this transgressive appeal to youth culture—represented by references to vaping, contemporary music, and social media—is a unique approach to representing trans identities, one that explicitly connects trans and youth culture. Screen depictions of trans femininity are historically associated with tragedy and transphobic violence, with few film and television programs challenging that correlation. Andre Cavalcante notes how, for Hollywood in particular, "transgender struggle and tragedy bec[a]me the defining paradigm for narrativising gender variance."[33] This filmic tradition extends to television, wherein trans characters have most often featured as victims of violence (for instance, in *CSI* and *Law and Order*). *Euphoria* breaks this pattern by eliding Jules's transition narrative, and while the show's dark tone means Jules's narrative journey is often difficult, it doesn't explicitly address gender dysphoria in its first season, which trans cinema scholars have pinpointed as one of the main features of cis-authored trans characterizations.[34] Schofield notes in an interview with *Polygon* that in mainstream television, "the trans person's only narrative is transition. . . . We have life beyond this, and that's what we're seeing with Jules. Her narrative is complicated."[35] *Euphoria* challenges norms by shifting focus to what happens *after* the initial stage of transitioning that mainstream media has traditionally dwelled upon in, for instance, *Transamerica* and *Transparent*. While the show deals explicitly with several forms of trauma (including a disturbing sex-scene between Jules and Nate's father), it's notable that Jules's gender identity is, for her, never defined by dysphoria.

33. Andre Cavalcante, "Centering Transgender Identity via the Textual Periphery: *Trans-America* and the 'Double Work' of Paratexts," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 30, no. 2 (2013): 88.

34. Cáel Keegan, "Moving Bodies: Sympathetic Migrations in Transgender Narrativity," *Genders* 57 (2016).

35. Haasch, "Euphoria's Trans Consultant."

In contrast to conventional depictions of trans femininity in, for instance, mainstream films like *Dallas Buyers Club* and *The Danish Girl*, *Euphoria* innovatively uses makeup and costumes to reflect a new trans aesthetic that highlights spontaneity, ephemeralness, spirituality, and the capacity to know oneself. Jules's costumes and makeup are highly stylized: she combines cottage core (a style inspired by a romanticized interpretation of agricultural or rural life[36]) with an e-girl aesthetic that evokes an alternative high-fashion look, and her bold use of vibrantly colored makeup contrasts and complements the color filters deployed throughout the first season. In one instance, a saturated blue filter augments her red-orange mascara to create a surreal image signaling the end of her trip to the city and foreshadowing the harrowing developments in the season's final episode. Although Jules's costumes and makeup mirror the show's stylized cinematography and lighting, they also fit with a wider Gen Z style. Most (if not all) of the teenage girls flaunt a distinctive aesthetic that demonstrates a creative application of makeup less interested in traditional beauty norms and more invested in creating a unique "look."[37] Like that of the rest of the women in the cast, Jules's makeup is a fashion statement that marks her as original and cool. But while many of the characters utilize distinctive makeup styles, none is as iconic as Jules, who incorporates more radical color-clashing and rave aesthetics. Makeup and fashion, in this world, are radically creative expressions of self rather than performances of binary gender associations, and in this space, trans identity is synonymous with both authenticity and edgy Gen Z cultural aesthetics.

While the show is radical in its investment of trans as cool, it still adheres to trans-normative beauty standards that celebrate thin, white androgyny.

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36. Isabel Slone, "Escape into Cottagecore, Calming Ethos for Our Febrile Moment." *New York Times*, March 10, 2020, http://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/style/cottagecore.html.

37. *Euphoria*'s make-up artist has since inspired a Gen-Z beauty movement, according to a recent edition of *Vogue* (Lauren Valenti, "How *Euphoria*'s Lead Makeup Artist Sparked a Gen-Z Beauty Movement," *Vogue*, August 1, 2019, http://www.vogue.com/article/euphoria-hbo-gen-z-makeup.

Trans-normative narratives reinforce "acceptable" ways of being trans, behaviors related to class and racial markers. Trans media have an established history of using race to invite points of identification between trans characters and cis audiences that contribute to "acceptable" ways of narrativizing trans difference.[38] Several trans writers have written about the impact of "fascist" beauty standards in trans media—particularly advertising that features trans models. According to Ray Filar, "the most acceptably sexy trans people are also the ones replicating existing beauty norms: whiteness, thinness, trans female femininity or assigned-female androgyny. Where these norms are expanded to include trans bodies, they leave beauty fascism intact."[39] Jules's unique style upholds these beauty standards while contributing to the overwhelming whiteness of trans media. Her thin, model-like stature and her long blonde hair recall characters like *Girl*'s Lara Verhaeghen, reinforcing notions of "acceptable" transness as tied to race and aesthetics. While HBO's fashionable treatment of trans identity might productively challenge traditional television tropes, it lacks a truly subversive quality and therefore remains transgressive only within the context of traditional trans representation.

This investment in a trans aesthetic as explicitly linked to youth culture mirrors HBO's wider investment in a distinctive visual style. According to Lotz,

> Even before many of the convenience technologies disrupted previous norms, subscription services such as HBO and Showtime cultivated a production culture that prioritized aesthetic excellence and originality in a manner that distinguished their shows from those of conventional television—arguably a necessary distinction for content for which viewers must pay.[40]

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38. Paige Macintosh, "Queer Capital: Transgender Representation in Contemporary American Cinema" (MA diss., Victoria University of Wellington, 2018), 77

39. Ray Filar, "Trans (TM): How the Trans Movement Got Sold Out," Open-Democracy, November 2015, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/how-trans-movement-sold-out/.

40. Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 89.

In the case of *Euphoria*, the emphasis on aesthetics goes well beyond Jules's characterization. The show employs a unique visual style that takes on elements of the surreal through clever cinematography and dynamic camera movements. The show establishes this unusual style in the first episode with a rotating room; in this early scene, a drug-addled Rue attempts to walk down a hallway when the room begins spinning. The heightened foley effects as she stumbles onto the walls and ceilings (along with the muted soundtrack) intensify the sequence's surreal quality. But while "fantastic" scenes like this in, for instance, *A Fantastic Woman* serve to other and spectacularize trans characters, this sequence in *Euphoria*, on the other hand, reinforces the surreality of high school. In *Euphoria*, teenage life occupies an alternative, unreal space cloaked in a haze of drugs, just beyond the reach of the "real" world. This real world haunts the show's high school characters through references to global catastrophe and climate change, which never quite impact their lived experiences but contribute to an anxious atmosphere that permeates the entire show.

Euphoria's striking cinematography is essentially HBO, but the series' style also serves a distinct purpose—its vibrant color palette and dynamic camerawork signal its hypersubjective perspective and Rue's unreliability as a narrator. Intense use of color, lighting, and slow motion productively convey Rue's internal emotional struggles. A sequence in which Rue describes her panic attacks begins with a close-up of powdered drugs on a galaxy board. The camera zooms out to a bird's-eye point of view of Rue sitting with the drugs on her lap before dramatically zooming back in, pivoting to an upside-down, front-facing shot of Rue as she snorts the line and then quickly turning upright as she looks up at the camera. This shot cuts away to a montage sequence that begins with heavy strobe lighting and increasingly switches between a warm orange-red and a cool blue filter. Close-ups of Rue's face leave the rest of the scene in total darkness as her narration begins to describe "that moment when your breath starts to swell. And every time you breathe, you breathe out all the oxygen you have." This disorientating and surreal sequence captures Rue's anxiety and numbness, a moment of terrifying, breathless euphoria in an otherwise chaotic world. *Euphoria*'s cinematographer Marcell Rév describes

the show's aesthetic as "'emotional realism' that's more based in the characters' emotions, and not how the world surrounding them really looks."[41] Sequences such as this one, in which mise-en-scène and cinematography are orchestrated to disorient the viewer and thereby represent Rue's anxiety, perfectly capture *Euphoria*'s hypersubjective worldview.

The show's innovative use of cinematography—and its repeated use of nonlinear narratives and montage editing—also mark *Euphoria* as a complex serial drama. Dunleavy argues that narrative complexity is a key feature of complex serial dramas that contribute "to the moral and psychological investigation of key characters in ways that deepen audience engagement with their conflicts, decisions and/or behaviors."[42] Rue's voice-over in the opening scene of the first episode (which depicts her birth in the days following 9/11) immediately establishes her as the unreliable narrator and complex moral center of the show. The constant use of flashbacks to depict other characters' backstories, always narrated by Rue, further cements her position at the center of the text while fragmenting the narrative and enhancing the series' complexity. Dunleavy argues that the fragmented and nonlinear structure "intensifies the narrative demands that complex serials make of their viewers. Viewers are invited to remember and apply details revealed, possibly at widely disparate points of the show's entirety, to gain the fullest understanding that the text makes available to them.[43] *Euphoria*'s complex depiction of gender and sexuality is ultimately mirrored in the show's nonlinear format: both the show's narrative and the characters' sexual and gender markers remain indistinct, fluid, and ephemeral.[44] The heightened use of saturated color and slow motion in these sequences expresses the intense

41. Matt Grobar, "Cinematographer Marcel Rév on Cultivating the 'Emotion Realism' of 'Euphoria,'" Deadline, July 7, 2020, http://deadline.com/2020/07/euphoria-dp-marcell-rev-sam-levinson-hbo-interview-news-1202977123/

42. Dunleavy, *Complex Serial Drama*, 114.

43. Dunleavy, 116.

44. This emphasis on ephemerality speaks to Eliza Steinbock's work in *Shimmering Images*. See Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

emotional realism associated with Rue's internal conflicts, casting both as highly subjective and surreal.

    Euphoria's reception reaffirms the transgressive qualities of the show, its capacity to create buzz, and its investment in younger demographics. Early reviews describe the show as "haunting,"[45] "controversial,"[46] "gritty,"[47] and "compelling,"[48] with several reviewers drawing explicit comparisons to *Kids*[49] or *Skins*.[50] By focusing on the show's controversial elements (i.e., sexual content and drug use), these reviews highlight the show's interest in courting controversy. Moreover, by explicitly tying the show's transgressive qualities to its youthful appeal, these reviews demonstrate the show's significance for younger audiences. Many point out the different generational responses: a review for the *Hollywood Reporter*, for example, argues that "Levinson steers unflinchingly into what many adults and particularly parents will be triggered (and maybe outraged) by while most teens will probably agree it's one of the few accurate visual interpretations of their life."[51] Another review in *Variety* explicitly describes the show as a "complicated Gen-Z story of love in the time of "likes,"[52] immediately pinpointing *Euphoria*'s explicit engagement with Gen Z culture.

45. Ben Travers, " 'Euphoria' Review: Zendaya's HBO Series is a Teens-in-Crisis Horror Show." IndieWire, June 4, 2019, http://www.indiewire.com/2019/06/euphoria-hbo-review-zendaya-series-1202146636/.

46. Viruet, "HBO's Controversial 'Euphoria.'"

47. Jeena Sharma, "Hunter Schafer: Leading the Charge for Femme Representation," *Paper*, June 13, 2019, http://www.papermag.com/hunter-schafer-euphoria-2638773269.html?rebelltitem=5#rebelltitem5.

48. Palmer Haasch, "Euphoria Respects Gen Z Teens and Gets Them Better than Anyone Else," Polygon, August 6, 2019, http://www.polygon.com/tv/2019/8/6/20757309/euphoria-finale-season-1-review-gen-z-queer.

49. Tim Goodman, " 'Euphoria': TV Review," *Hollywood Reporter*, June 5, 2019, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-reviews/euphoria-review-1215681/.

50. Rebecca Nicholson, "Euphoria Review—So Explicit It Makes Skins Look Victorian," *Guardian*, August 6, 2019, http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/aug/06/euphoria-review-zendaya-rue-sex-drugs-teen-drama-skins.

51. Goodman, " 'Euphoria.' "

52. Daniel D'Addario, "Trans Superstar Hunter Schafer on Her Moment in Euphoria," *Variety*, June 21, 2019, http://variety.com/2019/tv/features/hunter-schafer-hbo-euphoria-1203248330/.

The series' unique visual style connects to ongoing debates about the significance of showrunner auteurs in the multiplatform era. Critics and scholars associate television's recent investment in less traditional, nonlinear formats to the multiplatform age, described by Timothy Havens and Amanda Lotz (among others), as a new era of flexibility and creative freedom for above-the-line workers. According to these scholars, changes in the industry have led to "more flexibility, creative control, and higher pay for some creative workers, while others have experienced significant job insecurity and lack of creative decision-making power."[53] This is particularly true for "well-known actors, directors, musicians, producers, and other high-end workers" who, in the showrunner-auteur era, have gained unprecedented creative freedom[54] (e.g., Ryan Murphy). This industrial development is pertinent for *Euphoria* since the show is explicitly connected to a single creative voice: Sam Levinson. Credited as the series' creator, Levinson wrote and directed every episode of the show's first season.[55] In the multiplatform era, a "television auteur must be seen at once as an effective boss and an inspired genius, and in its ideal form he claims total authority, simplifying the collaborative nature of industrial media production by isolating a singular artist to whom all others in the network of cooperation stand subservient."[56]

Euphoria's paratexts follow this pattern, clearly framing Sam Levinson as the "inspired genius' at the center of the show. While articles from the *Guardian*,[57] *IndieWire*,[58] and *Variety*[59] reference his earlier work (*Assassination Nation*, *Wizard of Lies*) or his more established father (Barry Levinson), they also identify him as the key creative genius behind the scenes. Perhaps

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53. Havens and Lotz, *Understanding Media Industries*, 198.
54. Havens and Lotz, 198.
55. Although the show is technically a remake of a 2012 Israeli production, the radical changes Levinson made to the characters, plot, and setting have so far limited comparative analysis between the two. Levinson's introduction of Jules, however, demonstrates how recently trans characters have gained cultural value.
56. Newman and Levine, *Legitimating Television*, 40.
57. Nicholson, "Euphoria Review."
58. Travers, "'Euphoria' Review."
59. D'Addario, "Trans Superstar."

more significantly, reviews in the *Guardian*,[60] *Paper*,[61] and *Vox*[62] acknowledge that Levinson largely drew on his own experiences with addiction when crafting Rue's story line. In doing so, critics spotlight one of the key trends in the show's marketing campaign: aligning major story lines with the personal lives of cast and crew. Newman and Levine argue that in contrast to the impersonal and complex structures informing creative productions, television auteurism and culturally distinctive media pose "the possibility that the individuals who create culture are crafting expressions of their own concerns within the constraints of a commercial medium," and that this trope is often manifested "through the identification of autobiographical elements in television storytelling."[63] Thus, *Euphoria*'s promotional campaign highlighted Levinson's personal history as both a testament to the show's authentic treatment of teen addiction and his superior creativity.

Furthermore, interviews with cast and crew consistently reference Levinson as the show's creative center, not only by explicitly citing his personal history with addiction but also by attributing the authenticity of his characters to his ability to listen to cast and crew. In an interview with *Paper*, Hunter Schafer explains that "[Levinson's] ability to understand other people's positions in life is really special. . . . He has been great about listening and being collaborative in terms of our storylines and our backstories."[64] This is a common thread throughout reviews and interviews with cast and crew, wherein critics credit the show with a "rich authenticity"[65] or "a relentless dedication to authenticity."[66] Surprisingly, the show's trans consultant explicitly credits Levinson with the show's authentic treatment of trans identity:

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60. Hayes, "It Triggered Mass."
61. Sharma, "Hunter Schafer."
62. Emily VanDerWerff, "HBO's Euphoria Is Two Shows in One. One Is Bad. The Other Could be Good." Vox, June 23, 2019, http://www.vox.com/culture/2019/6/23/18701226/euphoria-premiere-pilot-episode-1-recap-zendaya-hbo.
63. Newman and Levine, *Legitimating Television*, 48.
64. Sharma, "Hunter Schafer."
65. Travers, "'Euphoria' Review."
66. Sharma, "Hunter Schafer."

> *Euphoria* not only features other trans actors like Quintessa Swindell (Trinkets), but also explores gender and sexuality in a way that feels authentic to its audience. According to Scott Turner Schofield, Euphoria's trans consultant, that's due to showrunner Sam Levinson's earnest desire to listen to trans individuals and fairly and accurately represent their experiences on screen.[67]

Comments such as these legitimize *Euphoria*'s edgy content with reference to Levinson's auteur status, either by explicitly citing the showrunner's personal experiences or his extraordinary receptivity.

Levinson also puts his personal stamp on each of the show's characters. In a promo for the show, Zendaya says, "I have this idea that basically all the characters are just, like, different facets of [Levinson's] personality" before Levinson himself explains that he wanted to create "a story that's realistic and authentic"[68]—this oddity, in which the characters are described as aspects of Levinson *and* as means to portraying "authentic" contemporary teen experience, suggests the extent to which Levinson's vision steered the cast and crew's perspective on the series. In other words, the promotional emphasis on collaboration situates Sam Levinson as the creative center through which cast members filter their own personal experiences. While Schafer's influence over her character is recognized, her contributions are treated as a credit to Levinson's talent as a showrunner auteur who listens to cast members and adapts their characters to the performers' experiences. It is therefore clear that Levinson's personal history is used to legitimize the show's depiction of addiction while Schafer legitimizes the show's trans discourses, both narratives celebrating Levinson as an up-and-coming television auteur.

The auteur-showrunner framework is valuable, inviting productive comparisons with Levinson's other work. While his filmography is relatively

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67. Haasch, "Euphoria's Trans Consultant."
68. TV Promos, "Euphoria 1x02 Promo 'Stuntin' Like My Daddy' (HD) HBO Zendaya Series." YouTube, June 17, 2019, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-8GuN_BHNI&ab_channel=TVPromos.

limited (he has only written and directed three films since his directorial debut in 2011), his work consistently foregrounds identity politics, "woke" youth culture, and, in the case of *Assassination Nation*, prominent trans characters. *Assassination Nation*, which opened in theaters a year before *Euphoria*'s television debut, follows the fictional town of Salem after a hacker publicly leaks private documents from half the town's residents. Chaos ensues, and the community turns into a violent mob intent on murdering the young women they deem responsible for the data leak. Described as a "complex mix of feminist politics and low-brow genre fun,"[69] the film merges feminist rhetoric and woke political discourse with a gory revenge fantasy about young women navigating the "anxieties and pressures and fears of growing up in the digital age."[70] The film's investment in feminist discourse is immediately foregrounded with an opening montage of trigger warnings that playfully warn the viewer about the film's violent and sexual content along with warnings for "fragile male egos." As in the case of Jules, a trans performer (Hari Nef) plays the film's high-school-aged trans character Bex and is not subject to the transphobic bullying common in teen movies. The film, like *Euphoria*, emphasizes a trans-inclusive sisterhood, and while acknowledging the potential dangers of living as a trans woman in the United States, these threats are linked to an outdated, toxic worldview that (according to the film) preceded Gen Z culture.

Ultimately, *Euphoria* gestures toward a new era in trans representation, one grounded in youth culture and divorced from the tragic associations historically afforded trans characters. Trans identity in Levinson's canon is an accepted feature of a youth culture invested in authenticity. His aesthetic treatment of trans subjects as fashionable, self-assured, and ultimately cool

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69. Elena Lazic, "*Assassination Nation* Interview: 'Right Now, in America, We're in This Sort of Stand-Off. And Stand-Offs Don't End Well, You Know?" Seventh Row, September 24, 2018, http://seventh-row.com/2018/09/24/assassination-nation-sam-levinson/.

70. Beth Webb, "Assassination Nation: How Sam Levinson Made a Millennial Satire," *Empire*, November 23, 2018, http://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/assassination-nation-how-sam-levinson-made-a-millennial-satire/.

suggests that trans identity is now something to be coveted or at least respected, a demonstration of one's capacity to be true to oneself. It spotlights the potential transgressive power of trans content for younger audiences. And while the show's controversial elements have sparked debate among established critics, the show also normalizes trans and queer identities in its appeal to younger audiences.

Much like trans-authored shows, such as Netflix's *Sense8*, *Euphoria* is not aimed at educating cisgender liberals about trans issues; rather, it portrays an edgy transgressive youth culture where trans identity is already largely accepted. According to Keegan,

> *Sense8* marks a number of unprecedented moments in televisual media that have been largely overshadowed by the success of more culturally mainstream and palatable transgender identity narratives, such as those in *Orange* [*Is the New Black*] and *Transparent*. Unlike these programs, which aim to "teach" transgender to liberal cisgender audiences through universalist metaphors or through pedagogical forms of affect, *Sense8* offers different routes into trans as an aesthetic practice or as a set of narrative strategies for simultaneously representing and replicating hypermodern globality.[71]

Although *Euphoria* hasn't reached the mainstream success of *OITNB*, its insight into queer and youth culture marks a significant turning point in screen depictions of trans identity. The show arguably demonstrates the wider influence of streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime, which have compelled more traditional networks like HBO to not only establish VOD services but also to introduce increasingly edgy content to distinguish itself in the multiplatform era. And while *Euphoria*'s auteur discourse is reductive, its treatment of trans identity signals a new trans aesthetic that rejects transition and dysphoria in favor of phenomenological experience.

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71. Cáel Keegan, "Tongues without Bodies: The Wachowskis' Sense 8," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, nos. 3–4 (2016): 606.

While contemporary television's complex relationship with trans characters and performers (as a means of accruing cultural capital) contributes to a potentially exploitative environment, one where trans representation benefits industry elites more than the community it claims to represent, *Euphoria*'s unique approach to representation remains an intriguing and possibly productive development in trans media. But the show also demonstrates the potentially limiting power of a "trans-as-cool" approach that relies on trans-normative beauty standards. Ultimately, *Euphoria* demonstrates the significance of trans characters, aesthetics, and culture in HBO's appeal to young audiences and adaptation of its edgy brand to compete in a crowded multiplatform television market.

Acknowledgments

Queer Seriality, Streaming Television, and *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*

KELSEY CUMMINGS

Abstract

This article argues that queer seriality manifests as a unique feature of streaming media. Through an examination of the Netflix children's show *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018–2020), a case study in both queer representation and format, I apply research on affect theory to understand streaming media via a framework of intimacy and queer identity. The article focuses on how streaming services produce affect in their viewers via the perspective of a queer theoretical framework. I argue that affect is produced in the intimacy of the streaming experience, drawing from television studies to consider how the domestic space is both celebrated and expanded by streaming media like *She-Ra*. The expansion of television from the solely domestic realm has important implications, not only for the economic functions of streaming media but also for their sociopolitical purposes. Specifically, queer seriality becomes a central framework through which we can understand the political potential of streaming media.

Keywords: television studies, queer studies, queer television, affect theory, streaming television, Netflix

Introduction

This article argues that queer seriality manifests as a unique feature of streaming media. Through an examination of case studies in both representation and format, I apply research on affect theory to understand streaming media via a framework of intimacy and queer identity. Simultaneously, through discussion of the limitations of capitalist media to express and understand queerness, I recognize the "cruel optimism" of seeking identity and/or community in a neoliberal media landscape.[1] Here, I draw in part from the work of scholars who ask, "What would a queer *theory* of television look like if it did not take as its starting point the *identity* of the queer . . . but rather an understanding of queerness as *method*?"[2] I also build from research by scholars like Amy Villarejo, who demonstrate the inherent connection between technological developments in television and representational changes for LGBTQ+ communities as well as the contradictions inherent in analyzing television through a queer lens.[3] The connection between historical considerations of television and queer theory, as well as the coinciding establishment of queer television studies as a subfield, demonstrate precedence in the theoretical overlap of these phenomena.[4]

Much scholarship has focused on the specific manifestations of queerness and heterosexism in streaming television, discussing how the content being produced by services like Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, and Disney+ centers on questions of gender, sexuality, and power.[5] This article focuses on how

1. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

2. Theresa L. Geller and Anna Marie Banker, "'That Magic Box Lies': Queer Theory, Seriality, and *American Horror Story*," *Velvet Light Trap*, no. 79 (Spring 2017): 38.

3. Amy Villarejo, *Ethereal Queer: Television, Historicity, Desire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

4. Lynne Joyrich, "Queer Television Studies: Currents, Flows, and (Main)streams," *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 133–39.

5. Billy Holzberg and Aura Lehtonen, "The Affective Life of Heterosexuality: Heteropessimism and Postfeminism in *Fleabag*," *Feminist Media Studies* (2021), http://doi.org.10.10 80/14680777.2021.1922485; Anna Llewellyn, "'A Space Where Queer Is Normalized': The Online World and Fanfictions as Heterotopias for WLW," *Journal of Homosexuality*

streaming services produce affect in their viewers from a queer theoretical framework. I argue that affect is produced in the intimacy of the streaming experience, drawing from television studies to consider how the domestic space is both celebrated and expanded by streaming media. Domesticity is no longer the sole setting for televisual consumption, as mobile media make streaming content accessible at work, on a bus, or in an airport. At the same time, the domestic realm itself is expanded through streaming, which allows audiences to watch not just in their living rooms but in spaces as intimate or personal as their beds. This expansion of television from the solely domestic realm has important implications, not only for the economic functions of streaming media but also for their sociopolitical purposes. If television is no longer "relegated" to the traditionally feminine-domestic sphere, what does that mean for its gendered and sexual associations? How does this connect to the masculinization of "quality" television that prioritizes heterosexist stories and/or production contexts? While the discourse around the proclaimed "golden age of television" tends to celebrate more heterosexist narratives like *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013), *House of Cards* (2013–2018), and *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), "quality" itself is made complicated by the fact that the very concept of "mass culture" is increasingly null and void. The widespread availability of a huge range of media offerings means that audiences are no longer limited to watching shows that dominate the media landscape—they can now watch NBC's streaming Peacock original *We Are Lady Parts* (2021–), a show about an all-female Muslim punk band, just as easily as they can watch Marvel's predominately white, heterosexual, and/or hegemonic fare like *Loki* (2021) and *WandaVision* (2021) on Disney+. All

(2021), http://doi.org.10.1080/00918369.2021.1940012; Justine Lloyd and Jilly Boyce Kay, "Gender and Transnational Media," *Feminist Media Studies* (2021), http://doi.org.1 0.1080/14680777.2021.1945651; Frida Lyonga, "Shades of Homophobia: A Framework for Analyzing Negative Attitudes Toward Homosexuality," *Journal of Homosexuality* 68, no. 10 (2021): 1664–84, http://doi.org.10.1080/00918369.2019.1702352; Teresa Caprioglio, "Does 'Queer Narrative' Mean 'Trauma Narrative' on TV? Exploring Television's Traumatized Queer Identity," *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* 22, no. 4 (2021): 452–64, http://doi.org.10.1080/15299732.2021.1925865.

of these factors make our understanding of streaming, seriality, and affect significantly more nuanced.

I will begin by discussing how queer representational content has been subsumed by hegemonic formatting, specifically in contemporary Hollywood film. Large studios write select marginal characters as being marginally queer and include blink-and-you-miss-them scenes of queer representation, baiting LGBTQ+ audiences in attempts to pander to them/ us while not risking the loss of homophobic audiences in the process. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in works by Disney, including its recent children's fare as well as film franchises like *Star Wars* and Marvel. For example, *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (2019) was promoted as including LGBTQ+ representation only for that representation to be comprised of two unnamed female characters kissing in a very brief celebration scene near the end of the film, prompting a *Vanity Fair* article to ask, "Are We Really Going to Pretend That Gay Kiss in *The Rise of Skywalker* Matters?"[6]

This discussion of hegemony and heterosexism in contemporary Hollywood film will contribute to my analysis of how formatting has functioned in the contemporary moment and also how it can function in different, counter-hegemonic ways. Thus, the next section of the essay considers the relationship between streaming television and affect, reading both format and representation as queer in a case study. My discussion of how the streaming context is changing over time ultimately considers how formatting of streaming platforms can be queer, especially in the sense that intimacy becomes the most central feature of this medium. Affect is routinely weaponized by neoliberalism in support of hegemony; however, I argue that it is also simply a feature of contemporary media that audiences are able to exert control over. The result is that streaming media reflect a form of queer seriality with politically useful implications.

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6. K. Austin Collins, "Are We Really Going to Pretend That Gay Kiss in *The Rise of Skywalker* Matters?," *Vanity Fair*, December 20, 2019, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/12/are-we-really-going-to-pretend-the-gay-kiss-in-the-rise-of-skywalker-matters.

Defining Key Terms

This essay primarily draws from theoretical frameworks of affect and queerness. When I use affect theory, I am building on the work of scholars including Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, and Judith Butler.[7] My use of the term *affect* focuses on the relationship between embodiment and emotions—audience affect in the context of streaming television not only emerges from how audiences emotionally react to particular programming but also from how they consume such programming (whether via the traditional method of sitting and devoting singular attention to a show in a shared domestic space or, for example, by listening to a show that includes visual impairment aids like audio description while doing errands or chores). The wide variety of ways in which audiences can consume streaming television and can interpret and emotionally respond to such content make affect an important framework through which we should interpret the streaming media context. I also use affect theory because of its importance to the feminist queer framework from which I am working; when we talk about queerness and media, it is necessary to account for the importance of traditionally maligned aspects of experience and identity such as feelings and physicality.

The queer theory from which I draw in this essay centers on queer identity representation in media as well as queerness as a counter-hegemonic position. I am particularly interested in drawing from the work of scholars like Berlant, Butler, and Kadhi Amin, the latter of whom notes the historical connections between affect and queer theory.[8] Broadly speaking, my use of queer theory in this context focuses on queerness as identity, intimacy (in both relationships and methods), and revolutionary potential.

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7. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

8. Kadji Amin, "Haunted by the 1990s: Queer Theory's Affective Histories," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 44, nos. 3 & 4 (2016): 173–89.

My use of the term seriality focuses on the medium specificity of streaming television as well as the narrative implications of serial storytelling, with an emphasis on how episodic formatting influences the relationship between viewers and streaming content. In short, I focus on seriality because I see it as the most important formatting element of streaming television to take into consideration when focusing on the affective dynamics that characterize platforms like Netflix. When I characterize this specific type of seriality as queer, I am referring in part to the counter-hegemonic potential of storytelling that is episodic.

Contextualizing Streaming and Queerness

A concern of LGBTQ+ communities that has become particularly prevalent in the streaming context is how queer representation gets subsumed by hegemonic media structures. Disney films have become especially emblematic of this issue in recent years: media like *Onward* (2020), *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021), and *Luca* (2021) make queerbaiting the new normal. Headlines like "Congratulations to Disney's 7th First Openly Gay Character" demonstrate audience awareness of the cynical appropriation of queerness by the studio.[9] Disney's Marvel made a point to announce in 2018 that "LGBTQ heroes" would begin to appear in the franchise, only to have the first such appearance in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) be an unnamed griever who has two minutes of screen time (played by codirector Joe Russo).[10] Like the serialized narratives of culture itself, the co-optation of queerness by structures of heterosexist capitalism becomes fundamentally cyclical. It is repeated again and again (and again) in the contemporary moment.[11]

9. Briana Lawrence, "Congratulations to Disney's 7th First Openly Gay Character," Mary Sue, May 26, 2021, https://www.themarysue.com/another-first-openly-gay-character/.

10. David Mack, "'Avengers: Endgame' Features Marvel Studios' First Openly Gay Character in a Small Role," BuzzFeed News, April 25, 2019, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/davidmack/avengers-endgame-first-gay-character-joe-russo.

11. Jackson McHenry, "*Avengers: Endgame*'s Gay Moment Is a Nice Gesture That Just Feels Exhausting," Vulture, April 29, 2019, https://www.vulture.com/2019/04/avengers-endgames-gay-moment-just-feels-exhausting.html.

In seeming contrast with these filmic representations, television shows with significant queer representational content like *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018–2020), *Pose* (2018–2021), *Dear White People* (2017–2021), *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–2019), and *Queer Eye* (2018–) are increasingly prevalent in the streaming television context across various genres.

The extent to which these queer representational elements align with hegemonic ideologies varies. For example, a show like *Stranger Things* (2016–), in its romanticization of and nostalgia for the 1980s, tends to reify heterosexism and misogyny through its writing of characters and romantic relationships. This is despite the fact that the show introduced a lesbian character in its third season (Robin Buckley [Maya Hawke], who came out in the second-to-last episode of season three) and has hinted but not confirmed that another character might be gay since the pilot episode (Will Byers [Noah Schnapp], whose mother admits in the first episode of season one that his peers bully him and call him homophobic slurs). Additionally, the prevalence of media made by creators like producer Ryan Murphy (*Glee*

Figure 1: Though representation was more subtextual in the first season of *She-Ra*, scenes depicting the intimate relationship between Adora and Catra demonstrate that the show was always informed by queerness. *Source:* Netflix

[2009–2015], *American Horror Story* [2011–], *Ratched* [2020–]) is often emblematic of the commodification and especially the whitening of queerness on contemporary television.[12] In addition to being a production-based phenomenon, this form of hegemonic white queerness is also an audience phenomenon that undermines queer and trans people of color as both fans and creators. For example, the CW show *The 100* (2014–2020) saw widespread fan backlash against its use of the "bury your gays" trope on a white woman,[13] but backlash against the show's routine killing-off and torturing of Black characters, among other forms of racism, was virtually nonexistent among white fans and never gained the media attention that the "bury your gays" outcries did.[14]

Representation aside, the formatting of major Hollywood films and television shows that dominate the industry reflect hegemonic epistemology, prioritizing heterosexist ideologies among other worldviews. Though Hollywood films can reflect or incorporate radical elements in their form (for example, in the case of works by director Douglas Sirk like *Written on the Wind* [1956], which presents a nearly surrealist camp interpretation of seemingly heterosexual desire), in the contemporary moment, they are more likely to reify formal elements that maintain capitalist ideologies first and foremost. For example, the plot holes and inconsistencies in a film like *Avengers: Endgame* demonstrate the irreverence with which studios like Disney tend to conceive of their franchises as storytelling or formal enterprises. This is not to deny the fact that the aesthetics of computer-generated imagery (CGI) are central elements of films like *Endgame*, nor to deny the potential of CGI

12. Noel Duan, "In 'The Assassination of Gianni Versace,' Ryan Murphy proves—Again!—He Can Never Get Race Right," Quartz, March 7, 2018, https://qz.com/quartzy/1222574/ryan-murphy-proves-again-he-can-never-get-race-right/.

13. Erin B. Waggoner, "Bury Your Gays and Social Media Fan Response: Television, LGBTQ Representation, and Communitarian Ethics," *Journal of Homosexuality* 65, no. 13 (2018): 1877–91.

14. Nicholas Rickards, "New Places, New Races: Neocolonialism and Postracial Racism in the Young Adult Dystopian Series, *The 100*," *Journal of Popular Culture* 53, no. 2 (2020): 409–30.

elements to be used for counter-hegemonic formal and narrative ideologies. Rather, I point out the inconsistencies of narrative in such films to demonstrate how the formal elements of storytelling are generally leveraged for capitalist ideologies.

By comparison, some streaming television of the contemporary media landscape, though it is obviously still created by platforms like Netflix to be profitable, also incorporates more counter-hegemonic elements in both its form and narrative. Because Netflix is often resistant to renewing shows past one to two seasons anyway,[15] its creators are more likely to experiment with unique, distinctive approaches to their programming as in shows like *Dear White People* and *She's Gotta Have It* (2017–2019). This is not to say that creators do not make a point of trying to produce shows that will be renewed for as long as possible, as I will discuss in greater detail below; however, it is to say that streaming television provides opportunities that allow for both narrative and formal experimentation, and this experimentation makes streaming television uniquely different from tentpole blockbusters in terms of its affordances. As I will discuss in greater detail below, children's media are also especially reflective of radical formal and storytelling potential.

Overall, streaming television has the potential, and in some cases has seen that potential through, to adopt queer methods and formatting. Even in shows with little-to-no queer representational content like *Bridgerton* (2020–), elements of production like "series drops" that facilitate binge-watching, thematic focuses on sexuality and desire, and visual design that emphasizes aesthetics as being of central importance to the program all reflect potentially counter-hegemonic elements of queerness. To better understand how streaming television produces and takes advantage of queer seriality for both storytelling and profit, we need to consider a specific example in more detail.

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15. Dan Clarendon, "Why So Many Netflix Shows Have Only One Season," TV Insider, July 6, 2021, https://www.tvinsider.com/1004638/why-netflix-shows-have-one-season/.

Affect, Streaming, and *She-Ra*

Taking *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* as a central case study, I argue that seriality in streaming contexts produces queer affect in part by producing intimacy. This children's show, based on the toy franchise and television series *She-Ra: Princess of Power* (1985–1987), was adapted for television by writer Noelle Stevenson. The show is identified by both audiences and critics as being of particular interest to and itself particularly interested in LGBTQ+ communities—as a *Los Angeles Times* article about the show's fourth season notes, "In Netflix's 'She-Ra,' even villains respect nonbinary pronouns."[16] *She-Ra* is made for children but drew audiences from a range of older age groups, particularly LGBTQ+ adults, in part as a natural result of its attraction for audiences who watched the original version in the '80s. The context and availability of binge-watching, alongside the ways in which

Figure 2: Netflix advertises *She-Ra*'s queer representational content in the thumbnail image for season one, episode eight, depicting Catra and Adora in a charged dance.
Source: Netflix

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16. Tracy Brown, "In Netflix's 'She-Ra,' Even Villains Respect Nonbinary Pronouns," *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 2019, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2019-11-05/netflix-she-ra-princesses-power-nonbinary-double-trouble.

binge-watching has affected production elements of television, make word of mouth an important determining factor in a streaming show's success. Word of mouth is often how LGBTQ+ content is shared among LGBTQ+ audiences, and the Netflix recommendation algorithm is also an important kind of technological "word of mouth" that uses viewers' activity and preferred media to determine what to recommend to them. If Netflix's algorithm suggests *She-Ra* to a user based on other media that they have watched (and that other and/or similar viewers also liked), that user might be receiving a new media kind of "word of mouth" recommendation from a fellow LGBTQ+ person without even knowing it.

As a children's show that nevertheless drew a fanbase of teenagers and adults as well as children, *She-Ra* provokes specific questions about aspiration. For example, reviews of the show on parenting websites like Common Sense Media note that it emphasizes choosing good over evil, being true to oneself, and that it prioritizes diversity in its characters' identities.[17] Showrunner Stevenson noted in an interview that "the idea that a kid could wear their sneakers and their shorts to cosplay She-Ra is really exciting to me."[18] This accessibility makes *She-Ra*'s status as an aspirational text possible for the target audience of children over seven years old and is of interest from a queer perspective partly because of the importance of attainable role models for LGBTQ+ children. Children's media can already have queer associations in terms of its formatting—for example, the seriality of the classic Saturday morning cartoon (like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* [1987–1996]) can lend itself to nonsequential consumption. Rather than being only reflective of the stereotypically "simplistic" nature of children's media, I argue that this nonsequential characteristic is queer in the sense of being nonconforming

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17. "Kid Reviews for She-Ra and the Princesses of Power," Common Sense Media, accessed May 5, 2022, https://www.commonsensemedia.org/tv-reviews/she-ra-and-the-princesses-of-power/user-reviews/child.

18. Mariella Mosthof, "Here's When The Original 'She-Ra & The Princesses of Power' Aired," Romper, November 13, 2018, https://www.romper.com/p/when-did-the-original-she-ra-the-princesses-of-power-air-netflix-is-bringing-back-a-classic-13137881.

or counter-hegemonic. In upending traditional Western narrative structures, nonsequential seriality can be understood as a challenge to the epistemology that most of us have been trained into via dominant narrative formats.[19] Similarly, media made for young children are often queer in their broken-up nature—for example, shows like *Sesame Street* (1969–) and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (1968–2001) are comprised of nonnarrative, arguably nonlinear, and sometimes nonfiction sections of the show rather than a cohesive story arc. Such shows are often comprised of a series of lessons and ministories that may or may not share unifying elements as broad as a particular letter or number of the week. This nonsequential formatting is not characteristic of *She-Ra* because of the linear nature of Netflix's structure (which makes sequential viewing of a show's episodes the most convenient and automatic watch option for audiences) and because of the show's traditionally structured narrative (which builds broader plots to a climax at the end of each season rather than only featuring one-off episodes that could be watched in any order). However, the rewatching that child audiences are known for (and that makes children's media so profitable) is made both possible and easy by the Netflix format. While the interface of Netflix prioritizes linear consumption, it also encourages rewatching through suggestions like "Watch It Again," and this rewatching can be understood as a partially nonlinear practice that allows audiences to revisit particular episodes out of order.

The history of *She-Ra* affects our understanding of the Netflix reboot and its affective as well as ideological functions. Peggy A. Bulger writes that the original *She-Ra* franchise was primarily created to cater to working mothers of the 1980s who sought empowering, positive female role models for their daughters:

> The character of She-Ra may be seen as logical outgrowth of the women's movement and feminine struggle for equality in the workforce. However,

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19. N. J. Lowe, *The Classical Plot and the Invention of Western Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

this positive imaging has been co-opted and combined with conventional role modeling by the toy industry to turn a handy profit. At the same time, the actual play of children will, at times, have very little connection to the marketing images perpetrated by toy manufacturers and media managers, or the altruistic models sought by today's mothers. This proposition would suggest that toys, rather than being designed and created for children, are fashioned by adults for other adults—the parent/consumers.[20]

A spin-off of the toy and television franchise *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (1983–1985), the original *She-Ra* can be seen simultaneously as a cynical cash-grab and as an at-least somewhat feminist answer to the aspirational functions of *He-Man* for child audiences. Aspiration, however, as Bulger notes, is affected not just by children's media but also by the other surrounding factors that affect children's development. Bulger describes watching her young daughters play with She-Ra dolls and reify gender stereotypes about shopping, nurturing, and performing other expected "feminine" acts in the process, despite the fact that She-Ra is not associated with those particular gendered functions. Does this affect our understanding of the Netflix reboot of *She-Ra* and its various attributes?

While sociological work of the kind that Bulger did should be undertaken to fully understand how child audiences process the narratives that they are presented with in children's media, this article focuses instead on asking how affect "by adults for other adults" can be understood in this particular case study. As Bulger notes, "Toys and dolls offered to our children are created by adults for adult consumers. These artifacts are generated in an attempt to teach current expectations of adult behavior to the developing child. These expectations, especially those involving gender roles, are shaped by the economic imperatives of the adult labor force and the cultural materialism that impacts society as a whole."[21] Expanding on this point,

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20. Peggy A. Bulger, "The Princess of Power: Socializing Our Daughters Through TV, Toys, and Tradition," *Lion and the Unicorn* 12, no. 2 (1988): 185.
21. Bulger, "The Princess of Power," 190.

I argue that adults also look to children's media to understand themselves and their roles in the cultural landscape. This particularly applies for fans of the original *She-Ra* show who might be watching the reboot with daughters, nieces, or other children in their lives. In the case of Netflix's *She-Ra*, some LGBTQ+ adults as well as children sought out a show that provided personalized experiences of aspiration, identity recognition, and/or embodiment—in other words, a show that provided desired affect.

Aspiration is built into this show because of the fact that the main character herself is a transformed ideal: Adora turns into She-Ra as a magical process, and she regularly comments on how She-Ra is taller, stronger, and has "better hair" than Adora in her normal form. The ideal self not only comes from the original *She-Ra* franchise of the 1980s but also from the magical girl anime subgenre from which the reboot draws (with this subgenre being particularly notable for how it is frequently beloved among LGBTQ+ audiences).[22] Identity recognition emerges from the queer nature of the show's narrative, particularly the relationship between Adora and Catra, who begin as best friends, become complicated enemies, and, by the show's finale, confess their romantic love and kiss one another. Though queer representation was not as explicit in the first season of the show, it became more prevalent as audiences reacted positively to it:

> "Studios and networks tend to be cautious, and never want to stick their neck out farther than they have to. It's easier to convince them if this is something that other shows have already done. There was a lot of fear at first," Stevenson says of the first season of her *She-Ra*. "There always had to be plausible deniability, with the exception maybe of Bow's two dads, because other shows had been including gay parents. It only started changing once we started getting positive, vocal support from fans of the show. They picked up on all the queer subtext, and they wanted more." That groundswell of

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22. Clare McBride, "Sailor Moon and the Queer Art of Questioning Gender and Sexuality," Syfy Wire, June 24, 2019, https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/sailor-moon-and-the-queer-art-of-questioning-gender-and-sexuality.

support for a central queer love story that had, up to that point, been merely implied, gave Stevenson what she needed to pitch executives on ending *She-Ra*'s run with [a] big swing. "When I was like, look, we want this queer relationship between the two leads to be the climax of the entire show—a fairly big ask—instead of getting a hard 'no,' I got a 'okay, sell us on it.' I was very very grateful for that trust and that opportunity."[23]

Stevenson's description of the process of making *She-Ra* explicitly queer demonstrates both how production is affected by the streaming context and how identifiable the show is for LGBTQ+ audiences. The act of making the subtextual textual is one that many audiences will identify with for its parallels to a person's real-life coming-out process.

As the earlier mention by Stevenson of easy *She-Ra* cosplay options for children suggests, embodiment is also important for audiences,

Figure 3: Image from the series finale of Netflix's *She-Ra*.
Source: Netflix

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23. Joanna Robinson, "*Raya and the Last Dragon*'s Kelly Marie Tran Thinks Her Disney Princess Is Gay," *Vanity Fair*, March 5, 2021, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2021/03/raya-and-the-last-dragon-kelly-marie-tran-gay-namaari-raya.

particularly children. Themes of transformation, the aesthetic changes over time that the characters experience in the show (including Catra's haircut in the final season, from long hair to a short butch cut), and audiences' identifications with different characters all reflect affective investments in *She-Ra*. From the beginning of the show, Bow, the central male protagonist, presents a counter-hegemonic image of masculinity with his heart-decorated crop top and loving nature; the fact that he is read as being trans-coded by many audience members (his swimsuit from an episode early in the series includes a top as well as a bottom) also reflects how the show itself, in the writing of all of its characters, prioritizes representations of LGBTQ+ characters for its audience.[24] Though the distinction between trans and queer identities is important to note, entertainment news coverage of the show has generally grouped its representation of queer characters like Adora and Catra with its representation of trans and nonbinary characters like Double Trouble,[25] partly in line with historical connections between queer and trans communities via terms like *LGBTQ+*. The show's aesthetics also manifest in its consistent use of bright colors and features like the not-so-subtle rainbow that appears at the climax of the first season's finale.

Seriality is central to how affect is produced and understood in this case study because seriality allows for word of mouth, binge-watching, and rewatching, all of which are important elements to the success of both streaming television in general and *She-Ra* in particular. Accessibility makes the show reflective of both affective and ideological investments in its audience. For example, *She-Ra* is rated TV-Y7 ("suitable for ages 7 and up") on Netflix, making it literally accessible to child audiences, even if they are watching Netflix with parental limits on it. Given that queer content is often branded as being "adult," even if it is comparable in

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24. Susannah Alexander and David Opie, "She-Ra Boss Responds to Popular Fan Theory Regarding Bow's True Identity," Digital Spy, May 24, 2020, https://www.digitalspy.com/tv/ustv/a32653364/she-ra-noelle-stevenson-theory-bow-trans/.

25. Alexander and Opie, "She-Ra Boss."

nature to seemingly heterosexual romantic representation on shows meant for similarly aged children, the fact that *She-Ra* is available to the TV-Y7 crowd is deeply valuable to that audience and is particularly important for LGBTQ+ children. This accessibility supports my broader argument about the role that intimacy plays in queer seriality of streaming television.

Intimacy comes not only from character-driven storytelling but also from formatting that allows audiences to binge-watch content from a variety of locations and contexts. My use of the term *queer seriality* focuses on how the seriality of streaming television is inherently intimate, breaking down boundaries between various binaries and (for creators and audiences at least, if not necessarily for platforms) prioritizing affect above profit. Care and community manifest in the streaming context of *She-Ra* because audiences are empowered, not just to see themselves represented but to do so repeatedly.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how queer seriality characterizes the Netflix show *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, arguing that the program is reflective of broader potential imbued in the streaming television context. Queerness as counter-hegemony that combats neoliberal isolation and capitalist imperatives not only manifests in the storytelling of *She-Ra* but also in its formatting. Through affective investments and accessibility, the streaming context represents a critical point of intervention in the contemporary media landscape. Programs like *She-Ra* show us how streaming can serve important, innovative functions for audiences of all ages.

Acknowledgments

Platformized Seriality

Chinese Time-Travel Fantasy from Prime-Time Television to Online Streaming

JIA TAN

Abstract

While seriality has long been associated with broadcast and cable television, the global rise of online streaming has brought development of what I call *platformized seriality*: assemblages of online platform infrastructure design, content regulation, generic convention, and experimentation. The notion of platformized seriality points to a complex refiguration of specific media content and genre forms that are usually overlooked in platform studies. This essay analyzes time-travel serials—now immensely popular in the context of China's growing video-streaming industry, convergence culture, and the financial boom of digital platforms. Analyzing the trope of the female time traveler in historical romance, this essay examines how *chuanyue*, or the Chinese time-travel genre, subtly unsettles contemporary gender-related anxiety and the dominant discourse on development and progress, something that partly explains the pleasure it generates. The genre of *chuanyue* benefited from the rise of platform infrastructure designs such as bullet screens and pay-on-demand-in-advance services that direct new forms of audience engagement and new practices of binge-watching. Focusing on the fantasy genre and the mutability of the time traveler's gender, sexuality, and class, I explore how the trope of traveling backward marks a reconfiguration of conceptions of time, space, and history and thus opens a space to negotiate with the neoliberal narratives of linear and progressivist temporality.

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Seriality has long been associated with the predominant narrative mode of network television.[1] The global rise of online streaming platforms has brought new practices of seriality online. With the rise of subscription video-on-demand services such as Netflix, Amazon, Tencent, and other branded television content, originally produced content has been increasingly important.[2] These new services offering quality television via video-on-demand have facilitated new modes of watching such as binge-watching, which is a deliberate, self-scheduled alternative to the conventional television-watching experience.[3] Intersecting existing literature on television studies and platform studies, in this essay, I examine the operations of what I call *platformized seriality*, which are assemblages of online platform infrastructure, content regulation, generic convention, and experimentation. Specifically, I explore the exemplary short history of the *chuanyue*, or Chinese time-travel genre, to demonstrate the logic of platformized seriality, including the genre's short period of popularity on prime-time television, its ban by the Chinese government, and its later revitalization on online streaming platforms.

The revival of time-travel serials typifies the impact of complex Internet fandom and media convergence. Platformized seriality makes narrative experimentation or diversification more flexible, as evident in the trope of the female time traveler who, compared to the male traveler, better articulates contemporary gender politics and collective anxiety and appeals to the female audience. The theme of traveling backward manifests a reconfiguration of the conceptions of time, space, and history and thus opens a

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1. John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).
2. Michael Wayne, "Netflix, Amazon, and Branded Television Content in Subscription Video On-Demand Portals," *Media, Culture and Society* 40, no .5 (2018): 725–41.
3. M. Jenner, "Binge-watching: Video-on-demand, Quality TV and Mainstreaming Fandom," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 3(2015): 304–20.

space to negotiate with the neoliberal narratives of linear and progressivist temporality, which, I believe, is one of the reasons behind this genre's unpopularity with Chinese officials. Focusing on the fantastical genre and its rendering of the gender, sexuality, and (im)mutability of the time traveler, I explore the trope of traveling backward from the present in the framework of China's neoliberal acceleration and its century-long revolutionary conceit of "moving forward." While these TV shows are usually dismissed as "superficial, vulgar, and infantile" by critics and government officials in China, this subgenre of time traveling to the past can also be read as a fantasy of gender relations and historical imagination.

After outlining the significance of platformized seriality and its contribution to existing discussions on seriality and streaming in the Chinese context, I elaborate on platformized seriality in three aspects. First, platformized seriality revitalized time-travel serials, made possible by the rise of convergence culture and the financial boom of digital platforms seeking original content despite its higher risk of content regulation and censorship. Second, platformized seriality is evident in various forms of the time-travel narrative, especially the gendered genres such as historical romance. Third, platformized seriality highlights how platform infrastructure directs audience engagement in the serial form with functions such as bullet screen and pay-on-demand-in-advance that raise expectations for the script's seriality.

Platformized Seriality: Television Studies Meets Platform Studies

In television studies, seriality is usually understood as one of the defining characteristics of the medium and a major narrative mode of organizing content.[4] Considering gender and audience receptions, scholars such as Ien Ang, Robert Allen, and Jane Feuer have pointed out the importance of

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4. Fiske, *Television Culture*.

seriality in understanding melodrama on television, particularly in the form of soap operas.[5] In the new millennium, as comics, literature, music, film, television, and other media are digitally reconfigured, new modes of seriality have also emerged, such as "digital seriality" in game storytelling.[6] In the digital environment, there are overlapping elements as well as differences in game storytelling and television storytelling; playfulness is a common and important facet of narrative comprehension.[7]

Expanding on discussions of digital television and seriality, I turn to platform studies to conceptualize seriality in the age of big data, algorithms, cloud computing, and the rise of "platform capitalism."[8] Platform studies is a fast-growing field, covering diverse topics such as digitized economy,[9] the convergence of media industries,[10] platform governance,[11] and platform infrastructure.[12] In particular, beside the political economy approach in the study of digital content-based platforms, scholars have investigated

5. Robert Clyde Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press Books, 1985); Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Jane Feuer, "Genre Study and Television," in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 138–60.

6. Shane Denson and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann, "Digital Seriality: On the Serial Aesthetics and Practice of Digital Games," *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 7, no. 1 (2013): 1–32.

7. Jason Mittell, "Playing for Plot in the Lost and *Portal* Franchises," *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 6, no.1 (2012): 5–13.

8. Paul Langley and Andrew Leyshon, "Platform Capitalism: The Intermediation and Capitalization of Digital Economic Circulation," *Finance and Society* 3, no. 1 (2017): 11–31.

9. Yu Hong, *Networking China: The Digital Transformation of the Chinese Economy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

10. Elaine Jing Zhao, "The Bumpy Road towards Network Convergence in China: The Case of Over-the-Top Streaming Services," *Global Media and China* 2, no. 1 (2017): 28–42, http://doi.org/10.1177/2059436416688698.

11. Robert Gorwa, "What Is Platform Governance?" *Information, Communication & Society* 22, no. 6 (2019): 854–71.

12. Jean-Christophe Plantin, Carl Lagoze, Paul N. Edwards, and Christian Sandvig, "Infrastructure Studies Meet Platform Studies in the Age of Google and Facebook," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 1 (2018): 293–310.

the algorithmic culture of Netflix[13] or the technological structures of publishing platforms such as Wattpad.[14] In these works, there is a tendency to emphasize the political economy perspective or the platform affordance and infrastructure. I call this a structural approach in platform studies since it emphasizes more structural shifts and the structure of the platform itself rather than the specific media content and genre forms on the platform.

In this essay, I develop the notion of platformized seriality to encourage more dialogue between television studies and platform studies considering the recent increase of serials produced by digital streaming platforms. I define platformized seriality as assemblages of online platform infrastructure, content regulation, generic convention, and experimentation. My use of assemblage follows Slack and Wise's framework[15] of understanding technology as assemblage that interconnects with the context, instead of as an autonomous thing. The notion of platformized seriality provides a conceptual framework to explore how serial narratives are shaped by platform infrastructure, thus bridging the concern with narrative structure in television studies and the attention to technical affordances and algorithms in platform studies. Assemblage emphasizes specific media content and generic forms, including the cultural variations of generic conventions and the active incorporation of content regulation and censorship into streaming platform design and functioning.

In China, the traditional television industry is controlled by several state-owned television stations, and productions must strictly comply with the official policy.[16] The boom of the online television market is largely due to the rapid development of digital technologies, the expansion of local

13. Blake Hallinan and Ted Striphas, "Recommended for You: The Netflix Prize and the Production of Algorithmic Culture," *New Media & Society* 18, no. 1 (2016): 117–37
14. Claire Parnell, "Mapping the Entertainment Ecosystem of Wattpad: Platforms, Publishing and Adaptation," *Convergence* 27, no. 2 (2021): 524–38
15. Jennifer Daryl Slack and John Macgregor Wise, *Culture+ Technology: A Primer* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).
16. Michael Keane, *The Chinese* Television *Industry* (London: BFI Palgrave, 2015).

Internet conglomerates, and the state's policy of engaging in the global Internet economy. In China's contemporary video-streaming landscape, four platforms—Tencent, iQiyi, Youku, and Mango TV—are the front-runners. Each is owned by one of the major players in the industry: Tencent, Baidu, Alibaba, and an influential traditional television station called Hunan Satellite TV, respectively.[17] The Chinese online television industry has boomed in the last decade. The entire online television market revenues increased from $2.14 billion in 2013 to $15 billion in 2017, and the annual rate of increase reached 50 percent.[18] By 2019, the audience size of video-streaming users has reached 639 million, accounting for 74.7 percent of the total number of Internet users.[19]

Scholars have traced the formal and informal markets of the Chinese online video industry and how it has shifted the definition of television.[20] Elaine Zhao's study indicates how online video-streaming platforms such as iQiyi have negotiated state and copyright territories in platform-initiated overseas expansion, when diasporic Chinese communities are returning to the Chinese Internet using geo-blocking circumvention.[21] Wilfred Yang Wang and Ramon Laboto suggest that online video platforms such as iQiyi "must heed the state's political imperative to maintain uniformity in services and content formats" to provide

17. Anthony Fung, "Fandomization of Online Video or Television in China," *Media, Culture and Society* 41, no. 7 (2015): 995–1010.
18. "The Report on China's Business Situation in Online Video," iResearch, May 25, 2018, http://www.199it.com/archives/728128.html.
19. China Netcom, "44th Statistical Report on the Development of Internet in China," CNNIC, August 30, 2019, http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/hlwtjbg/201908/t20190830_70800.htm.
20. Elaine J. Zhao and Michael Keane, "Between Formal and Informal: The Shakeout in China's Online Video Industry," *Media, Culture and Society* 35, no. 6 (2013): 724–41; Michael Keane and Elaine J. Zhao, "TV or Not TV? Re-imagining Screen Content in China," *Routledge Handbook of New Media in Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 299–307.
21. Elaine J. Zhao, "Negotiating State and Copyright Territorialities in Overseas Expansion: The Case of China's Online Video Streaming Platforms," *Media Industries Journal* 5, no.1 (2018): 106–21.

materials for the audience.[22] In this context, "individualization, decentralization, user empowerment, and disruption, may have limited application."[23] Anthony Fung points out that companies such as Tencent manage to create "fandomization of online video or television"[24] in that participation plays a stronger role in swaying online video content via the dual television- and fan-based platform. While these studies approach Chinese online streaming through various angles such as infrastructure, economy, mode of operation, and audience/fandom, much less attention is paid to the specific content and its narrative seriality, especially the relationship between platforms and the seriality. In the context of these exciting new works on digital platforms and online streaming, I provide a reading of a specific genre—the time-travel serial or chuanyue genre—its platformized seriality, and its innovations in the online environment that enabled it to circumvent censorship.

Time-Travel Serials from Prime-Time Television to Online Video Platforms

As Ying Zhu, Michael Keane, and Ruoyun Bai point out, scant research exists on Chinese serials, especially when compared to the extensive scholarship published about Chinese films.[25] Television drama in China first appeared as single-act plays in the late 1950s. The first serial drama (*lianxuju*) did not appear until the early 1980s.[26] Not long after, costume dramas became

22. Wilfred Yang Wang and Ramon Lobato, "Chinese Video Streaming Services in the Context of Global Platform Studies," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 12, no. 3 (2019): 356–71 and 367.

23. Wang and Laboto, "Chinese Video Streaming," 367.

24. Anthony Fung, "Fandomization of Online Video or Television in China," *Media, Culture and Society* 41, no. 7 (2019): 995–1010.

25. Ying Zhu, Michael Keane, and Ruoyun Bai, "Introduction" in *TV Drama in China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press), 3.

26. Zhu, Keane, and Bai, "Introduction," 4.

"undoubtedly" a dominant genre in prime-time television since the 1990s.[27] As more classical "chapter novels" were adapted for television, the long tradition of serial storytelling seen in *Dreams of the Red Chamber* or *Journey to the West* contributed to the themes and aesthetics of the television serials. More recently, online video seriality is also influenced by serialized literary forms—in particular online literature, as in the case of time-travel serials.

The Chinese genre of chuanyue has been popularized in numerous television serials, films, and electronic literature in the last two decades, which formed a time travel media phenomenon. In the 2000s, China Central Television's *The Myth* (2010) and Hunan Television's *Palace* (2011) had a boom in the number of viewers. Time-travel serials became extremely popular with TV serials *Palace* (2011) and *Startling by Every Step* (2011). Broadcasted by Hunan Satellite TV, both shows scored high ratings. Their popularity is also reflected in their high viewership on online video platforms. For example, on Youku alone, China's leading Internet television platform, the total clicks on the thirty-three-episode *Palace* were more than three hundred million in 2011. Both television dramas feature a young, urban, middle-class woman from present-day China traveling back to three hundred years ago, during the peak of China's last imperial dynasty, the Qing dynasty. The female time traveler's consciousness enters the body of a Manchurian noblewoman. Even though the Manchu ruled the Qing dynasty, the Manchu aristocrats in most Qing historical drama are usually played by actors of Han ethnicity, the largest ethnic group in China. With a modern woman's consciousness, the female protagonist develops multiple romantic relationships with known historical figures, particularly two princes competing for the crown. *Palace* illustrates a modern woman's intervention into a highly aestheticized and romanticized imperial setting.

The popularity of time travel in Chinese-language media has a relatively short history. Stephen Chow's comedy *A Chinese Odyssey* (1995) is a myth-based costume drama with fantastical elements such as time traveling via a

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27. Zhu, Keane, and Bai, 7.

magic device called a moonlight box. It contributes to the postmodern style of nonsenseness or *mo lei tau* originating in Hong Kong. Adapted from a science fiction novel by Wong Cho-keung (Huang Yi), *A Step into the Past* (2001), a forty-episode Hong Kong television serial, depicts a modern policeman using a time machine to travel back to China's first dynasty and help change history. The setup of an elaborate time-travel machine and time-travel technology in *A Step into the Past* is not unlike Hollywood time-travel science fiction blockbusters such as *Terminator* (1984). Similarly, one of the recurring time-travel motifs in Japan is based on Tsutsui Yasutaka's popular young adult novella *The Girl Who Leapt through Time* (1967), with eight adaptations to film and television between 1972 and 2010, in addition to two manga adaptations.[28] In these Japanese time-travel stories, like *A Step into the Past* or *Terminator*, teleportation across time and space has a loose scientific basis through science fiction conventions.

In contrast, in the development of the time-travel genre in Mainland China in the 2000s, the term *chuanyue* is used to describe a person entering another world by transferring their cognitive powers without using any scientific equipment. Unlike typical science fiction time-travel plots of traveling to the future with one's own body, chuanyue often involve the traveling of consciousness instead of the body. In *Startling by Each Step*, for example, the modern female time traveler finds herself waking up in a noblewoman's body in an ancient-style room (Figure 1). Usually in the television show, the same actor will play both the modern woman and the ancient woman whose body she enters to avoid audience confusion. Yet the ancient woman usually has her own social status and experience of growing up.

Most chuanyue tropes in China are *hunchuan*, or consciousness traveling, in which the time traveler is no longer in their own body but is transplanted to someone else's who already has a social position and social

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28. Sung-Ae Lee, "Adaptations of Time Travel Narratives in Japanese Multimedia: Nurturing Eudaimonia across Time and Space," *International Research in Children's Literature* 7, no. 2 (2014): 136–51.

Figure 1: Screen capture of the modern female time traveler waking up in a noblewoman's body in an ancient-style room in *Startling by Each Step* (2011). Dressed in white pajamas and with an injured head, she asks her maid, "Where am I?"

identity in the alter-world. Interestingly, this development of time-travel media in China draws less on science fiction conventions and instead relies more on well-established genres such as period drama or martial arts. In other words, chuanyue is more related to Stephen Chow's myth-based costume drama with fantastical elements than to science fiction. This is also why I talk about chuanyue as fantasy rather than as science fiction, although there is, of course, much cross-influence between these genres.

The success of prime-time time-travel serials points to the importance of online fandom and convergence culture. It is common to associate the thriving of the online video industry with the convergence culture. Yet convergence culture already existed when time-travel stories were popular on prime-time television. The television show *Startling by Each Step* (2011) is adapted from an Internet novel that was produced by an Internet-based publisher, the Jinjiang Literary City. Established in 2003, the website of Jinjiang Literary City claims itself as the largest female literature website around the globe, specializing in publishing online novels written by ordinary female

users. These novels include popular genres such as chuanyue, romance, *wuxia* (the adventures of martial artists in ancient China), fantasy, boy love stories, etc. The online literature platform has millions of registered members, and a predominate portion of the users are female between the ages of eighteen to thirty-five. Many users publish their novels on the website, and the most popular ones are placed into the VIP category, which may subsequently go to print publishing. Thus far, tens of thousands of novels from the website are published in print. *Startling by Each Step*, written by Tong Hua, is one of these novels. Its later adaptation into a television drama highlights a new development for electronic literature. Notably, the predominant form of the online literature on Jinjiang is serialized. Analyzing creative writing and reading on the social media platform Wattpad, Claire Parnell finds that serialization is inscribed into the interface of Wattpad and shapes how works are created and engaged by its users.[29] Similar observations can be made about Jinjiang as a creative writing and reading platform in web-based as well as social media forms.

Time-travel serials show dynamic intertextuality among different cultural texts. *Startling by Each Step*, for example, is largely influenced by historical fiction and historical television drama. As mentioned earlier, the costume drama genre has grown rapidly since 1993 and has become one of the most popular genres on prime-time television.[30] Ying Zhu's influential works on historical drama point out that revisionist Qing dramas such as the popular serial *Yongzheng Dynasty* (1999) have responded to the political climate of contemporary times such as anticorruption campaigns.[31] Making obvious reference to the political struggle popularized in these historical dramas, *Startling by Each Step* draws on the antagonism between the fourth and eighth princes who become the two male players in the love triangle with the female time traveler.

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29. Parnell, "Mapping the Entertainment," 530.
30. Ying Zhu, Michael Keane, and Ruoyun Bai, *TV Drama in China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 7.
31. Ying Zhu, "Yongzheng Dynasty and Chinese Primetime Television Drama," *Cinema Journal* (2005): 3–17.

Thus, the time-travel cultural phenomenon presents interactions between television, electronic literature, and print publishing in the context of convergence culture.[32] It also aligned with the more recent trend of media adaptations based on work from online publishing platforms such as Wattpad.[33] The trend toward convergence culture is also evident in the crossover between television and games. For example, *The Legend of Sword and Fairy*, or *Chinese Paladin*, a role-playing game (RPG) developed by Taiwan's Softstar Entertainment Inc. in 1995, was made into three seasons of television serials. Moreover, these television shows are increasingly consumed on the Internet, which goes along with the emergence of electronic fandom. The time-travel cultural phenomenon is indebted to the rise of fandom in the digital age. Tong Hua, the author of the original novel *Startling by Each Step*, is one of thousands of online writers, most of whom are fans of historical drama and fiction. Here, fans become authors who openly reappropriate cultural texts. The fans become what Henry Jenkins describes as "textual poachers" in participatory culture.[34]

In April 2011, the Chinese government banned time-travel television shows. The Chinese state regulation banned time-travel shows from prime-time television and restricted time-travel television productions in the future.[35] Despite the official ban on time-travel television production since 2011, the development of video-streaming series in China has given rise to another wave of time-travel serials online in recent years. One example is the web series *Go Princess Go*, which premiered via LeTV in 2015. It features a modern man who time-travels to the past and enters the body of a princess, the wife of the prince (Figure 2). The time traveler, a man living in a woman's body, tries to climb up the social ladder while spending time with other concubines of the prince. With its unique plot twist and gender play, this small budget online series became a hit. More recently,

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32. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
33. Parnell, "Mapping the Entertainment," 530.
34. Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
35. David Barbosa, "Making TV Safer: Chinese Censors Crack Down on Time Travel," *New York Times*, April 12, 2011.

Figure 2: Screen capture of a modern man who finds himself in the body of a princess in ancient times in *Go Princess Go*. Again, dressed in white pajamas, the man tries to find out what is going on by talking to the maid in green.

iQiyi produced *Joy of Life* (2019), a forty-six-episode serial adapted from a famous time-travel novel. Tencent also produced the twenty-four-episode serial *The Romance of Tiger and Rose* (2020) that was well received.

The reappearance of time-travel serials online illustrates the shift in Chinese television and the online video industry. In the early 2010s, strict limitations were set on time-traveling dramas: National Radio and Television Administration of the PRC stated that existing time-travel dramas disrespected history and culture and that these productions were not fit for recommendation. On December 31, 2015, the China Television Drama Production Industry Association set out the "Notice and Rules of Producing Television Drama Content," which stated that television series had to be based on realistic subjects and forbade the "promotion of the attachment of souls, reincarnation, voodoo practices and some such feudal superstitious ideas."[36]

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36. China Television Drama Production Industry Association, "General Regulation on TV Drama Production," accessed August 1, 2021, https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%94%B5%E8%A7%86%E5%89%A7%E5%86%85%E5%AE%B9%E5%88%B6%E4%BD%9C%E9%80%9A%E5%88%99/19428353.

While it is no longer possible to air time-travel serials on traditional television, time-travel online novels remain popular. Thus, when online streaming platforms were trying to grab users in the mid-2000s, small budget investments in original content available exclusively via the platform were highly desirable. *Go Princess Go*, which premiered in 2015 as LeTV, was trying to attract subscribers to its online streaming service. In this way, the revitalization of time travel serials on subscription video platforms was enabled by competition among digital platforms to attract and maintain users through original content production. For big-budget productions, the time-travel plot is likely to be adjusted to minimalize possible censorship risks. For example, in the original novel of *Joy of Life*, the main character suffers from myasthenia gravis and gradually loses control of his muscles. One night, he lies in the hospital, pondering over his fear of death. When he opens his eyes, his consciousness is in the body of an infant. The man time-travels back to the ancient past and is given a new life as Fan Xian, which explains the Chinese tile of the show, *Thankful for the Remaining Years*. When the novel was adapted into an online serial, the time-travel element was removed, and the main character was changed to a university student writing a novel set in the ancient past. In this way, the time-travel plot was replaced by framing the story as fictional writing. The revised version passed the censor and the online serial eventually obtained airing rights on traditional satellite television.

In contrast, another smaller budget yet well-received online serial *The Romance of Tiger and Rose* (2020) emphasizes its time-travel plot. The main character Chen Xiaoqian is a young screenwriter who struggles to finish her script but is met with harsh critiques from producers and the leading actor. After completing the script, she closes her eyes and later wakes up in the body of the unpopular princess Chen Qianqian, surrounded by male courtesans in a matriarchal society (Figure 3). As a side character in Chen Xiaoqian's original script, Chen Qianqian is an arrogant princess who dies in the third episode. To survive, the main character uses her knowledge as a scriptwriter to stay alive as the plot starts to depart from what she originally

Figure 3: Screen capture of a modern script writer who wakes up and finds herself in the body of the unpopular princess Chen Qianqian, surrounded by male courtesans in *The Romance of Tiger and Rose*.

wrote. These new time travel serials and their plot design are related to the platform's need for and different strategies of original content production, forming one aspect of what I call platformized seriality. For smaller budget serials such as *Go Princess Go* and *The Romance of Tiger and Rose*, the time travel plot is an important plot device for narrative experimentation. I will explore the narrative experimentation in detail in the next section. Yet for big budget serials such as *Joy of Life* adapted from famous IP works, the plotline was revised to minimize risk.

The production of *Joy of Life* also reflects how adapting copyrighted popular Internet literary fiction, usually referred to as intellectual property (IP), has been an important strategy for video platforms to develop their original content. Both licensed and original content are important for subscription video platforms. Amazon builds its streaming service alongside network brand identities to lure more subscribers. In contrast, Netflix builds its own brand in competition with network television.[37]

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37. Wayne, "Netflix, Amazon."

Chinese streaming services, telecom operators, television stations, and Internet platforms gradually converge to provide diversified multimedia services. To obtain more online traffic and to cut down costs, online video platforms have also combined two modes of distribution—namely, exclusive distribution (*dubo*) and codistribution (*lianbo*). Exclusive distribution generally refers to how the content can only be viewed on its own platform, which aims at attracting more members via original content. In contrast, content via codistribution can be viewed on different platforms and other satellite television stations. *Go Princess Go* and *The Romance of Tiger and Rose* have exclusive distribution to attract and maintain platform users. *Joy of Life* also started with exclusive distribution before being codistributed. It was aired on traditional television not only because of its popularity but also because of its revised plot that did not explicitly mention time travel. In this way, the contexts of the different video platforms are important to understanding the serial format and its platformized seriality.

The Female Time Traveler: Seriality, Gender, and Fantastic History

How do the generic formations of time travel inform gender politics and historical imagination related to platformized seriality? Despite its huge popularity in terms of fan fiction and television ratings, Chinese writers, cultural critics, and Chinese media have described the chuanyue phenomenon as "superficial, vulgar and escapist." Time-travel television dramas marry two "low" genres: the television form based on the quotidian and seriality and the popular genre of romance, melodrama, and fantastical works that feature excessive emotions and spectacle. In her study of romance, gothic novels, and soap operas, Tania Modleski argues that the enormously popular "mass-produced fantasies for women" touch on

"very real problems and tensions in women's lives."[38] In a similar vein, Peter Brooks points out that in the melodrama genre, larger social conflicts are expressed in excessive and intensive personal stories.[39] Thus, it is worth asking the following questions about time-travel stories: How does the enormous popularity of the time-travel genre reflect the collective societal anxiety of contemporary China? What cultural contradiction does it invoke or negate?

Although many online time-travel fictions feature female time travelers, sometimes with a homosexual or transgender twist like *Go Princess Go*, the popular cinematic and televisual imaginations were largely restricted to heterosexual male journeys until around the time of *Startling by Each Step*. The male time travelers' journeys are full of actions and excitement; the travelers themselves emphasize their masculine bodies, sophisticated combat skills, or social position as modern, privileged individuals. In his 2005 movie *The Myth*, Jackie Chan's character, a modern archeologist, is a reincarnation of General Meng Yi in the Qin dynasty, a heroic historical figure who saves the empire as well as the emperor's beautiful concubine. Similarly, the 2009 television show *The Myth* also features a young male time traveler who fights for justice in ancient times.

Departing from male-centered time-travel narratives that emphasize masculinity and empire-building, stories about female time travelers focus excessively on the romantic experience of the female protagonist. The key narrative theme of prime-time serials such as *Startling by Each Step* and *Palace* is that the female time traveler rejects the Qing dynasty's polygamous marriage system and continues to seek her true love. Thus, she refuses to become

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38. Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 14. The narrative strategies which have evolved for smoothing over these tensions can tell us much about how women have managed not only to live in oppressive circumstances but also thrive in their situations with dignity.

39. See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

the imperial concubine of the prince or emperor and instead chooses to be a maid of honor working in the imperial palace. Although the female time traveler stays away from the center of politics and imperial power to defend her view on "true love," she is the center of the diegetic universe where she easily forms strong romantic bonds or friendships with various male characters. In the television serial *Startling by Each Step*, right after time traveling, the female protagonist opens her eyes with a subjective, out-of-focus shot. She is a middle-class woman living in an urban environment, highlighted by her professional clothing and black-framed glasses. She gets in a fight with her boyfriend after catching him kissing another woman. After slapping her boyfriend in the face, she strongly asserts her belief in monogamy by stating that they are no longer living in imperial times when men could marry more than one wife. She is then disoriented by electronic sparks from a nearby construction site and hit by a car, then transported to the Yongzheng reign of the Qing dynasty, when men could marry multiple wives. Unlike many science fiction time-travel tropes in which one travels with his or her own body, our female protagonist wakes up in the body of the sister of the second wife of the eighth prince. After realizing that she has traveled back to the Qing dynasty, the female protagonist learns to negotiate her own social identity and her life as a woman in this era. As a woman from the future, she doesn't benefit much from her modern wisdom and knowledge to re-write history. Most of the time, she tries to figure out how to survive as an upper-class woman in the patriarchal society of the Qing dynasty, including reciting Mao Zedong's poem to impress the emperor Kangxi.

Compared to prime-time television serials, online video-streaming platforms provided more room for narrative experimentation. In *Go Princess Go*, the man in a woman's body creates many plotlines that challenge conventional femininity, such as a woman's manner, or creates on-screen intimacies between women, including the time traveler and other concubines. The show also playfully suggests that gender performance is socially coded. Likewise, in *Romance of Tiger and Rose*, the female protagonist, a scriptwriter who travels back in time in the story she has written, knows the hidden

plots in the universe she is in. The new world is a matriarchal society where women rule and men are confined to domestic and supportive roles with no significant social status. The reversed gender hierarchy brings comedic effects but also points to the absurdity of gender hierarchy.

In contrast to the familiar time-travel trope in science fiction that brings the time traveler to spectacular and otherworldly spaces, the Chinese time-travel serials feature female protagonists traveling back to ancient times. Why traveling to the past? Hua Tong, the scriptwriter of *Startling by Each Step*, who is also the author of the original novel, acknowledges herself as a fan of a Qing dynasty time-travel fiction classic *Dreaming Back to the Qing Dynasty*. Tong finds her character's unconventional values and modern attitude the major reasons for her popularity among the princes. However, at the end of typical time-travel stories, those female time travelers either marry a man with wives and concubines or they return to modern times. The Internet fan/writer manifests a strong will to assert a woman's individual happiness, which may involve the subversion or revision of history:

> To time travel is merely to live your life in another place. To live is to feel refreshed and is to live for oneself. It doesn't matter whether one is going with the flow of history or living against it. If one is not happy, why don't we subvert everything![40]

The playful rewriting of history with romantic conventions, or the appropriation of historical characters and events for generic pleasure in the time-travel genre, disturbs the official view on history and led to the discouragement of time-travel television productions by the administration for television production and censorship in China, the Bureau of Radio, Film and Television. In other words, the element of achieving the impossible in time travel provides an imaginary solution to the contradictions in gender politics and historical imagination.

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40. Lan Shui, "Preface" in *If Xiangxi I*, Cece Literature, accessed August 29, 2021, www. cecewx.com/chapter/34995_8.html.

The departure from official histories in the time-travel trope is not unlike the "playful reenactment" (*xishuo*) subgenre in costume television serials. This subgenre is deliberately mocking official histories. The playful approach to history departs from influential serials such as *Yongzhen Dynasty*. *Yongzhen Dynasty*'s subtle critique of political corruption in contemporary times, its elaborate scriptwriting and character design, and the realistic representation of costumes, imperial settings, and outdoor activities all suggest its "quality drama" status. In contrast, the *xishuo* trope or the more recent time-travel trope is deemed much less valuable. Traveling back to a historical time, especially the heydays of the Qing imperial dynasty, may signal a nostalgia for the times when China was a strong imperial power. At first glance, traveling back in time may reassure the audience as modern, privileged, and well-informed individuals. Yet previous studies on seriality and television also remind us that we should attend to the pleasure that these popular forms provide and the collective anxieties they abruptly or symptomatically address.

When China's embrace of neoliberalism accelerates and transfigures the century-long revolutionary conception of moving forward in its pursuit of modernization and development, what is at stake in traveling backward from the present? The predicament of women's situations embodied by the Chinese female time traveler, both in ancient and contemporary times, lies not in the nostalgic mode of fantasizing about a golden age in history. The female time traveler in the serials—usually a single, educated, middle-class woman living in an urban area of contemporary China—tends to be experiencing problems in her personal or work life. In contemporary China, the socialist framing of gender equality is overturned by the commodification of the female body in the "market economy." The development promised by the state increasingly relies on a monolinear understanding of economic growth. The gendered nature of developmental ideology is reflected by the hostility toward single women, such as the widespread stigmatization of single women as "left-over women."[41]

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41. Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (London: Zed Books, 2016).

The time-travel trope differs from historical television drama in its constant reminder of the present, embodied in the figure and the mind of the female time traveler. Her self-awareness of the time-travel trope and her comments on the rigidity of social norms in the Qing dynasty constantly remind the audience of the coexistence of the present and the past. While the historical television drama tries to provide an immersive viewing experience by setting up a realistic mise-en-scene and story lines, the female time traveler completes her soul-seeking process in the world of fantastic history. In platformized online productions, stories tend to be set in ancient times without corresponding to a specific period or dynasty. It is a way to stay away from the accusation of not taking real history seriously. At the same time, platformized seriality gives more room to create a fantasy world with gender-crossing and reversed gender hierarchy, as seen in *Go Princess Go* and *Romance of Tiger and Rose*.

Time travel is a plot device that enables complex relationships among the past, the present, and the future, and these are intensified in platformized seriality. While many time-travel stories feature the transportation of the protagonist's mind and body back to the historical period, some of the female time travelers' stories feature the transportation of the "soul" or the consciousness into another body, with various renderings of gender, sexual, and ethnic mutability. In contrast to the formulaic television dramas, electronic literature presents a much more diverse rendering of mutability and a more intentional rewriting of history for the sake of a woman's agency and subjectivity. For example, in the popular Qing dynasty time-travel Internet fanfiction *Cherishing Each Other*,[42] the female protagonist travels back to the Kangxi reign in the Qing dynasty and becomes General Nian Gengyao, another famous historical figure. As a woman in a man's body, s/he is involved in romantic relationships with several princes and chancellors. In her research on time-travel historical romances, Jin Feng has pointed out that

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42. Lan Shui, *If Xiangxi I*, Cece Literature, accessed August 29, 2021, http://www.cecewx.com/ebook/34995.html.

these online novels do not necessarily reflect feminist consciousness even though readers have "moved from being passive receptacles of patriarchal ideologies to active pursuers of their own welfare."[43] Nevertheless, what is significant is the pleasure these time-travel historical romances provide. As Mary Jo Puntey points out, all romances are fantasy since the genre centers on emotions and relationships rather than plots. A good romance offers a "spirit of optimism" as well as a belief that "life is improvable" in the face of the boredom and agony of everyday life.[44]

Further, at first glance, the time-travel trope seems to reflect many traits of postmodernism in its parodic style, flat sense of history, and the infinite referral to other cultural texts. History becomes a database for game-like narrative structures and fantastical imagery. However, as I try to demonstrate in this paper, this postmodern sampling culture should be scrutinized in relation to contemporary politics of gender, sexuality, and the conception of history.

Platformized Audience Engagement: Bullet Screen and Pay-on-Demand-in-Advance

Every video-streaming platform provides multiple ways to engage the audience, and the ways of engagement may vary in different contexts. For China-based online streaming platforms, the serials may have hyperlinks on screen linking to social media platforms such as Super Topic (*chaohua*) for plot discussions. There are also numerus Chinese online forums or apps devoted to viewer discussions. Douban, for example, arranges its content by each cultural product: books, films, and serials. Beside these digital environments that facilitate audience engagement, the video-streaming platform

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43. Jin Feng, *Romancing the Internet: Producing and Consuming Chinese Web Romance* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 164.
44. Mary Jo Putney, "Welcome to the Dark Side" in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*, edited by Jayne Ann Krentz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 99–106.

infrastructure also provides user interactions within the forum. One of the prominent features is *danmu*, or the bullet-screen function in which viewers' comments fly over like a bullet on the screen. The comments are time coded so that the viewers may watch the video at a different time yet still respond to each other about the same content on-screen. You can "like" the comments. It also creates an immediate experience of watching collectively and interactively (Figure 4). Studies have shown that both users' instantaneous intention to comment and their intention to continue to comment are significantly affected by the perceived interactivity provided by bullet screen.[45] The large quantity of bullet-screen comments also creates the perception that watching the videos, including time-travel serials, is a shared experience.

Originated as danmuku video sites in Japan, the bullet-screen function has been adopted by many Chinese video sites since 2012. The bullet screen is a popular interactive tool in many video platforms in Asia. Increasingly, the platform designs have made efforts to generate audience interactions. For example, on Twitch, streamers can choose to overlay live chat texts on the side of the screen. Overlaying the texts on the sides of the screen works well when the streamer continues to be centered on the screen. What is distinct about the bullet screen on Chinese or Asian video platforms is that the comments are viewed when watching fictional films and serials, which is not yet common in Anglophone platforms.

To attract more users to register as members, a value-added service called pay-on-demand-in-advance (*shaoqian dianbo*) was launched by online video platforms, which can unlock the content of the episode in advance, in addition to membership subscriptions. For instance, members of Tencent who pay extra were able to view new episodes of *Joy of Life* or the *Romance of Tiger and Rose* prior to those Internet users who are already members. This value-added service has brought new revenues

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45. Lili Liu, Ayoung Suh, and Christian Wagner, "Watching Online Videos Interactively: The Impact of Media Capabilities in Chinese Danmaku Video Sites," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 9, no. 3 (2016): 283–303.

Figure 4: Screen capture of colorful audience comments flying over the upper part of the screen via the danmu, or bullet screen, during the viewing of *The Romance of Tiger and Rose*. In this scene, the female time travel-er is explaining the matriarchal society in which "a man without talent is virtuous," mocking the famous Confucian saying, "A woman without talent is virtuous." Three users comment that this is an ironic remark (of the present) while many others express they adore the show.

for online serials such as *The Untamed* (2019). Yet, considering the current copyright infringement in China, this mode of broadcasting still faces challenges. Many major segments of online series are transmitted on social media in the form of short video clips, which undoubtedly affects the viewing experience of those who pay and should enjoy the pay-on-demand-in-advance service. This has led to key plot points of these series spreading rapidly on the Internet and even going viral once they have made it to the Hot Search (*resou*) list of Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter.

The platformized seriality facilitated by bullet screen and the pay-on-demand-in-advance service in China's online video industry provides a new context to examine audience behaviors like binge-watching. A binge usually

implies "a deliberate choice of watching serialized 'quality' content."[46] Binge-viewing is a kind of attentive viewing, not only in terms of an excessive number of episodes but also an "excessive" or "close" audience-text relationship.[47] Binge watching has been a practice for a long time. Yet streaming platforms such as Netflix put all episodes of selected serials online and further prompt binge-watching while other serials or shows are released on a weekly basis. In the Chinese online video platforms, most online serials today still follow a weekly schedule to maintain user subscription. For example, recent time-travel serials such as *Joy of Life* and the *Romance of Tiger and Rose* release six episodes per week. The first few episodes were free to all users, and the subsequent episodes were only available to subscribers. The pay-on-demand-in-advance service provides an opportunity for the subscribers to unlock one week's content, which usually consists of six episodes. One new episode can only be unlocked once all the previous ones are unlocked. *Joy of Life*, for example, has made a million-dollar commercial profit via this value add-on service.[48] In the past, platforms tried to maximize the profit gained through this service and were met with consumer backlash.[49] Yet the pay-on-demand-in-advance service has now been used in most Chinese online video platforms.

Binge-watching is usually associated with "quality" serials, which all episodes are available online at once. But unlike binge-watching, what the pay-on-demand-in-advance service encourages is binge-watching over several weeks. Such a platformized function of pay-on-demand-in-advance is best suited for serialized content, especially long-format serials, instead of series

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46. Jenner, "Binge-watching," 314.

47. Jenner, 314.

48. For details, see Kankeji, "Tencent Video Earns 30 Million a Night from Preview of *Joy of Life*, Video Streaming Platforms Harvesting Users," December 13, 2019, https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/97214692.

49. Users criticized platforms such as Tencent Video for this value add-on service and tried to protect users' rights through legal means. For details, see Wen Shahua and Bi Yuanyuan, "Behind the Fiasco of *Joy of Life* Is a Trial by Video Sites," *National Business Daily*, December 19, 2019, http://www.nbd.com.cn/articles/2019-12-19/1394657.html.

or feature films. Unlike American or Japanese serials, most Chinese serials are long. For costume drama, it is common to see serials that consist of more than fifty episodes. Even for serials set in contemporary times, it is unusual for a serial to have less than twenty-four episodes. *Empresses in the Palace*, also known as *The Legend of Zhen Huan*, which features the life of an eighteenth-century royal concubine and her way to power, has seventy-six episodes. The serial was reedited into six episodes when it was made available on Netflix in North America. One of the reasons behind the long-serial format is that, historically, television serials have been sold by episode in China since they are evaluated by the running time they provide to television stations. Hence it is common for scriptwriters to "add water," or add side plotlines to the story.

The new pay-on-demand-in-advance service on online video platforms poses new expectations for serial script writing. For example, more plot twists are expected in the second half of a serial to hook the audience across several weeks. In traditional network television, a television serial is usually forty-four minutes long per episode to fit all the commercial breaks in the one-hour time slots. The forty-four-minute time frame influences how stories are told, and usually each episode tries to end with a cliffhanger. For Chinese online serials, the length per episode for big-budget productions is still forty-four minutes so it is possible for online serials to be aired on television, such as the case of *Joy of Life*. In the case of *Romance of Tiger and Rose*, though the production value is lower, the length is still forty-four minutes per episode. The new pay-on-demand-in-advance business model certainly brings more financial opportunities for online serials. How it will influence storytelling remains to be seen. As I am writing this article, the pay-on-demand-in-advance service on the platform was criticized for its violation of subscribers' user rights, and the platforms stopped this design in 2021.[50] Nevertheless, what we can expect is a higher demand on screenwriting and plot twists as the serials develop.

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50. For more details, see People's Daily Online, " 'Aiyou Teng' Cancels 'Advance On-Demand' Netizens: This Wasted Money Need Not Be Spent Any More," October 4, 2021, http://finance.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2021/1004/c1004-32245692.html.

Conclusion: Transnational Seriality in East Asia

In 2020, South Korean TV station tvN acquired the rights to *Go Princess Go* and remade it into *Mr. Queen*, a twenty-episode serial in which a male chef from contemporary Seoul enters the body of the queen in the Joseon dynasty (1392–1897). It is not the first time that Chinese time-travel serials were remade in other East Asian countries. In 2016, SBS remade *Startling by Every Step* into *Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo*, another time-travel romance set in the Goryeo dynasty (918–1270). These South Korean remakes reflect the popularity of Chinese time-travel serials across East Asia. This is noteworthy since cultural productions from Mainland China, when compared to Japanese television and anime and later the Korean wave, tend to be less flexible in crossing geographical boundaries.[51] For transnational remakes, more than a dozen Korean serials were remade into Chinese versions, such as *The Loving Home* (2014) and *Because Love Is a Miracle* (2014). Additionally, Hunan Satellite Television and Zhejiang Satellite Television purchased the rights to Korean reality formats, and the Chinese versions of *Where Are We Going, Dad?* (2013–2018)[52] and *Keep Running* (2013–2016) are both long-lasting, popular shows. In contrast, the cultural flow in the past rarely went the other way from China to South Korea, except for cases such as the time-travel serial *Startling by Every Step*. However, more recently, with the adaptation of *Go Princess Go*, remakes of Chinese serials in the Korean market have started to gain momentum. This emerging transnational adaption of Chinese shows are partly due to the industry context and serialization pattern as well as the audience engagement that I have characterized as platformized seriality in this essay.

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51. Beng Huat Chua and Koichi Iwabuchi, eds., *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008).
52. Because of the official regulation to cut down the airtime of children on reality television, Hunan Satellite Television stopped airing the show on television. It was then moved to online streaming on Mango TV from 2016 to 2018. For more information, see Beijing Youth Daily, "Parent-Child Programs 'Where Are We Going, Dad' and 'Dad Is Back' Were Called Off," March 6, 2016, https://web.archive.org/web/20160307135229/http://www.bj.xinhuanet.com/bjyw/2016-03/06/c_1118246587.htm.

Throughout this paper, I have charted different aspects of platformized seriality through the time-travel subgenre. The convergence culture and the financial boom of digital platforms, which seek original content despite the risk of content regulation, allowed for the revitalization of time-travel serials. In the shift from prime-time television serials to platformized seriality, the historical romance centered around female time travelers stands out as a trope that subtly unsettles contemporary gender-related anxiety and the dominant discourse on development and progress—this explains its charm. Platform infrastructure designs, such as bullet screens and the pay-on-demand-in-advance service, direct new forms of audience engagement and new practices of binge-watching that are associated with higher expectations for seriality. Thus, the time-travel serial genre provides a good case study to examine platformized seriality as assemblages of online platform infrastructure, content regulation, and generic convention and experimentation in China. While online video-streaming platforms are a growing market and many of them are trying to reach transnational markets, how platformized seriality will develop is yet to be seen. What seems obvious is that the definition of seriality cannot be separated from the specificity of digital infrastructure designs and shifts within the industry. Though the paper engages in specific discussions of Chinese time-travel serials, the notion of platformized seriality can be applied to other cultural and industrial contexts to account for varied platform infrastructure, content regulation, and generic convention.

The notion of platformized seriality contributes to platform studies by engaging with generic conventions and experimentation, analyzing the cultural significance of specific cultural forms, and broadening the field beyond its heavily Western-focused biases. Examining the platformized seriality of Chinese time-travel fantasy serials, I hope to bridge the analysis of narrative structure in television studies and the attention on technical affordance in platform studies. Further, by engaging with the generic content of these serialized cultural products, we are more attuned to their underlying cultural politics, as in the case of "traveling backward." In his study of science fiction, Fredric Jameson argues that science fiction and its emphasis on future

history "demonstrate" and "dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future." Science fiction depicts a utopian form of "profound historicity":

> The historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socio-economic system is conceivable, let alone practically available. The Utopians not only offer to conceive of such alternate systems; Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality, to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet.[53]

As I have shown in this paper, the trope of the Chinese female historical time traveler not only demonstrates the "incapacity to imagine the future" but also to bear the present, which is always overshadowed by the drastic changes and gender inequality in China's "moving forward." I am not suggesting that the trope of the female time traveler necessarily resists such a developmental ideology of moving forward. However, reading these cultural texts in relation to the geopolitical context can expand feminist television studies and discover their potentiality as meditations of narratives of gender, progress, and development.

Acknowledgments

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53. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005), xii.

Platform Strategy in a Technopolitical War

The Failure (and Success) of Facebook Watch

JAKE PITRE

Abstract

In recent years, as more corporations have decided to launch their own streaming platforms, it has become of greater importance for each to differentiate themselves through a suite of strategies intended to mark their place within the market. Facebook Watch, a video-on-demand service, is this paper's case study, a unique example of a streaming effort undertaken by a technology company with an approach based in data collection and infrastructural might. Watch has not premiered a new scripted series since August 2020, reflecting Facebook's abandonment of narrative seriality through series like *SKAM Austin* and a more pointed investment in the streaming space as an instance of what I am calling *experiential seriality*, meant to lead users along certain trajectories rather than building a reputation on its content. I argue that this is instead a move to compete with Alphabet Inc. (which owns YouTube) to dominate the world of online video, drawing Facebook users through links, recommendations, and other breadcrumbs to maintain continuous use.

Keywords: streaming, seriality, infrastructure, platform capitalism

Introduction

As more companies have launched their own streaming platforms, it has become clear that each has a particular approach or a suite of strategies intended to carve out a big enough chunk in the market to sustain them and appease shareholders. This has naturally resulted in a growing interest in platform strategization as an analytical concept. In other words, people like myself are interested in how each service sets itself apart and how they position themselves within an ever-expanding ecosystem, whether in terms of content, marketing, budgets, interface, or any number of other aspects or techniques intended to ensure growth.

Disney+, for example, entered the market rather late, at the end of 2019, but did so strongly with a robust library and lineup of anticipated originals, largely thanks to its exclusive ownership over Marvel, Lucasfilm, and 20th Century Fox. HBO Max similarly attempted to harness the brand awareness of both HBO and Warner Bros., alongside its own slate of originals, and after the COVID-19 pandemic forced theaters to close, a unique same-day premiere move put its entire 2021 release schedule on the platform and in theaters at the same time. Quibi infamously imagined a bite-size future of content consumption with short ten-minute video segments, but it fizzled out only months after launching, seemingly misunderstanding market demands.

For its part, Facebook launched Facebook Watch in 2017 as a video-on-demand service within its platform (rather than opting to launch a separate platform). It struggled to catch on. A summer 2018 survey by the Diffusion Group revealed that half of US Facebook users were unaware of Facebook Watch, and half of those aware of it had never used it.[1] We can look to an Instagram post from November 2019 by Jessica Biel for further confirmation, as she starred in Facebook Watch's now-cancelled series

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1. Todd Spangler, " 'Facebook What?' Half of Users Have Never Heard of Facebook's Watch Video Service." Variety, August 22, 2018. https://variety.com/2018/digital/news/facebook-watch-half-users-never-heard-of-1202913756/.

Limetown, and she wrote, "My face when people are STILL asking how to watch @limetownstories on @facebookwatch. JK it's real confusing."[2] Facebook subsequently altered its strategy by focusing less on scripted and serialized narrative content; they even cancelled their highest-profile series such as *Sorry for Your Loss* and have moved to focusing on cheaper talk shows, various reboots of reality TV properties, and licensed clips and full-length videos from other networks.

The trouble with studying platform strategy is that it's always changing, and our challenge is to understand why these choices are made and what their implications are for consumers. In the case of Facebook Watch, a clear message has been sent: narrative seriality was a short-term experiment that was abandoned. The question is, What does this strategic move signify? Amid growing awareness of the extent of data collection undertaken by platforms like Facebook, an answer emerges: Facebook Watch pivoted, or was perhaps planned all along to shift (the result is the same), toward being a direct line of competition against YouTube, which is owned by Alphabet. YouTube has long dominated online video, with nary a serious rival to approach its global reach and ubiquity. YouTube touts over two billion active monthly users while Facebook claims 2.8 billion active monthly users. These aren't comparable numbers since they aren't comparable entities, as though one tried comparing Instagram (owned by Facebook) to Gmail (owned by Alphabet). The point is that in the so-called platform economy, each massive firm must ensure constant growth, which can be marketed as "innovation" when in fact most of these innovations are purposeful entries into areas dominated by other firms. In other words, Facebook grows increasingly uncomfortable with YouTube's monopolistic control over online video and its apparent appeal to young people and decides it must introduce an alternative that boosts their data collection, improves user engagement, and builds greater dependency within a hyper-competitive digital economy. Growth is

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2. https://www.instagram.com/p/B4ilwSZgTlE/?hl=en

the only thing that matters, and keeping users on your platform for longer means they are spending less time elsewhere, or so the thinking goes.

This article conducts a material-discursive reading as its primary method, following the model used by Taina Bucher in her book on Facebook.[3] Like Bucher, this article uses a range of secondary sources, including public statements and releases by the company, media reports, internal corporate memos, and scholarly writing on the company, all of which contributes to a reading of rhetoric and strategy. The creation of Facebook Watch, and its subsequent reorganization, reflects the company's anxiety of staying ahead of the competition, particularly amid growing legal and social scrutiny facing the company's various practices. As we now know for sure thanks to the release of the "Facebook papers" in fall 2021, which this article engages with and builds on in part, the company's internal research showed that the platform was increasingly, well, old: by 2021, teenage users had dropped by 13 percent since 2019 and were projected to drop a further *45 percent* by 2023.[4] This reflects an ongoing existential threat for the company, as an internal memo said that the "aging up issue is real" and that if "increasingly fewer teens are choosing Facebook as they grow older," a more "severe" decline in young users would be inevitable.[5] Like the recent priority shift in rebranding as Meta to focus on the metaverse, Facebook (which is how this article will continue to refer to the company) is invested in bringing young people back into their fold, and the initial launch of Watch, seen as a failure at least in terms of the short-lived serial narrative approach, can and should instead be understood as a strategic investment less in actual eyeballs and more in a wider sense of user engagement, a framework for capturing users, especially teenagers, in thrall to the platform.

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3. Taina Bucher, *Facebook* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021).

4. Cristiano Lima, "A Whistleblower's Power: Key Takeaways from the Facebook Papers," *Washington Post*, October 26, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/10/25/what-are-the-facebook-papers/.

5. Alex Heath, "Facebook's Lost Generation," Verge, October 25, 2021, https://www.theverge.com/22743744/facebook-teen-usage-decline-frances-haugen-leaks.

An Experiment in Serial Narrative

Television has transformed in recent years, not only with a shift from broadcast to streaming but a more general and even perceptual move toward what Catherine Johnson calls simply "online TV," "services that facilitate the viewing of editorially selected audiovisual content through internet-enabled devices."[6] Johnson argues that viewers of television are now in an age of blurred boundaries and categories, as we watch CBS dramas on our smartphones and Apple TV+ originals on our Internet-connected smart TVs. Moreover, she argues, these changes are (thus far) additive rather than substitutive, meaning that all these experiences, portals, and components are used variously by each consumer. There are shared characteristics across them all but also significant distinctions. One distinction of services rendered by platforms like Facebook Watch, for instance, is a far greater interest in data collection for its users than, say, a more traditional interest from a broadcast network looking at broad audience demographics.

While Netflix's investment in dramas like *House of Cards* and *Orange Is the New Black* vastly and rapidly expanded its influence within the television industry, Facebook Watch's limited programming slate struggled to show a return on an initial $1 billion investment, with memes and jokes proliferating about what it even is and how to access it. While this could be seen as a failure in branding, Facebook and Mark Zuckerberg have argued that it was always intended as an added value and never as a stand-alone service, which, while a bit disingenuous, makes sense in part since it exists only as a tab on the website, without its own app or channel. As Zuckerberg explained in an earnings call in January 2020: "Things like Watch . . . that we had started rolling out are not things that we expect everyone to use. But even if tens or hundreds of millions of people use them, then we're adding unique value that other folks might not be able to build, and we're making the app more

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6. Catherine Johnson, *Online TV* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 1.

valuable."[7] In terms of their strategy when it comes to content, Zuckerberg explained, "You can think about the content acquisition that we do there as more along the lines of either marketing or bringing new people into the experience. We're not building out a subscription service or anything like that around this." There is a surprising truth to this, it turns out, as Watch came to abandon original serial narrative content—perhaps these series had already brought in the new people it was intended to, or perhaps it became clear that it was less costly to shift strategy elsewhere. At first, Watch almost felt like a desperate attempt to have Facebook's own version of a new content pipeline, like Instagram's introduction of Reels as an answer to TikTok's success. Certainly the many hours users have been spending on newer video platforms like TikTok and Twitch played a role in Facebook's awareness of online video as a space needing more of their attention. That said, more time spent on Facebook's platforms, regardless of how it's accomplished, is a success in their books, and Facebook Watch likewise provides yet another avenue for data accumulation, advertising, and platform dependency.

Facebook's initial and brief approach to scripted content operated outside of Netflix's paradigm and was not without novelty. In spring 2018, Facebook Watch debuted *SKAM Austin*, an adaptation of the popular Norwegian teen drama series *SKAM* that captured international attention for its real-time transmedia storytelling approach when it launched in 2015. Facebook knowingly and savvily took advantage of *SKAM*'s existing online fandom and its compatibility with the daily regiments of social media engagement among the show's target teen audience in order to make their initial mark as a TV producer, usefully revealing the company's understanding of what serial narrative content offered to their platform. Their version's narrative very closely followed that of the original series, depicting a group of high school students in Austin, Texas, and their various relationships and friendships and how technology plays mediator in their lives. In format, distribution, narrative, and more, *SKAM Austin* deliberately

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7. Facebook Inc., "Fourth Quarter 2019 Results Conference Call," Facebook, January 29, 2020, https://investor.fb.com/investor-events/event-details/2020/Facebook-Q4-2019-Earnings/default.aspx.

sought to mirror the successful formula of the original, with the added resources and platform integration offered by Facebook and Instagram. As Ricky Van Veen, Facebook's head of global creative strategy, said in a statement when the show was renewed for a second season, "*SKAM* is a shining example of what social video can be when there is a seamless integration of technology and content on Facebook," and executive producer Simon Fuller was even clearer: "Facebook Watch has been the perfect partner in developing *SKAM Austin*, it's a platform that connects people, sparks conversation and fosters community. We've started to see significant teen engagement across America."[8]

Norway's *SKAM* has had global success and international remakes in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Much recent scholarship has examined and traced these remakes and the challenges facing them, often depending on how they are distributed, as well as how these various adaptations approach the project as a strategy of "youthification" for their service.[9] *SKAM* has also helped introduce and popularize a unique approach to storytelling and distribution, which has been written about by scholars such as Gry Rustad and Vilde Schanke Sundet, writing in English, and others writing in Norwegian, in a variety of contexts, but mostly as a key transmedial, transnational object. This unique approach is, of course, directly tied to the show's power in youthification, as some consider how this manages to create a "democratic aesthetic" of making young people into citizens,[10] and Sundet has written about how this is indebted to the original series' youth-focused

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8. Natalie Jarvey, "Facebook Renews Simon Fuller's 'SKAM Austin' for Season 2," *Hollywood Reporter*, July 25, 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/digital/facebook-renews-simon-fullers-skam-austin-season-2-1129572/.

9. Stefania Antonioni et al., "'*SKAM Italia* Did It Again': The Multiple Lives of a Format Adaptation from Production to Audience Experience," *Critical Studies in Television* 16, no. 4 (2021): 433–54; Vilde Schanke Sundet, "'Youthification' of Drama through Real-Time Storytelling: A Production Study of *blank* and the Legacy of *SKAM*," *Critical Studies in Television* 16, no. 4 (2021): 145–62; Florian Krauß and Michael Stock, "Youthification of Television through Online Media: Production Strategies and Narrative Choices in *DRUCK/SKAM Germany*," *Critical Studies in Television* 16, no. 4 (2021): 412–32.

10. Synnøve Skarsbø Lindtner and John Magnus Dahl, "Aligning Adolescents to the Public Sphere: The Teen Serial *Skam* and Democratic Aesthetic," *Javnost: The Public* 26, no. 1 (2019): 54–69.

public service mission.[11] Moreover, this has created a multitude of transnational fan communities around these various versions of the show, as many scholars highlight the intimate level of participation that viewers are invited to take in. Tore Rye Andersen and Sara Tanderup Linkis describe their concept of *concurrent participation*: "Because of the temporal overlap between the story being told, the telling of the story, and its distribution, digitally distributed serialized narratives are able to produce a special aesthetic effect, a sense of taking part in (the construction of) the ongoing story."[12] Particularly in light of Facebook's version, I intend to evaluate what the show can tell us about their programming methodology and how we can make sense of platform strategization more generally and the relationship between seriality, data, and platform television. Jill Walker Rettberg describes the circular logic provided by *SKAM*'s model, which would certainly appeal to a platform like Facebook looking for their own way into youthification through a video-based service: "Many of the awaited fictional events occurred in social media, so the audience's waiting to find out about a fictional event in social media mirrored the fictional characters' experience of waiting for a text or a phone call, which again mirrors the audiences' own experiences of such waiting."[13]

The original *SKAM* format developed by Julie Andem—who also served as showrunner on the first season of *SKAM Austin*—encouraged everyday interaction from fans through diegetic social media accounts that fans could follow and comment on and unpredictable distribution patterns, as episodes would be uploaded on the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation's website at the time of the episode's events, so if a character was struggling with insomnia in the middle of the night, that episode would

11. Vilde Schanke Sundet, "From 'Secret' Online Teen Drama to International Cult Phenomenon: The Global Expansion of *SKAM* and Its Public Service Mission," *Critical Studies in Television* 15, no. 1 (2020): 69–90.
12. Tore Rye Andersen and Sara Tanderup Linkis, "As We Speak: Concurrent Narration and Participation in the Serial Narratives '@I_Bombadil' and *Skam*," *Narrative* 27, no. 1 (2019): 102.
13. Jill Walker Rettberg, "'Nobody Is Ever Alone': The Use of Social Media Narrative to Include the Viewer in *SKAM*," *Journal of Popular Culture* 54, no. 2 (2021): 244.

likewise be posted at 2 a.m.. This distribution method trained fans to constantly be aware of the ongoing narrative and to visit the website throughout each day to monitor for updates. Facebook's adaptation follows suit but further leverages the integrative potential of both Facebook and the Facebook-owned Instagram, creating a narrative space that invests viewers in both the story and, crucially, Facebook's platforms. It is important to keep in mind that, in 2017 and 2018, Twitch was drawing young users for hours on end to various streams, and TikTok's rise was just around the corner, to say nothing of YouTube's continued dominance, so user retention was, and remains, the priority. As the *Washington Post* found in its analysis of the Facebook papers, "Facebook chooses maximum engagement over user safety."[14] Extracting the *SKAM* format was part of a larger effort to appeal to a teen audience being aggressively and successfully courted by these other social platforms-turned-content providers.

As Gry Rustad explains:

> The fact that the teen users are able to experience the situations as 'they happen' and have to wait with the characters for the exciting date, the cool party or for a boyfriend to answer a text facilitates an engagement where the story seamlessly becomes part of the teens' online life. The unpredictable schedule seems to facilitate an even stronger loyalty to the programme and several of the viewers check the page for updates several times per hour, waiting for updates. . . . The programme's distributional practice caters to teen users' daily rhythms and media habits, situating them in a viewing mode in which viewers frequently refresh and update the web page to follow the unfolding lives of the characters just as they would do with friends' social media feeds. Skam thus works itself into the fabric of the teen users' everyday media consumption, blending perfectly with their social media practice.[15]

14. Lima, "A Whistleblower's Power."
15. Gry Rustad, "*Skam* (NRK, 2015–17) and the Rhythms of Reception of Digital Television," *Critical Studies in Television* 13, no. 4 (2018): 507, 508.

Of course, that sounds too good to be true to Facebook. In a way, the serialized narrative of the series is intended to blur with the user's real-life dramas and voyeuristic interest in the lives of their friends, acquaintances, crushes, and beloved celebrities. This isn't to say that reality and fiction become interchangeable, but instead that the aesthetic experience of the social platform is being structured around continuous use that begets more attentive engagement as users are drawn into a steady mixture of serial narratives, both fictional and real. In other words, by aligning these narratives with existing social media practices, Facebook Watch aimed to construct a self-fulfilling growth machine wherein further interest in the story necessitates further usage of their platforms, which results in further exposure to advertising and other "narratives" within their news feed and so on in a circle of reliance on Facebook platforms. It only makes sense, then, to recall the long history of soap opera analysis within television studies, including work by C. Lee Harrington and others on the mode's move into the "new media" era,[16] and we can see Facebook's deployment of *SKAM Austin*'s innovative model as indicating a savvy awareness of soap viewing practices and what they can offer a platform like theirs within a competitive market (in this case, it really can feel like the soap opera is a part of your life as you consume it alongside the content provided by your actual friends and family).

While Facebook Watch may lack name recognition for the average user, *SKAM Austin* exhibits a strategic deployment of narrative and programming strategies, with an emphasis on daily engagement and letting the characters bleed into time lines along with real friends and family. Keeping pace with the storytelling likewise means spending more time on Facebook, taking in all the other content and ads within the same newsfeed that gives you narrative updates. This enables Facebook to differentiate itself not through prestige, like Netflix, or even necessarily

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16. C. Lee Harrington, Sam Ford, and Abigail de Kosnik, eds., *The Survival of Soap Opera: Transformations for a New Media Era* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2011).

through unique production and distribution models like Quibi but through the articulation of aesthetic experiences rooted in the remaking of consumption and user practices that could lead to a transformation of content strategy on social platforms seeking ever-greater growth for user engagement.

A Shift in Strategy

Now, in 2021, Facebook Watch has shifted strategy once again, moving away entirely from original scripted content and fashioning itself instead as an infrastructure, as I would put it, that can suit all video needs on the platform or indeed *on the Internet itself*. Put differently, Facebook Watch is no longer positioning itself as a competitor in the streaming platform wars but instead as a very direct counterpoint to YouTube, which is owned by Google's parent company Alphabet and has dominated online video for over a decade. These monopolistic plays for our attention and engagement are, in fact, an entirely different beast than the comparably low-level competition playing out among Netflix, HBO Max, and all the rest, and to conflate them is a mistake. Simply, Alphabet and Facebook are not dealing with millions of people but with billions. Facebook and Alphabet would, in all likelihood, never overcome the content pipeline established by Netflix, and they do not seek to do so. Instead, on-demand video is one of many avenues for these companies to grapple for control, for ownership, for a more powerful claim to being a user's one-stop answer to every online need. Occasionally, this is done through acquisition, as when Facebook has purchased Instagram, WhatsApp, Giphy, Oculus (virtual reality and gaming), Chainspace (blockchain), Atlas Solutions (advertising), and many others to either forestall a potential competitor or, more often, assimilate their technology and expertise into Facebook's platform. Other times, though, as with Facebook Watch, it is more strategic to delegate resources to strengthening the platform to capture engagement and growth according to the practices and data already garnered. We could call this a process of infrastructuralization or, as Anne Helmond has

theorized,[17] a *platformization* whereby Facebook may not always be able to catch up to or anticipate changing user practices or emerging technologies and competitors but it can create new services, integrate plug-ins, or otherwise rework and reconfigure its platform to better situate itself into the wider Web and pull data back into its own coffers. Elsewhere, Helmond, David B. Nieborg, and Fernando N. van der Vlist have articulated Facebook's evolution as the development of a *platform-as-infrastructure*, meaning that Facebook is "a constantly changing platform that derives power from its ability to create institutional dependencies among its vast network of partners."[18] The point here is that Facebook has operated through a strategy of "expansion and subsequent entrenchment," a constant loosening of platform boundaries "while simultaneously embedding themselves into other markets by strategically orienting their programmability toward developers and businesses."[19] It is into this context that we must place the launch and shifting strategizing for Facebook Watch as one crucial if easily misunderstood instance of Facebook's growth into a platform-as-infrastructure.

In the landmark book *Platform Capitalism*, Nick Srnicek memorably places this within an economic model to very plainly describe how a company like Facebook has come to understand itself within the market. Srnicek says that platforms embody four characteristics: they are intermediary digital infrastructures (which allow different groups, from advertisers to customers to producers, to interact on the terms set by the platform); they produce and rely on network effects (users beget more users, and the value of a platform increases as the number of users increases, so platforms can grow extremely quickly); they operate via cross-subsidization (balancing free and paid services to attract and accumulate more users and more data); and they employ a politics with a core architecture that is always tweaked and

17. Anne Helmond, "The Platformization of the Web: Making Web Data Platform Ready," *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 2 (2015): 1–11.
18. Anne Helmond, David B. Nieborg, and Fernando N. van der Vlist, "Facebook's Evolution: Development of a Platform-as-Infrastructure," *Internet Histories* 3, no. 2 (2019): 124.
19. Helmond, Nieborg, and van der Vlist, "Facebook's Evolution," 125.

revised to sustain constant user engagement: "Platforms, in sum, are a new type of firm. . . . They are an extractive apparatus for data."[20] Facebook is the perfect example of this model. Firstly, as Srnicek points out, if you want to socialize online, it has become the default option purely by virtue of how many users it has (which is even truer since their purchase of Instagram). Facebook offers anyone the ability to reach the groups they wish to reach, and it has taken advantage of network effects to build a social (and inevitably, inextricably economic) monopoly. Moreover, obviously using Facebook is free, and most of its services and activities are too. Yet not only does it charge for advertising or games or other activities but it gains value through data—as we are familiar with by now, we "pay" for Facebook and other platforms with the data we provide them with. Finally, Facebook is always revising their approach and their strategies for maintaining growth, whether by purchasing other apps and firms or by outlining their rules of governance so that users, companies, and developers can use their platform in ways that benefit Facebook, thereby setting up a politics of use.

In a roundabout but revealing way, these infrastructural power plays bring us back to *SKAM*. In its original version, produced for the Norwegian public broadcaster NRK, it was intended to serve a public service function in the model of PBS Kids, for example. Some criticism was lobbed at *SKAM Austin* as a result, as it served a tech overlord rather than matching the public service mission of the original. Put differently, there was some discomfort with the extent to which the series operated as an advertisement for Facebook. As critic Inkoo Kang wrote, "What was once a depiction of how teenagers use the internet now feels more like an illustration of how teenagers *should* use the internet (on products owned by Facebook, obviously). Content has seldom felt so indistinguishable from marketing."[21] Of course,

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20. Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 55–56.
21. Inkoo Kang, "Is Skam Austin an Innovative Teen Drama or an Advertisement for Facebook?" *Slate*, May 22, 2018, https://slate.com/technology/2018/05/skam-austin-is-an-innovative-teen-drama-and-an-ad-for-facebook.html.

streaming platforms typically undertake similar actions, such as when one of the *Queer Eye* hosts is a guest on *The Circle* on Netflix, for example, on a season that also features someone from another Netflix series, *Too Hot to Handle*. But, as Kang points out, there's something different and "vaguely alarming" about a show aimed at young kids and teens ostensibly depicting how they actually live but entirely framed by the use of Facebook apps (Snapchat, YouTube, and others are mentioned but rarely, if ever, seen): "Even if *Austin* were only representing how teens are addicted to Facebook's products, it doesn't feel quite right that the show's realistic aesthetic contributes to the normalization of the company's grip on high-schoolers' social lives." Put another way, Facebook is able to have its cake and eat it, drawing on the dramatic impact of this technology on the lives of young people while ensuring their continued use of their platforms in order to keep watching.

Facebook, though, has moved on from *SKAM Austin*, and Facebook Watch is instead functioning as another facet of what I am calling *experiential seriality*. The abandonment of narrative seriality and the adoption of experiential seriality captures Facebook's strategy to online video. Experiential seriality is not unrelated to traditional and familiar theories of televisual flow and how streaming platforms like Netflix have updated and transformed Raymond Williams's concept with analysis of auto-play features or other tools that platforms use to keep people logged in and watching for as long as possible. With nonstreaming platforms with a stake in online video, though, companies like Facebook or Alphabet have parallel but distinct concerns and tools to address them. Experiential seriality, then, defines a *platformized aesthetic of enforced continuity in the infrastructural pursuit of total user dependency*. It is a form of technopolitics. This likewise follows the concept of data infrastructure put forward by Jonathan Gray and others, meaning "socio-technical systems implicated in the creation, processing, and distribution of data,"[22] but also broader infrastructural meanings related to enshrining Facebook as the core social infrastructure of the Internet. As

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22. Jonathan Gray, Carolin Gerlitz, and Liliana Bounegru, "Data Infrastructure Literacy," *Big Data & Society* (July 2018): 234.

Helmond and Nieborg argue, Zuckerberg himself has used this language, particularly in statements to Congress, because he "aims to appropriate the historical connotations of utilities and infrastructure as non-commercial services for the common good, thereby normalizing the commodification of connectivity and user data."[23]

Wendy Chun and many others have pointed out how this can take the form of addiction, or habitual action, and that social platforms generally seek to capture attention and engagement through the unpredictability and affective jolts of user news feeds and time lines. As Ludmila Lupinacci has argued, though, we should remember that "the proposition of social media's constant unrest is not to disrupt per se, but rather to generate active engagement and, finally, predictability—or the capacity to anticipate users' preferences and behavior for targeted advertising purposes."[24] Moreover, this predictability "can only work if users accept and subscribe to the widespread claim of unsettledness, and if they feel like checking, scrolling, and engaging constantly, continuously,"[25] and one ideal way to do that, Lupinacci argues, is through the liveness of media. Controlling video architectures is of great importance for Facebook (or most major social platforms) as a result. Infamously, many news publications initiated a "pivot to video" based on Facebook metrics that turned out to be highly inflated.[26] That's a story of deception, and of many jobs lost based on that deception, but it's also a story about Facebook's control and its interest in serving all needs in a way that works for them, which naturally means in a way that increases their growth.

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23. Anne Helmond and David B. Nieborg, "The Political Economy of Facebook's Platformization in the Mobile Ecosystem: Facebook Messenger as a Platform Instance," *Media, Culture & Society* 41, no. 2 (2019): 211.

24. Ludmila Lupinacci, "'Absentmindedly Scrolling through Nothing': Liveness and Compulsory Continuous Connectedness in Social Media," *Media, Culture & Society* 43, no. 2 (2020): 277.

25. Lupinacci, "Absentmindedly Scrolling," 287.

26. Megan Graham, "Facebook Knew Ad Metrics Were Inflated, but Ignored the Problem to Make More Money, Lawsuit Claims," CNBC, February 18, 2021, https://www.cnbc.com/2021/02/18/facebook-knew-ad-metrics-were-inflated-but-ignored-the-problem-lawsuit-claims.html.

Consider this incident from a slightly different angle, and it becomes clear how these video metrics and the resulting pivots to video in 2017 and 2018 were occurring at roughly the same time as Watch was being launched. This suggests, I would argue, that Facebook implemented a company-wide directive (whether explicit or implicit) to find ways to guide users, publishers, creators, and everyone else on their platform to focus on video in an effort to emphasize what made them the most money and to help along their continuing process of becoming a platform-as-infrastructure. These desires are inextricably linked for Facebook and for many major platforms.

Thinking back again to Williams and televisual flow, we are reminded of the drive to keep viewers glued to the screen for huge chunks of time based on an economic desire to capture people and how streamers like Netflix replicate this model in their own way, moving their platform into being the exclusive provider of televisual content. At this point, Facebook Watch offers livestreaming, sports, news, talk shows, music videos, and user-generated content, and all of it can be monetized through "gifts" to livestreamers, paid live events, subscriptions, and other means, to say nothing of the wider advertising market attached to video. Much of this is directly intended to compete with YouTube and Alphabet, as they both make investments in infrastructural gains based on the platformization of the Web space so that *everything comes back to them*. That way, it doesn't matter that Facebook Watch has failed as a scripted content provider, because that was merely a way to open the door into a much larger ecosystem of video needs online. The intention of embracing a model of experiential seriality for a company like Facebook is to find ways to codify the continuity of the use they desire through the prism of online video. Netflix CEO Reed Hastings has said more than once that, more than anything else, Netflix is competing with sleep. In truth, experiential seriality can be used as a metric to measure and show how Netflix, Facebook, Alphabet, and the rest are tweaking, acquiring, and marketing in ways that capture users, but that Netflix's aims are truly smaller than Facebook's or Alphabet's—Netflix, thus far, has no interest or benefit in, say, developing a messaging app or developing its own cryptocurrency

(but never say never). The continuity sought by Facebook and Alphabet is all-encompassing, deeply infrastructural, and can *carry across platforms* as long as they are owned by the same parent company.

A useful comparison here would be Amazon, which similarly seeks a kind of infrastructural power but is instead focused on dominating all *transactional operations* online, from its marketplace to its third-party sellers to its cloud computing services to its artificial intelligence assistance. Facebook, on the other hand, can be said to focus on dominating all *social operations* online (which are, often enough, also transactional). In this way, the concept of experiential seriality offers context for how a company like Facebook engages in storytelling, mythmaking, and value creation within a platform economy. The concept may work particularly well in these cases, where entities are invested in and dependent on the growing control over online social operations—messaging, sharing information or images, common-interest groups, multimedia, and so on. It is a deliberate aesthetic experience imposed on users to *encircle their social experience online*, where a continuity is designed and implemented into the system itself to draw them further into their platformed edifice.

Further Applications of Experiential Seriality

The concept of experiential seriality can, I argue, be applied usefully to other instances of platforms intending to maintain constant use and engagement, and there is perhaps no better current example than TikTok. Some further analysis of this example will help articulate why tech companies like Facebook and Alphabet have made only limited attempts to invest in narrative seriality, including YouTube Premium's own abandonment (it has not premiered a scripted drama or comedy series since 2019). TikTok, a video-sharing app owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, is a massively popular platform that is still considered an emerging player in the industry despite amassing over five-hundred-million active monthly users, well above Twitter

or Snapchat. ByteDance launched an app called Douyin in China in 2016 while TikTok was launched in other markets in 2017—they are in essence the exact same platform but they run on separate servers due to Chinese censorship laws. Recalling Srnicek's characteristics, ByteDance purchased the app musical.ly (which was built around short lip-sync videos) in 2018 and merged it with TikTok, in part to buy their competition and in part to consolidate musical.ly's data into their own and to create a larger community of young users in Western markets. In 2018, TikTok became the world's most-downloaded app in the iOS store, rapidly becoming the go-to online social space for Gen Z. As Facebook has tracked how Gen Z has been spending less and less time on Facebook, they even attempted to launch its own competitor in late 2018, called Lasso, which failed to catch on. Facebook Watch functions as a separate feed that is largely identical to the familiar news feed—again, it is not a platform of its own but an integrated category feature that organizes video on the platform. TikTok, on the other hand, lets a user scroll through the main page, called "For You," and you watch whatever comes your way via the algorithmically determined feed. The specific operations of this feed are obscure and, of course, protected, but generally it is a constant stream of videos, giving the user a feeling of discovery with every swipe in a way that stands apart from other apps, in part because they are pulled from around the world with little relationship to anyone you already follow.

This does not mean that narrative seriality is itself completely missing on TikTok, for certain ongoing narratives can appear in your feed over time, including users who create stories and role play various characters. The point, though, is that TikTok operates differently than any streaming platform or any social media platform. This sense of discovery and the attendant liveness of each swipe (even if videos are actually days, weeks, or months old) is an algorithmic boon to the platform's desire for continuous use. The fact that Facebook has tried *twice* to copy this model, first with Lasso and then with Reels on Instagram, suggests an awareness on their part that TikTok is leading in this area and that they had an interest—or perhaps an imperative—to match that growth.

Facebook Watch's initial interest in narrative seriality and content like *SKAM Austin* has, in a way, confused the issue. For the most part, discourse around Watch focused on its position with the streaming wars against existing heavy hitters like Netflix or Hulu. That is not Facebook's fight. This is mirrored in interesting ways through the launch and evolution of YouTube Premium, originally YouTube Red. The subscription service is not free, like Watch, but has otherwise exhibited a similar trajectory in content production with an initial investment in scripted originals, including teen dramedies like *Foursome* and the *Black Mirror*esque series *Bad Internet*, both of which premiered in 2016, followed by a move toward docuseries and reality shows, most of which star famous YouTubers. The subscription model suggests not only that YouTube sought to overcome ad blockers but that, to some degree, Premium (or Red at the time) was imagined as a possible way to compete with streaming platforms like Netflix, with the exclusivity of massively popular YouTubers having new access to inflated budgets. As with Watch's shift away from these narrative series, we cannot know for certain why YouTube changed direction, whether it was the realization that they could not actually compete with other streaming services, or whether it was because that narrative approach had served its intended purpose, or whether it was because these shows were not paying off in terms of data collection or profit boosting. Perhaps it was a combination or none of these. Regardless, YouTube made the same move that Facebook did, and now the two behemoths continue to seek dominance over online video, making sure as many links, recommendations, and digital pathways as possible lead evermore back to their platform, an ever-intensifying whirlwind of experiential seriality.[27]

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27. It's worth mentioning how this has operated within the public discourse, particularly in recent years as research has shown how YouTube in particular has led many users down far-right rabbit holes of recommendations and playlists and how a particular flow formed around how easy it can be to go from seemingly regular videos to conspiracy theories, white nationalism, or other thematic wormholes.

Conclusion

In truth, Facebook and YouTube (or, rather, Alphabet) are closer in lockstep with each other than with any other entity within digital capitalism. When it comes to video, TikTok and Twitch may be better points of comparison than Netflix or Disney+, but the game comes down to Facebook and Alphabet in a tussle of giants for ultimate ownership over user time and energy. Jathan Sadowski, among others, has argued that these efforts amount to a new form of rentier capitalism, wherein firms like Facebook cement themselves as ubiquitous intermediaries, forcing themselves into production, circulation, and consumption processes across all sectors to capture evermore value through data extraction and capital convergence. What this means is that "landlords and platforms both possess similar positions of mediation, powers of access, purposes of extraction—enough so that I argue we should define them as rentiers."[28] One could argue that Facebook's success to date into becoming a rentier platform does not match Alphabet's or Amazon's—for example, if Amazon Web Services crashed, much of the Internet would disappear instantly. Yet the tentacles of platform capitalism spread in countless ways according to each platform, and if anything, this project has revealed the attention that must be paid to things like Facebook Watch as crucial elements within this complex system. To the general public, Facebook Watch is where they might go to watch some gaming livestreams or to see Jada Pinkett-Smith interview her husband on *Red Table Talk*. But as Sadowski explains,

> The Internet of Landlords, like the Internet of Things, is simultaneously distributed and centralised. It spreads rentier relations far and wide, at different scales and intensities, while also concentrating control over the system and value captured from the system in a small number of large hands. Thus, the mega-platforms like Amazon have succeeded in following

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28. Jathan Sadowski, "Internet of Landlords: Digital Platforms and New Mechanisms of Rentier Capitalism," *Antipode* 55, no. 2 (2020): 565.

the rentier logic to its most extreme: by gaining a monopolistic position as proprietors of essential services, they have the power to extract absolute rents from the use of its platform.[29]

I see Facebook Watch, in its deliberate strategic turn over the last couple of years since abandoning original scripted content and embracing a wider push into formats to compete with Alphabet, as yet another outgrowth of this infrastructural mission. Put simply, if all video roads lead back to Facebook, the value to be captured grows exponentially. Facebook may be learning the benefits of positioning itself as a public utility, but its current extractive strategy of essential service instead situates it as the postfeudal capitalist vision of one platform among many intent on defining the conditions of online experience in their image. Whoever wins, we lose, unless we can build resistances or digital public infrastructures entirely outside their orbit.

Acknowledgements

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29. Sadowski, "Internet of Landlords," 569.

Algorithmic Audiences, Serialized Streamers, and the Discontents of Datafication

ANNE GILBERT

Abstract

This article addresses streaming television platforms' reliance on algorithms, serial narratives, and user interfaces and the effect of these strategies on the television viewing audience. The datafication of television means that opaque, proprietary computational processes play a significant role in the television that gets made, in steering viewing to particular series, and in reshaping the identity of the viewing public. User interfaces, data tracking, seriality, and algorithms have thus far proven inadequate for navigating the vast databases offered by streaming platforms. In practice, these systems off-load work to viewers and actively create obstacles to the formation of a collective viewing experience. Algorithmic audiences are trained to be sequential, isolated viewers, whose work of watching occurs in labor-intensive ways.

Keywords: algorithms, streaming television, seriality, audiences

In April 2021, Netflix launched its newest feature: their "Play Something" button became an explicit promise to do "all the work for you," for those times when we "just don't want to make decisions."[1] Play Something, beta tested as a "shuffle mode" for Netflix's vast library of content, selects a series

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1. Cameron Johnson, "With Play Something, Netflix Does All the Work for You," About Netflix, April 28, 2021, https://about.netflix.com/, https://about.netflix.com/en/news/play-something-netflix-does-the-work-for-you.

or film to recommend. If users aren't interested in that one, there's even a few more play-something-else options.

Despite the fact that it was initially only available to viewers accessing Netflix from a television and its recommendations turn out a notable number of in-house productions, Play Something is a notable departure for streaming interfaces because it represents a shift from the promotion of abundance as streaming platforms' defining characteristic. When Disney+ was preparing to launch in 2019, the company touted its thousands of familiar and beloved titles—and promised that, with Disney+, they would remain at users' fingertips rather than being removed to the "vault."[2] HBO Max, Paramount+, and Peacock all recently launched platforms with advertisements that emphasize the deep libraries and exclusive content that give viewers the ability to watch whatever they wanted, whenever they want to see it. Play Something, however, makes it apparent that the promise of abundance does not always speak to audience desires.

Given streamers' reliance on algorithms and seriality as strategies for organizing and navigating their content databases, this article considers the effect on television viewing audiences negotiating these systems. Algorithmic audiences steered, via technology and narrative aesthetics, to particular options that obstruct viewers' ability to form a collective audience. While algorithms promise agency and customization, they effectively demand more work of users, transferring onto viewers the labor of curation, evaluation, and selection that were once the task of television channels' gatekeepers and programming practices. Algorithms of streaming television are not neutral mirrors that reflect the will of their users, but rather they impose themselves, crafting that will and shaping identities.[3] The result is a

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2. Julia Alexander, "Disney Is Ending Its Vault Program, Giving Disney+ a Huge Boost in the Streaming Wars," Verge, March 7, 2019, https://www.theverge.com/2019/3/7/18254942/disney-vault-streaming-service-plus-animated-live-action.

3. Jonathan Cohn, "My TiVo Thinks I'm Gay: Algorithmic Culture and Its Discontents," *Television & New Media* 17, no. 8 (December 2016): 675–90, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476416644978.

diminishing of the power of niche audiences leaving viewers as isolated as they are individualized.

Algorithmic Television and Its Audience

Reliance on algorithms as both a promotional and practical tool has been ingrained into the practices of streaming from its very start: In 2009, Netflix offered $1 million to a team that could build the service a better algorithm to make recommendations based on viewing history in its much-hyped Netflix Prize. While many cultural contexts obscure or deemphasize the reliance on algorithms, so as to not invite too much scrutiny on how they might shape choices or make decisions,[4] streaming television interfaces feature their algorithmic organization front and center. Streaming television was built on the assertion that a high-profile, effective, targeted algorithm is the key to creating long-term user demand.

Algorithmic television promises its audience access to personally selected content from a vast library,[5] agency to navigate and schedule a viewing experience with a content database, and a sophisticated user experience that caters to individual taste. Netflix in particular has been very proud of the quantity and detail of their user data and the ways in which this represents a break from the traditional monitoring methods available to legacy television. Current Netflix co-CEO Ted Sarandos, discussing the level of tracking possible for streaming television, notes, "We have insight into every second of the viewing experience. I know what you have tried and what you have turned off. I know at what point you have turned it off."[6] This viewing data formed the basis for

4. Blake Hallinan and Ted Striphas, "Recommended for You: The Netflix Prize and the Production of Algorithmic Culture," *New Media & Society* 18, no. 1 (January 2016): 118, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814538646.

5. Amanda D. Lotz, *Portals: A Treatise on Internet-Distributed Television* (Ann Arbor, MI: Maize Books, 2017).

6. "Interview with Ted Sarandos," Carsey-Wolf Center at UC Santa Barbara, 2012, https://www.carseywolf.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Interview_Ted-Sarandos.pdf.

Netflix's recommendations that are "based on actual content viewed and the searching/browsing patterns of users,"[7] the data-backed algorithms meant to produce more targeted recommendations and therefore greater customer satisfaction.[8] From the start, streaming television promoted the personalization, control, and convenience available to viewers as their "innovation."[9]

In reality, however, streaming television effectively off-loads much of its labor directly onto audiences—the work of selecting, scheduling, and curating programming, for example, is as much a demand for labor as it is an affordance of the system. The organization of each streaming interface[10] and the sophisticated (and obfuscated) algorithms at work on each platform should theoretically ease audiences' workload, but instead of providing relevant, on-point recommendations and meaningful curation that cut through the clutter, streaming algorithms merely present endless options that the viewer must sift through themselves. Jonathan Cohn refers to this failure of algorithmic recommendations as a burden of choice: the fatigue of evaluating whether a one-size-fits-all algorithm is making a valid and worthwhile recommendation, and of selecting which of the endless recommendations to choose even as they offer diminishing satisfaction the longer the list gets.[11] Rather than simply creating opportunities for its audiences, algorithmic television makes demands, cultivating a perpetual sense of dissatisfaction with the process, meaning viewers are most likely to notice when algorithms get things wrong rather than when they make a meaningful recommendation.[12]

7. Alison N. Novak, "Narrowcasting, Millennials and the Personalization of Genre in Digital Media," in *The Age of Netflix: Critical Essays on Streaming Media, Digital Delivery and Instant Access*, ed. Cory Barker and Myc Wiatrowski (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017), 163.

8. Hallinan and Striphas, "Recommended for You."

9. Novak, "Narrowcasting."

10. Mel Stanfill, "The Interface as Discourse: The Production of Norms through Web Design," *New Media & Society* 17, no. 7 (August 1, 2015): 1059–74, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814520873.

11. Jonathan Cohn, *The Burden of Choice: Recommendations, Subversion, and Algorithmic Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019).

12. Cohn, *The Burden*.

Streaming television is what happens when legacy television[13] embraces algorithmic culture. The affordances of streaming platforms, as well as those streamers' reliance on serialized narratives and prestige programming, are the result of cultural work that is increasingly being taken on by computer processes.[14] Algorithmic culture likewise offers—and demands—changes in its viewers: audiences within an algorithmic television culture are repositioned as users, bearing an expectation of agency and an identity that is beholden to data footprints rather than demographics.

According to Ted Striphas, algorithmic culture encompasses the "many ways in which human beings have been delegating the work of culture—the sorting, classifying, and hierarchizing of people, places, objects, and ideas—to data-intensive computational processes."[15] It represents a paradigm shift in television, from "user-controlled surfing" to "algorithm-controlled sorting,"[16] one in which audiences are produced through data rather than cultural participation.[17] For television in particular, consequences of the integration into algorithmic culture are profound: television is increasingly organized as a database when previously it was organized as a schedule,[18] thus displacing time, linearity, and flow from how viewers approach the medium, and instead shaping a viewing experience with opaque systems of navigation, data tracking, and interfaces.

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13. Amanda D. Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018). Lotz uses the term to encompass the distribution of television on episodic and linear programming schedules as well as the practices of financing, production, and viewing that marked both broadcast and cable television eras.
14. Ted Striphas, "Algorithmic Culture," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, nos. 4–5 (August 2015): 395–412, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549415577392.
15. Striphas, "Algorithmic Culture," 396.
16. Mark Andrejevic, "The Twenty-First-Century Telescreen," in *Television Studies after TV: Understanding Television in the Post- Broadcast Era*, ed. Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 36.
17. Sarah Arnold, "Netflix and the Myth of Choice/Participation/Autonomy," in *The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century*, ed. Kevin McDonald and Daniel Smith-Rowsey (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 50.
18. Derek Kompare, "Reruns 2.0: Revising Repetition for Multiplatform Television Distribution," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 38, no. 2 (2010): 82, https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.2010.483353.

Streaming television addresses its audience as new media users who are both active participants in the consumption of television and beneficiaries of the wealth of options and agency afforded them by these platforms. Algorithmic television promises to alleviate the limitations of legacy TV, its "endless scroll"[19] offering the illusion of infinite choice to counter the one-at-a-time constraints of linear channels, and the frequent absence of breaks for commercials or to select further episodes so as not to disrupt the endless content flow made possible by access to subscription databases.

Algorithms were supposed to be the finely tuned, personalized means of navigating streaming services' database of plenty. If each platform's interface indicates the norms and priorities of its creators,[20] then the emphasis on recommendations and curated selections that runs across services illustrate the reliance on algorithmic organization as a defining trait for streaming television. Nearly all major streamers feature curated suggestions and "recommended for you" categories in positions of significance on their browsing interfaces. They frequently disincentivize targeted searching for specific titles by making the search function difficult to find or navigate on many device menus. Hulu is prone to auto-play new titles with recommendations based on past viewing history, and Disney+ has a landing page that offers multiple channels with suggestions headed with "Because you watched . . ." Streaming interfaces promote browsing among recommended titles and, ideally, a "discovery" of new content.

The experience afforded by each platform, however, is quite different. Individualized recommendations and scheduling make the algorithmic audience a fragmented one, the consequences of which I will take up directly in a later section. The agency promised to audiences effectively means more work, but with little actual control. As an illustration, when it first began producing original television, Amazon's pilot season foregrounded

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19. Mike Van Esler, "In Plain Sight: Online TV Interfaces as Branding," *Television & New Media* (May 20, 2020): 3, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476420917104.
20. Stanfill, "The Interface as Discourse."

its promise of agency. The platform released pilots and asked viewers to vote for which should receive a full season production. But, as Cory Barker notes, Amazon did not detail how these votes might actually affect their programming decisions: "Amazon convinced thousands of viewers to watch its content and provide their minor—yet not unmeaningful—labor and then chose not to reveal any specific information about the effect of this labor."[21] Amazon touted the control that streaming television could provide to viewers but did not guarantee they would actually do so.[22]

The customized viewing experience promised by streamers' highly sophisticated algorithms has likewise failed to fully materialize. In practice, recommendation systems steer users toward certain options, often to owned original content[23] or to content that most benefits larger corporate directives, such as international titles to help build a demand for a global library or recognizable content from legacy television meant to anchor a new streaming service. This steering creates a circular, algorithmic logic:[24] television platforms' interfaces guide viewers toward specific titles; viewers select that content; this then prompts the algorithm to continue to guide users toward that content and others like it.[25] The result is that streamers' recommendations are often considered unhelpful[26] or irrelevant. Collecting data on how streaming audiences arrive at something to watch, Nielsen found that already familiar programming and personal recommendations from friends are the primary sources from which viewers find something to watch on their service of choice; the recommendation of algorithms only comes in at number six.[27] Algorithmic audiences are, in fact, more likely to

21. Cory Barker, "'Great Shows, Thanks to You': From Participatory Culture to 'Quality TV' in Amazon's Pilot Season," *Television & New Media* 18, no. 5 (2017): 453, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476416667817.
22. Barker, "'Great Shows,'" 446.
23. Van Esler, "In Plain Sight."
24. Cohn, *The Burden of Choice*.
25. Van Esler, "In Plain Sight."
26. Cohn, *The Burden of Choice*.
27. "The Nielsen Total Audience Report: Q3 2018," Nielson, 2019, https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/report/2019/q3-2018-total-audience-report/.

watch something that has been recommended by a friend, that they have seen mentioned in traditional media, or that has cultivated a cultural buzz[28] than they are to select a show based on a streamer's recommendation.

Algorithmic television's promises for its audiences—personalization, agency, a customized viewing experience—have rarely been realized. Algorithmic processing is proprietary, private, and profitable, and as a result, audiences often have to take streamers' words that it is successful. As they have advanced and proliferated, many streaming services have stepped back from the rhetoric of personalization and agency promised to audiences. While most streaming platforms offer "for you" content suggestions, these are often balanced by other recommendations based on popularity, user trends, and themed collections. This type of organization is slowly replacing algorithms as platforms' proprietary solution for effectively navigating the abundance of content presented by streaming television. As a result, algorithmic audiences provide labor without agency, generate data without customized recommendations, and navigate the vast libraries of streaming television in ways that are structured by corporate goals rather than algorithmic reasoning.

Datafied Seriality

If algorithms represent the primary means by which streaming television is technologically organized, then seriality is the most significant means of structuring its aesthetics. Streamers consistently produce serial narratives that cluster programming into larger, more accessible content blocks. Netflix has been thus far most consistent in its adherence to releasing entire seasons at once, though Hulu, Disney+, and HBO Max all distribute some shows this way, others in weekly episodes, and some in periodic drops of two or three new episodes meant to be

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28. Marika Lüders and Vilde Schanke Sundet, "Conceptualizing the Experiential Affordances of Watching Online TV," *Television & New Media* (2021), https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764211010943.

viewed sequentially. This commitment to both narrative seriality and an organizational seriality produces a system of streaming television that conditions its audience to watch sequentially, as a binge, and in ways that are easy to quantify, irrespective of whether viewers may find it isolating and unfulfilling.

When Netflix began creating original narrative television in 2013, it borrowed aesthetic and brand strategies from premium cable channels, in particular from HBO.[29] This meant the streamer worked to set itself apart from legacy television while mimicking some of its most successful elements; most notably, its narrative structures. Original streaming television content produced predominantly adheres to what Jason Mittell calls "complex TV,"[30] in which the episodic is balanced with the serial, as some events wrap within a single episode while story lines, characters, and events might also play out across multiple episodes or seasons. Though this kind of complex seriality did not originate with streaming television, these platforms are particularly well-suited to it. Seriality and narrative complexity predict and encourage binge-watching,[31] aligning with most platforms' continuous play modality and always-on archiving capabilities to invite audiences to understand streaming television narratives as ongoing and virtually continuous.

The binge model of streaming—a full season of television, available at all at once, unpolluted by breaks, promotions, or other paratexts—might be considered a "pure" television text,[32] unavailable on legacy systems. Legacy television balances episodic story lines with longer, multiepisode arcs in order to please multiple stakeholders. Television history is rife with examples of struggling shows negotiating the tension between fans and writers who desired

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29. Michael L. Wayne, "Netflix Audience Data, Streaming Industry Discourse, and the Emerging Realities of 'Popular' Television," *Media, Culture & Society* (2021): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437211022723.

30. Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

31. Lüders and Sundet, "Conceptualizing the Experiential," 5.

32. Tanya Horeck, Mareike Jenner, and Tina Kendall, "On Binge-Watching: Nine Critical Propositions," *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* 13, no. 4 (December 2018): 500, https://doi.org/10.1177/1749602018796754.

the complexity and depth offered by serial narratives and television executives who wanted episodic stories in order to bring in new viewers each week. Streaming platforms solve these issues structurally and aesthetically: grouping episodes, seasons, and programs together in their database enforces a seriality of viewing, and these interfaces direct users to the beginning of a narrative to track popularity, completion rate, and rewatching. In other words, there is no effective midseason "joining" of a serial narrative already in progress, as streaming's metaseriality works in support of narrative seriality, thus solving the balance issue that plagued legacy programming. In relying on continuous seriality, streaming television can secure viewership for future seasons while also providing the background necessary to appeal to new viewers.

Perhaps the clearest indication of streaming television's commitment to seriality can be found in Netflix's release (and subsequent rerelease) of *Arrested Development*'s fourth season. *Arrested Development* began as legacy television, airing three regular seasons of thirty-minute episodes on FOX before being cancelled in 2006. Netflix rebooted the program for a long-awaited fourth season that dropped in 2013. Season four was structured very differently: fifteen episodes, of varying lengths, that told events of the same time period from different characters' perspectives before tying back together. Marieke Jenner argues that in this release of *Arrested Development*, "Netflix seems to also 'teach' its audiences how to watch Netflix."[33] Jenner is primarily concerned with the bingeable nature of *Arrested Development* in this format, relying on fan practices and DVD box-set aesthetics to "demand more attention from viewers through its narrative structure"[34] and rewarding binge-viewing with intricate narrative callbacks. I would also argue that Netflix was teaching its viewers to trust its interface and rely on sequential viewing. Technically, season four of *Arrested Development* did not need to be viewed in a precise order, as the episodes told stories that effectively took

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33. Mareike Jenner, "Is This TVIV? On Netflix, TVIII and Binge-Watching," *New Media & Society* 18, no. 2 (2016): 8, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814541523.

34. Jenner, "Is This TVIV?," 10.

place simultaneously. The commitment to organizational seriality effectively overruled this narrative choice, however, as Netflix's autoplay feature makes it difficult to elect to watch episodes in any order but the one given. This helped train audiences to value playback sequence over narrative seriality—a practice that was ultimately rewarded with a new version of season four.

In advance of the release of the show's fifth season in 2018, Netflix dropped "Season Four Remix—Fateful Consequences." Gone were the fifteen character-focused episodes, and in their place were twenty-two episodes with a standard length and more traditional episodic structure that bounced between characters and story lines and reordered narrative events into chronological order. Series creator Mitchell Hurwitz admits that recutting the season was done, in part, to make it more able to align with the needs of the syndication market.[35] But the *Arrested Development* remix also illustrates the value of seriality, both organizational and narrative, in streaming television: now that audiences have grown increasingly accustomed to watching all at once, in order, chronology and seriality are valued more than narrative innovation.

The example of *Arrested Development* also highlights that streaming television's reliance on seriality serves well the data, algorithms, and user interfaces that define the medium, but it does not necessarily serve its audiences. The complex seriality favored in streamers' original content privileges audiences who are invested enough to sit through each episode and attentive enough to track the careful doling out of complex narrative information.[36] However, Derek Kompare argues for the value of "banal" television, watching (or rewatching) shows whose purpose is to be comforting and "habitual, rather than entertaining."[37] In the context

35. Denise Petski, "'Arrested Development' Season 4 Is Getting a Remix," *Deadline*, May 1, 2018, https://deadline.com/2018/05/arrested-development-season-4-remix-re-lease-mitch-hurwitz-1202380474/.

36. Mittell, *Complex TV*.

37. Derek Kompare, "The Benefits of Banality: Domestic Syndication in the Post-Network Era," in *Beyond Prime Time: Television Programming in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Amanda D. Lotz (New York: Routledge, 2009), 56.

of streaming television, banality might refer to soothing or mindless re-watching shows familiar from legacy television. Sitcoms like *The Office* and *Friends* were immensely popular on Netflix, to the extent that each was eventually pulled from the platform in order to anchor new stream-ing services (Peacock and HBO Max, respectively). These shows are less serialized than many streaming originals, adhering more closely to the episodic structure demanded by legacy television. At the same time, the user interfaces of the streaming platforms maintain the sequence or-der of each program's episodes, even if not demanded by the narratives themselves. On most streamers, it is difficult for users to circumvent the technological steering toward sequence and seriality and to watch out of order or even select a particular episode.

Streaming television adheres to sequential playback for its program-ming, regardless of the level (or lack) of seriality in the narrative. This type of technological seriality offers an opportunity, similar to algorith-mic certainty, for streamers to mitigate some industrial risk. Much like franchises and sequels for film, subsequent seasons of a serial narrative are known entities and can therefore benefit from familiarity and in-vestment with each subsequent release. Continuing serial story lines can also assure producers of viewership for future seasons and encourage binge-viewing by obviating the need for algorithmic recommendations between episodes. However, despite the affordances it provides to pro-ducers and platforms alike, the seriality of streaming television can be rigid and unhelpful for audiences.

The emphasis on data and user interfaces offers an ideal environ-ment for serial storytelling. Serial complexity builds and rewards view-ers' knowledge over time but simultaneously disciplines those audiences into viewing television episodes strictly in order because user interfaces are so oriented to simply resume playback. Streaming interfaces gen-erally steer viewers to original serial narratives rather than to banal, comfortable favorites, prioritizing the primacy of the algorithm over audience tastes.

Users Are Not a Collective

Streaming television promotes particular behaviors in its audiences, the algorithmic organization demanding labor and participation, even as the serial aesthetics promote linear binge-viewing. But most significant are the audience practices that algorithmic television inhibits. The datafication of streaming television represents a new way of knowing the audience: as points of information within a technological sphere, as predictive rather than explanatory,[38] and, importantly, as individuals rather than a mass. In this environment, the technological limitations and industrial practices together erect obstacles that make it difficult for audiences to collectivize and for fans to activate.

Television audiences have been fragmenting for years; the same characteristics that define streaming television and its interfaces also have helped to push along this trend. Platform interfaces and reliance on both algorithmic recommendations and highly serialized narratives mean that most users are watching their own version of television. Though streamers might overstate the customization of their recommendation algorithms, the work performed by users to scroll, select, and organize a content database into a de facto playlist does result in a highly personalized viewing experience. Long-form, serialized narratives and on-demand content catalogues also encourage individualized viewing; in fact, Justin Grandinetti contends that the binge-watching prescribed by many streaming platforms and a sense of audience community are inherently mutually exclusive.[39] Additionally, the asynchronous nature of streaming TV means that viewers are watching their own thing on their own time. Whereas legacy television's adherence to a fixed schedule forced a sense of communal viewing among audiences

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38. Eran Fisher and Yoav Mehozay, "How Algorithms See Their Audience: Media Epistemes and the Changing Conception of the Individual," *Media, Culture & Society* 41, no. 8 (November 2019): 1176–91, https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719831598.
39. Justin Grandinetti, "From Primetime to Anytime: Streaming Video, Temporality and the Future of Communal Television," in *The Age of Netflix*, 11–30.

on a large scale, Marieke Jenner notes that discussion of contemporary television has moved to social media on a basis that is ad hoc at best: "The viewer of algorithmic television is one radically alienated from . . . so-called 'water-cooler' television,"[40] leaving these audiences with a sense of isolation rather than a shared cultural experience.

The isolation of streaming television is perhaps most profound when viewers attempt to overcome its structures of separation. Television fans have regularly come together when the fate of a favorite show is threatened, making use of technological, communication, and commercial strategies to mobilize their communities to make their voices heard and attempt to affect industrial change. Though these campaigns are often not successful—presumably, every canceled television show could be someone's favorite—the ones that do mark a return of a show from the brink of cancellation are notable enough to fuel future efforts. In the context of legacy television, particularly ad-supported television, these campaigns make commercial sense: television networks cancel programs that are not financially successful, so making a concerted show of dedication throws a light on the size and depth of audience interest. As a result, "save our show" campaigns frequently make use of petitions; viral hashtags; testimonials; meet-ups or conventions; trade and public advertisements, particularly based in Los Angeles; letter-writing or email drives; and other public-facing measures that draw on collective action and draw attention to their strength of community.

These strategies, however, become decidedly more difficult for algorithmic audiences of streaming television. Regardless of their level of investment, organizational prowess, or industry savvy, dedicated fans face significant challenges if they attempt to mobilize a grassroots campaign to save a particular television show from cancellation. The opacity of services' proprietary algorithms, the demands of serial viewership, and the challenges

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40. Stephen Shapiro, "Algorithmic Television in the Age of Large-Scale Customization," *Television & New Media* 21, no. 6 (September 2020): 660, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476420919691.

of discerning how streaming executives employ their data to make programming decisions makes it increasingly difficult for users to come together as a collective fandom.

On February 19, 2019, Gloria Calderón Kellett, the creator and showrunner of *One Day at a Time*, tweeted that she had met with executives at Netflix regarding the possibility of the show's renewal for season four. "They [Netflix] made it clear that they love the show, love how it serves underrepresented audiences, love its heart & its humor, but . . . we need more viewers. They'll decide soon. I wish I felt more confident. WHAT CAN YOU DO? Tell friends to watch!"[41] Presumably, Netflix was less than impressed with the number of users who had watched the third season, which had dropped less than two weeks prior. In response to Calderón Kellett's call to action, critics wrote articles in support, hoping to encourage new viewers and to perhaps prod Netflix to renew the show.[42]

Fans began tweeting with the hashtag #RenewODAAT, singing the show's praises and urging others to watch and recruit more people to do the same; they tweeted at Netflix; they started petitions on change.org. These efforts, however, were unsuccessful: Netflix officially cancelled *One Day at a Time* in March 2019. However, three months later, basic cable network Pop picked up the show for a fourth season, marking the first time a show cancelled by a streamer was revived on legacy television. The revival was short lived, however, and Pop cancelled *One Day at a Time* in late 2020 at the conclusion of its fourth season, citing low ratings as well as a shift in network brand identity and the global coronavirus pandemic.[43] When Calderón Kellett tweeted

41. Gloria Calderón Kellett, "NEWS: Met with @Netflix about @OneDayAtATime S4," Twitter, February 20, 2019, https://twitter.com/everythinggloria/status/1098336889470238720.

42. Carolina del Busto, "Why It's Important for Netflix to Save One Day at a Time," *Miami New Times*, accessed July 23, 2021, https://www.miaminewtimes.com/arts/save-one-day-at-a-time-gloria-calderon-kelletts-tweet-inspires-renewodaat-campaign-11093635.

43. Will Thorne, "'One Day at a Time' Officially Over After 4 Seasons," *Variety*, December 8, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/one-day-at-a-time-officially-over-four-seasons-gloria-calderon-kellett-1234848942/.

out the news of the cancellation, fans again attempted a revival, this time frequently tagging Hulu or Amazon in their pleas for additional seasons.[44] Netflix gained a reputation early in its streaming endeavors as a site of potential second chances for programs—like *Arrested Development*—that might have been poorly served on broadcast but could now find a new life as Netflix and, eventually, other streamers endlessly sought new content. *One Day at a Time*, however, indicates that fans are often at a loss for how to grapple with cancellations that go in the other direction. Who saves the show that has been canceled on cable once it's already been canceled at a streamer? They had no new strategy to try, and *One Day at a Time* was officially cancelled for good.

Just as show cancellations are only partly about popularity, so too are audience efforts to come together and intervene in programming decisions occasionally hamstrung by complex corporate involvement in streaming television. In November 2018, Netflix announced the cancellation of its Marvel coproduction *Daredevil*, despite the show's critical acclaim and presumed popularity. *Daredevil* had been the first of Netflix's Marvel series and, narratively, there were openings for the serialized story lines and characters to continue beyond its three completed seasons. While invested viewers mourned the loss of future seasons, high production costs along with the complicated intellectual property and branding strategies of a Netflix/Marvel coproduction[45] in the face of the then-imminent launch of Disney+ made the show a poor candidate for a fan-led rescue mission. Due to the specifics of the coproduction agreements, even though Netflix was not producing new *Daredevil* content, they owned exclusive rights to the characters for two more years[46]—Disney+ couldn't revive *Daredevil* if it wanted to.

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44. Gloria Calderón Kellett, "It's Officially Over," Twitter, December 8, 2020, https://twitter.com/everythinggloria/status/1336447639634644993.

45. NewsDesk, "Marvel Fans Launch 'Save Daredevil' Campaign as Disney + Acquires All Rights to Show after Netflix's Dividing Ax," ExBulletin, November 30, 2020, https://exbulletin.com/entertainment/588857/.

46. Jennifer Bisset, "Disney's Streaming Service Can't Save Daredevil, Iron Fist and Luke Cage," CNET, December 12, 2019, https://www.cnet.com/news/disneys-streaming-service-cant-save-daredevil-iron-fist-and-luke-cage/.

Nevertheless, fans circulated a petition to continue the existing show or to continue the characters and stories across other Marvel properties[47] and reached out to producers, other platforms, and the show's actors to circulate their efforts.

Once the rights for new *Daredevil* content reverted to Marvel, the #SaveDaredevil campaign relaunched in full force, organizing more viral petitions, in-person events, and video campaigns meant to draw attention to the length and prevalence of *Daredevil* devotion. When the characters, and same actors, began appearing in Disney's Marvel properties—in *Spider-Man: No Way Home* on film and in the *Hawkeye* limited series on Disney+, both released at the end of 2021—fans reignited their efforts, though it became clear that the fanbase was often divided on whether th-ey were now clamoring for more *Daredevil* or for the characters to be resurrected on in other projects more central to the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Once *Daredevil* was pulled from Netflix and dropped on Disney+ in March 2022, fan campaigns once again struggled for a cohesive point around which to activate, given the dizzying developments brought on by streamers' corporate dealings. In short, there is no playbook for how fans can activate their base to intervene in the franchise design for a major transmedia property; the serialized narrative and interconnected characters make it difficult for a fan campaign to have significant impact. At the time of publication, Marvel has not announced plans to bring back a *Daredevil* series.

Fans developed savvy strategies that made use of the practices of legacy television to both identify and champion beloved shows that are at risk for cancellation. For example, ad-supported commercial television means that fans have an additional pressure point, appealing to advertisers for financial investment because a show with low ratings might continue to air if advertisers were very interested in purchasing space. Additionally, American legacy

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47. Paul Tassi, "There's Now a Petition to Bring Netflix's 'Daredevil' Back from the Dead," *Forbes*, January 5, 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2019/01/05/theres-now-a-petition-to-bring-netflixs-daredevil-back-from-the-dead/.

television's reliance on Nielsen to measure viewership—and the common practice to publish ratings numbers in trade and popular presses—means that lay audiences can easily identify shows that might be underperforming and gauge how a particular program is faring against the competition. Access to this information, combined with the relatively predictable calendar for show cancellations and renewals, meant that audiences knew when to come together to throw their support to a favored show.

Few of these strategies are available to viewers of streaming television. Netflix adopted a policy of "anti-transparency" with regards to viewing data[48] based on its start as an original content producer, and other streaming platforms have largely followed suit. Even now that Netflix strategically releases limited information on its viewing numbers, they have eschewed connecting the user data to programming decisions. In 2019, Ted Sarandos explicitly said that all the data Netflix has on its viewers "doesn't help you on anything in that process" of selecting content.[49] Calderón Kellett similarly revealed that Netflix did not share numbers with her,[50] so she knew neither what the show's calculated viewership for season three was nor what numbers would have to be in order to secure a renewal. While Disney similarly releases only limited information on their viewership numbers, and *Daredevil*'s viewer numbers are held by Netflix regardless, the connection between viewership and production is even more oblique, particularly as many of their other limited and recurring seasons in the Marvel universe have thus far served to drive forward interest in their film offerings. The proprietary nature of Disney's corporate strategy likewise means that fans are unable to develop campaigns that both align with long-range planning and account for quantifiable audience interest.

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48. Wayne, "Netflix Audience Data," 6.
49. Dade Hayes, "Netflix's Ted Sarandos Weighs in on Streaming Wars, Agency Production, Big Tech Breakups, M&A Outlook," Deadline, June 22, 2019, https://deadline.com/2019/06/netflix-ted-sarandos-weighs-in-on-streaming-wars-agency-production-big-tech-breakups-ma-outlook-1202636595/.
50. Gloria Calderón Kellett, "I Don't Actually Know," Twitter, February 20, 2019, https://twitter.com/everythinggloria/status/1098338138445901824.

In addition to opaque specifics on viewer numbers, seriality likewise impedes fans' calls to action. In the case of *One Day at a Time*, fans (and producers) were unclear as to what behaviors would yield the best results; on social media, many asked if views needed to come from different profiles or accounts, or if rewatching the show might also help, and whether viewers needed to be watching the recently released season three or if Netflix would also look favorably on new viewers starting the show from the start. Since the launch of Disney+, the need for *Daredevil* to shift platforms, particularly when the potential for the initial three seasons to also shift off Netflix only recently became a possibility, was an obstacle for its activist fans; resurrecting the show in the midst of a serial narrative would be a major deterrent for the show to find new viewers in its new home.

Platforms such as Netflix characterize their lack of explicit viewer data as central to their disruption of legacy television. Though streamers often tout their refusal to gather, much less publicize, demographic information and viewing numbers as being a "champion of creativity,"[51] these practices allow streamers to calculate viewership in ways that is most beneficial for them. This position conveniently allows these companies to deflect the power they have to calculate and interpret the numbers behind proprietary algorithms and data sets. Though demographics are obviously reductive and incomplete, their absence from the profile of streaming television viewing data and recommendation algorithms is also an obstacle that limits viewers' ability to find programming that is popular with others who share tastes, interests, or identities. Streaming television makes it increasingly difficult to perform as that small group with a shared passion. Given the opacity of television's datafication, algorithmic audiences have little idea how their viewing habits affect their own recommendations, much less how they might best influence other individuals or the data on overall viewers.

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51. Wayne, "Netflix Audience Data."

The practices of legacy television conceptualized its audience as members of relevant demographics, viewers who were grouped together into categories and therefore had no individual or personal identities.[52] Algorithmic audiences are the opposite: so individualized, so personalized, that they are unable to have a shared viewing experience. Viewers still feel some degree of "pull" toward social viewing[53] that they attempt to address though the limited means afforded by social media,[54] but the reliance on datafication undermines the ability for streaming television audiences to effectively act as a collective.

Conclusion: Is This Netflix Backlash?

Streaming television, perhaps unsurprisingly, has done little to mitigate the negative impacts of its reliance on data and seriality as characteristics to prop up its popularity. But as these platforms lean on proprietary algorithms and proven narrative formulas to shape audiences and determine the television content that is produced, it is becoming increasingly apparent that these strategies are both inadequate for effectively organizing and perpetuating a viewing audience.

Among the most dangerous presumption of streaming television is to assert the neutrality of its algorithms or objectivity of its data. The emphasis on serial narratives privileges a narrow—but desirable—viewing audience. User interfaces are steering audience behavior so that viewer data has a predictable—and, again, desirable—outcome. But algorithms can magnify the biases that create them, and proprietary algorithms do so in ways that are unseen, but certainly felt, by media audiences.[55] In 2016, in analyzing what the Netflix Prize could

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52. Fisher and Mehozay, "How Algorithms See Their Audience," 7.
53. Lüders and Sundet, "Conceptualizing the Experiential."
54. Grandinetti, "From Primetime to Anytime."
55. See, for instance, Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018); Virginia Eubanks, *Automating Inequality: How High Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor* (New York: St. Martin's, 2017); Frank Pasquale, *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms that Control Money and Information* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

tell us about algorithmic culture, Blake Hallinan and Ted Striphas asked, "What happens when engineers—or their algorithms—become important arbiters of culture? . . . How do we contest computationally-intensive forms of identification and discrimination that may be operating in the deep background of people's lives?"[56] Their questions illustrate the discomfort with opaque technology shaping popular culture while being subject to little oversight.

To put this discomfort in concrete terms: streaming platforms can easily justify programming decisions with (inaccessible) data that support development deals, awards campaigns, casting, and decisions on renewal and cancellation. At the same time, these decisions can also have troubling implications. In 2020, Netflix canceled or opted not to renew twenty-three television series; of these, seventeen featured women, people of color, and/or LGBTQIA+ characters in leading roles. In 2019, at least eight programs cancelled by Netflix were produced by female showrunners, including *One Day at a Time*.[57] If the data are collected based on flawed assumptions about popularity, representation, or watchability, or if algorithms do not account for the obvious discrepancies in viewership for niche programming versus broadly targeted content, this could explain a disproportionate cancellation of shows aimed at small audiences. Quantified viewer statistics do not account for loyalty, devotion, or cultural significance.

A turn away from the emerging dominance of streaming television is likely nowhere on the horizon. But perhaps there is room for an attitudinal shift in how algorithmic audiences view the seriality and abundance of streaming platforms. After all, John Cheney-Lippold argues that every flawed recommendation "reaffirms a sense of collective disbelief in algorithms' certitude."[58] What good are the boundless offerings of streaming

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56. Hallinan and Striphas, "Recommended for You," 131.

57. Jon Jackson, "Netflix Faces Criticism after Canceling Shows That Promoted Diversity," *Newsweek*, October 9, 2020, https://www.newsweek.com/netflix-canceling-women-poc-lgbtq-1537696.

58. John Cheney-Lippold, *We Are Data: Algorithms and the Making of Our Digital Selves* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

television if audiences cannot find among them television content that they like or that they can use to engage with friends, with loved ones, or other fans? I do contend that algorithms have thus far been insufficient tools for organizing and structuring on-demand content, at least when it comes to the effects on the audience. Streaming television is more work, offers less opportunity for interpersonal connection, is more opaque and more isolating. Algorithmic entertainment is sequential-forward, data driven, and deeply empirical. As a result, it destabilizes and, unfortunately, deemphasizes the affective practices of audience engagement.

Then, Now, Forever

Television Wrestling, Seriality, and the Rise of the Cinematic Match during COVID-19

OLIVER KRÖNER

Abstract

In April 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the state of Florida classified professional wrestling (pro wrestling) alongside hospitals, law enforcement, and grocery stores as an essential service. The state's decision made global headlines and was generally met with a mix of confusion and surprise. This article investigates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on contemporary television wrestling. After tracing the influence that the television medium and media convergence have had on pro wrestling, the article argues that the pandemic circumstances, coupled with the demands of television wrestling's serialized storytelling, led to an evolution of a specific wrestling-match type: the cinematic match. Through a close textual analysis of wrestling programs that were produced without a live crowd during the COVID-19 crisis (e.g., *WWE Friday Night Smackdown*, *Wrestlemania 36*), this article examines how television wrestling—in an effort to appeal to its audience—produced a number of cinematic matches that combine distinct elements (e.g., editing, cinematography, sound) of genre filmmaking (e.g., horror, action) with the spectacular athleticism of pro wrestling.

Keywords: professional wrestling, television, seriality, genre, narration, aesthetics, media convergence

In April 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the state of Florida classified professional wrestling (pro wrestling) alongside hospitals, law enforcement, and grocery stores as an essential service.[1] The state's decision made global headlines and was generally met with a mix of confusion and surprise. When Florida governor Ron DeSantis was asked during a press conference as to why pro wrestling should be considered an essential service, he referred to the fact that, due to the pandemic, "people are starved for content" and already have to revert to watching "reruns from the early 2000s"[2] to keep themselves entertained. According to DeSantis, pro wrestling programs could deliver to viewers new content while providing little health risks for the people involved in their production as long as they were recorded without a live audience. Unsurprisingly, DeSantis did not mention some of the more questionable motivations that might have influenced his decision to classify pro wrestling as an essential service: WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) is a major American business, the McMahon family—who owns WWE—has long been associated with Donald Trump, and Florida is a Republican-run state. Of course, pro wrestling programs are not the only type of television production that continued to operate during the pandemic. Yet what sets pro wrestling apart from most other programs that continued production during the pandemic is that, true to its serial nature, television wrestling barely took a break. This article investigates the impact of the pandemic on current wrestling programs. It argues that the pandemic circumstances, coupled with the demands of television wrestling's serialized storytelling, led to an evolution of a specific

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1. "WWE Deemed Essential Service in Florida—Alongside Hospitals and Fire Department," *Guardian*, April 12, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2020/apr/14/wwe-raw-florida-tv-shows-ron-desantis-wrestling-coronavirus.
2. Aaron Rupar, "Florida Gov. DeSantis declared WWE an 'Essential Service.' His Explanation Doesn't Make Much Sense," Vox, April 15, 2020, https://www.vox.com/2020/4/15/21221948/florida-wwe-essential-service-ron-desantis-vince-mcmahon-coronavirus.

wrestling-match type: the cinematic match. This article begins with a discussion of the core dynamics of pro wrestling and then looks at how the television medium and media convergence have influenced these dynamics. The essay then analyses how wrestling programs initially adapted to the COVID-19 outbreak before discussing the rise of the cinematic match during the pandemic.

Professional Wrestling, Television, and Seriality

In his seminal essay on pro wrestling, Roland Barthes defines wrestling as "a spectacle of excess."[3] Barthes notes that wrestling is "a sum of spectacles, of which no single one is a function: each moment imposes the total knowledge of passion which rises erect and alone, without ever extending to the crowning moment of a result."[4] Barthes here identifies two of the core elements of pro wrestling: spectacle and immediacy. Spectacle, as Barthes understands it, refers to the spectacular nature of watching two (or more) wrestlers participate in a complicated choreographed performance whereas immediacy describes how individual wrestling maneuvers or holds (e.g., the body slam, the sleeper hold) are able to capture the audience's attention. According to Barthes, in pro wrestling, every move, every gesture, and every interaction with the audience is characterized by a sense of immediacy and obviousness.[5] This includes wrestlers pretending not to be able to move after they have been attacked, wrestlers displaying pain through exaggerated facial expressions, and wrestlers taunting their opponents after having performed a successful attack.[6]

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3. Roland Barthes, "The World of Wrestling," in *Steel Chair to the Head*, ed. Nicholas Sammond (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 23.
4. Barthes, "Wrestling," 24.
5. Barthes, 24.
6. Barthes, 26–27.

Based on this narrative clarity, pro wrestling has often been referred to as a modern morality play. John Campbell notes that morality plays commonly feature "mighty heroes" and "monstrous villains"[7] fighting each other in a battle between good and evil. Campbell points out that "the wrestler's character and actions must conform to the audience's clearly drawn expectations of what good and evil will do."[8] The evil portrayed by villainous wrestlers must be strong since this creates more dramatic tension and it is also crucial that the villain is eventually defeated in order for the in-ring drama to fit in with the tradition of the morality play.[9] This brief definition of pro wrestling does not cover every aspect of the appeal of wrestling, but it establishes spectacle, immediacy, and narrative clarity as core elements of wrestling performances. The significance of these principles is underlined by the fact that they have survived pro wrestling's transition from an athletic form of performance art into its own television subgenre.

In the 1950s, when pro wrestling first began to be televised in the United States, many wrestling programs were essentially filmed versions of live events. It was not until the early 1980s when, largely through the influence of WWE chairman Vince McMahon, the television medium transformed pro wrestling. As an experienced wrestling promoter, McMahon thought of strategies to attract audiences. However, rather than trying to get wrestling fans interested in local live events, he was aiming to attract a national television audience. The key to attracting viewers was still to provide them with a "spectacle of excess";[10] however, the television medium offered McMahon more possibilities to deliver this spectacle. Over the years, McMahon incorporated narrative and aesthetic elements from other TV genres

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7. John W. Campbell, "Professional Wrestling: Why the Bad Guy Wins," *Journal of American Culture* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 128, http:doi.org.10.1111/j.1542-734X.1996.1902_127.x.

8. Campbell, "Bad Guy," 128.

9. Campbell, 128.

10. Barthes, "Wrestling," 23.

(e.g., sports, soap opera, reality TV) and popular culture (e.g., politics, film, comic books) into WWE's programming to appeal to a larger audience. Although WWE and its competitors (e.g., WCW, ECW) followed this strategy for years, it was not until the late 1990s that McMahon acknowledged the genre hybridity of pro wrestling or, as WWE referred to itself, "sports entertainment" by stating that "[*WWE* borrows] from such program niches like soap operas like the *Days of Our Lives* or music videos such as those on *MTV*, daytime talk shows like *Jerry Springer* and others, cartoons like the *King of the Hill* on FOX, sitcoms like *Seinfeld*, and other widely accepted forms of television entertainment."[11] Neal Gabler has previously pointed toward the ruthlessness with which WWE assimilated various aspects of popular culture into its own programming, arguing that, as a result of this strategy, WWE can be regarded as a "postmodernist mélange."[12]

In addition to amplifying pro wrestling's inherent intertextual tendencies, the television medium has revolutionized wrestling storytelling. Henry Jenkins has previously analyzed the effects of television on the narration of pro wrestling in detail. He regards television wrestling as "masculine melodrama,"[13] a form of the soap opera that is primarily aimed at a male audience and includes a cast of continuing characters and rivalries that unfold over an extended period of time across wrestling matches, interviews, and various out-of-the-ring segments. Jenkins defines television wrestling as follows:

> Television wrestling offers its viewers complexly plotted, ongoing narratives
> of professional ambition, personal suffering, friendship and alliance,
> betrayal and reversal of fortune. Matches still offer their share of acrobatic
> spectacle, snake handling, fire eating, and colorful costumes. They are,

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11. Vince Russo, "The Attitude Era Begins," *WWE Monday Night Raw*, season 5, episode 48, aired December 15, 1997, USA Network.
12. Neal Gabler, "Professional Wrestling Is a Form of Political Protest," in *Professional Wrestling*, ed. Louise I. Gerdes (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 2002), 63.
13. Henry Jenkins, "Never Trust a Snake: WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama," in *Steel Chair to the Head*, 34.

as such, immediately accessible to the casual viewer, yet they reward the informed spectator for whom each body slam and double-arm suplex bears specific narrative consequences. A demand for closure is satisfied at the level of individual events, but those matches are always contained within a larger narrative trajectory which is itself fluid and open.[14]

Jenkins here makes clear that television wrestling is not only a spectacle of excess that is primarily characterized by its sense of immediacy but also engages its audience through serial storytelling. In fact, it is striking how much the narration of television wrestling resembles the serialized storytelling of soap operas or, more broadly speaking, television drama. Robert C. Allen has argued that instead of providing an ultimate narrative telos, soap operas usually feature a number of overlapping "mini-closures"[15] that resolve a particular narrative question but do not move the text closer toward an ultimate resolution. Similarly, Jason Mittell states that the plotlines of serialized television drama are rarely fully resolved and, if they are, they are typically immediately replaced by "more suspenseful or engrossing narrative enigmas to keep viewers watching."[16] As a result, the viewer's engagement with serialized television drama is characterized by a "wandering viewpoint,"[17] a mix between protension (expectation) and retention (retrospection). If we equate the rivalries between wrestlers with plotlines, then these observations on television serials accurately describe the narrative employed by pro wrestling programs. As Jenkins notes, television wrestling typically raises narrative enigmas during the free broadcasts but only resolve these enigmas during the monthly pay-per-view events.[18] Moreover, as I have discussed

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14. Jenkins, "Never Trust a Snake," 34.
15. Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 75.
16. Jason Mittell, "Film and Television Narrative," in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007),164.
17. Allen, "Soap Operas," 76.
18. Jenkins, "Never Trust a Snake," 35.

elsewhere at length, television wrestling frequently utilizes the audience's long-term engagement with its characters to increase the emotional impact of its storytelling.[19]

   Although Jenkins's work on television wrestling dates back to the 1990s, most modern wrestling programs can still be described as serialized masculine melodrama. Yet, as with most other forms of contemporary storytelling, media convergence has influenced the narration of television wrestling. Of course, pro wrestling has always relied on audience participation. As Annette Hill states, audiences are responsible for creating much of the "controlled chaos" that is integral for sports entertainment, for example by playing certain roles such as "chanting or booing for heroes and heels; using props, like offering a wrestler a beer; and interaction with the wrestlers during a match through noise amplification, attention to the action and participation as fans and anti-fans."[20] This kind of audience participation is essential since it provides the basis for the in-ring performances of the wrestlers. For example, wrestlers might address the audience in the middle of a match, perform wrestling moves that are a direct response to the audience, or adjust the pacing of their movements based on the crowd reaction. Ford describes pro wrestling as a "a massively popular fictional performance that invites the audience to participate directly with the text," adding that "without audience participation, the text of a pro wrestling [match] cannot be completed."[21] These studies underline that audiences are an integral part of pro wrestling since they influence the flow of wrestling matches on a moment-to-moment basis. Most contemporary wrestling programs are still produced in front of a live audience, but media convergence has somewhat redefined the role of

19. Oliver Kroener, "Wrestling with Characters," in *Convergent Wrestling: Participatory Culture, Transmedia Storytelling, and Intertextuality in the Squared Circle*, ed. CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson (London: Routledge, 2019).

20. Annette Hill, *Reality TV* (London: Routledge, 2014), 112.

21. Sam Ford, "Pinning Down Fan Involvement: An Examination of Multiple Modes of Engagement for Professional Wrestling Fans," *Material of the MIT Programme in Comparative Media Studies* (2007), 30.

live crowds at televised wrestling events. As Jon Ezell notes, the live audience of a televised wrestling event may "cheer and boo different performers, but in the repertoire of responses there is a continuity informed by prior televisual experience and dictated by the current ecology of performance, where live audiences' immediate responses have less influence on the performance than responses from mediated audiences (e.g. ratings, stock price, social media)."[22] Contemporary wrestling programs produced by WWE have particularly embraced the influence of mediated audiences on the performances and storytelling of television wrestling that Ezell refers to here.

Convergent Wrestling

Jenkins has famously defined media convergence as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want."[23] Based on its inherent intertextuality and its embrace of transmedia storytelling, contemporary television wrestling represents a prime example for media convergence.[24]

WWE does not only exclusively develop its stories through its weekly television programs or monthly PPV events but also through social media platforms. For example, wrestlers might continue a rivalry that began on television on Twitter. Similarly, WWE has previously advanced plotlines on their weekly programs that originated from reality TV shows, web series, and podcasts

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22. Jon Ezell, "The Dissipation of 'Heat': Changing Roles of Audience in Professional Wrestling in the United States," in *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, ed. Broderick Chow, Eero Laine, and Claire Warden (London: Routledge, 2016), 14.
23. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 2.
24. CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson, "Introduction—Defining Convergent Wrestling," in *Convergent Wrestling* 11.

featuring WWE talent. In addition to developing its stories across different media platforms, WWE encourages their fans—the WWE Universe—to engage with their content on social media. For example, the company frequently creates event and match-specific Twitter hashtags to increase fan engagement and prominently features the Twitter handles of their performers on-screen as they enter the ring. As Joyce Goggin and Argyrios Emmanouloudis have discussed, WWE also offers viewers a smartphone application that allows them to access news, highlights, and videos while also giving them the opportunity to vote for matches they would like to see.[25] Despite the fact that WWE seems to do everything they can to increase online audience participation, the question remains as to how much fans are actually able to impact the storytelling. Of course, the discussion as to who really is in control of an unfolding transmedia narrative is not new. Suzanne Scott already noted almost a decade ago that one of the dangers of transmedia stories is that despite their "collaborative narrative design, the media industry frequently equates fans' 'participation' with their continuous consumption of texts that narratively and financially supplement a franchise."[26] Based on how WWE have in the past edited unwanted participation from the live crowd, a practice that wrestling fans and insiders commonly refer to as "sweetening," it is safe to assume that WWE only welcomes certain types of fan interaction and is concerned with remaining in power of the stories it tells. Frank Kelleter has argued that in popular serialized narratives, production and reception are closely related since "a series is being watched or read while it is developing, that is, while certain narrative options are still open or have not yet materialized as options."[27] Following Kelleter's logic, popular serial storytelling functions as a feedback loop in which production and reception

25. Joyce Goggin and Argyrios Emmanouloudis, "The Pro wrestling Audience as Imagined Community: Reflecting on the WWE Universe as a 'Fan-Generated Narrative' Body," in *Convergent Wrestling*, 143.
26. Suzanne Scott, "Who's Steering the Mothership? The Role of the Fanboy Auteur in Transmedia Storytelling," in *The Participatory Cultures Handbook*, ed. Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson (London: Routledge, 2012), 43.
27. Frank Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality," in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 13.

continuously influence each other. For example, in the case of a television se-
ries, producers might alter the unfolding story based on how viewers reacted
to previous instalments. However, even if viewers do not actively engage with
a series (e.g., on social media), they still have to be considered "agents of narra-
tive continuation" since producers might still make changes to the story based
on the audience's viewing activity (e.g., drop in viewership).[28] Television wres-
tling represents a unique example of popular seriality since, unlike most other
transmedia stories, its fictional world is "built fundamentally around serialized
live events."[29] This somewhat complicates the feedback loop between produc-
tion and reception. More specifically, the audience participation of television
wrestling operates on different levels—the live audience participates in the pro
wrestling performances on a moment-to-moment basis while simultaneously
shaping the long-term storytelling through their participation. On a broader
level, the television audience influences the progression of the story through
their viewing of or interaction with these serialized live events. Some studies
have already traced how the interaction between these different types of au-
dience participation have influenced the serialized storytelling of WWE pro-
grams—for example, scholars have referred to the fact that the enthusiastic
manner in which live crowds and wrestling fans on social media responded to
Daniel Bryan in 2013 forced WWE to make rapid changes to their storytelling
and create a plotline that culminated in Bryan becoming WWE World Heavy-
weight Champion at *Wrestlemania XXX*.[30] The pandemic provided a different
kind of challenge for television wrestling. The absence of a live audience, cou-
pled with the demands of serial storytelling and the expectations of the viewers
at home led to a rise of cinematic wrestling matches, a match type that was
designed to provide viewers with the spectacle they associate with pro wrestling,
albeit in a pandemic environment.

28. Kelleter, "Popular Seriality," 13.
29. Sam Ford, "WWE's Storyworld and the Immersive Potentials of Transmedia Storytell-
    ing," in *The Rise of Transtexts*, ed. Benjamin W. L. Derhy Kurtz and Mélanie Bourdaa
    (New York: Routledge, 2016), 170.
30. Goggin and Emmanouloudis, "Imagined Community," 144.

The Weirdest Show on Earth: Television Wrestling during COVID-19

Alongside most other aspects of modern life, the COVID-19 crisis has affected media production and reception. The impact of the pandemic on contemporary media has also led to an emergence of scholarship on "pandemic media," which refers to everything from media that reports on the crisis (e.g., news programs, special reports) to media produced during the pandemic (e.g., films, television programs, video games) as well as media consumption during COVID-19.[31] At the time of this writing, the scholarship on pandemic media is still evolving, but there have already been a number of studies that have focused specifically on how the COVID-19 crisis has impacted film and television production, exhibition, and distribution. For example, Kate Fortmueller argues that cinema closures and, more generally, the cancellation of most live events have accelerated the move toward streaming that had already been in motion prior to the pandemic.[32] Meanwhile, Darshana Sreedhar Mini argues that the pandemic circumstances have led to film and television productions with a decidedly "pandemic aesthetic" while outlining the strict health and safety protocols that American labor unions helped to put into place to guarantee a safe return to work for employees involved in film and television production:

> The staged reopening process requires producers to ensure the availability of protective safety equipment, thermal screening and physical distancing protocols, including minimising instances of scenes involving fights, intimacy and crowds by amending scripts or using digital effects. The agreement emphasises the maintenance of a safe workspace, pitched as a

31. Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini, eds., *Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory* (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2020).
32. Kate Fortmueller, *Hollywood Shutdown: Production, Distribution, and Exhibition in the Time of COVID* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021).

'shared' goal and responsibility. Apart from the lab-based PCR diagnostic kit for testing, the employees are also divided into separate zones, depending on the number of people with whom they are in contact. Employees will be eligible for paid sick leave and quarantine pay. The COVID–19 compliance supervisor is another addition to safety protocols, and this official will be physically present during shoots to enforce regulations.[33]

As previously noted, based on its classification as an essential service in Florida, professional wrestling was somewhat of an outlier in the early stages of the pandemic since—in contrast to most other forms of live entertainment—wrestling never went on hiatus. In terms of distribution, WWE benefitted from the fact that they already had television deals in place and were ready to distribute their content (e.g., weekly shows, PPV events, documentaries) to a global audience via their own streaming platform (the WWE Network). At the same time, like any other form of live entertainment, WWE lost all income that was generated through live ticket sales. In order to counter pandemic-related financial losses, the company furloughed or laid off a large number of employees in the early phase of the COVID-19 crisis and continued to do so throughout the pandemic. WWE's actions were widely criticized given the company's current net worth of over $5 billion. On the production side, the classification of pro wrestling as an essential service in the state of Florida meant that WWE quickly had to put health and safety protocols in place to be able to produce their weekly shows and monthly PPV events. Yet the company's health and safety protocols did not have to comply with the strict protocols that had been negotiated by film and television labor unions since professional wrestlers in America are still not allowed to unionize, meaning the majority of them are employed as independent contractors. This, along with the company's mass firings, created tensions between WWE and many of its employees. Specifically,

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33. Darshana Sreedhar Mini, "Where Is Cinema? COVID-19 and Shifts in India's Cinemascape," *IIC Quarterly* 47, nos. 3 and 4 (Winter 2020–Spring 2021): 118.

wrestlers and members of WWE's production crew anonymously reported to the media that they felt the health protocols the company put in place were inadequate and voiced concerns over being pressured to work in close proximity to other people if they wanted to keep their jobs.[34] This article primarily focuses on how the COVID-19 crisis affected the aesthetics and the narration of television wrestling, yet this overview of how the pandemic disrupted wrestling productions is still relevant since the changes to the production of wrestling programs paved the way to how they how they evolved on a textual level during the pandemic.

In March 2020, WWE began to produce their weekly programs and monthly PPV events at the Performance Center in Orlando, Florida. The Performance Center, which is WWE's training facility, gave WWE the possibility to shoot their weekly programs with minimal staff and without a live crowd. The first empty arena show that was produced at the Performance Center was the *Friday Night Smackdown* episode that aired on March 13. The episode begins with a statement by wrestling legend and current WWE chief operating officer Triple H. He introduces viewers to the Performance Center, vaguely alludes to the pandemic circumstances, and assures viewers that despite what is going on in the world, WWE is still determined to "put a smile on peoples' faces."[35] Later on in the episode, Triple H proclaims that by continuing to produce content during the pandemic, WWE are truly fulfilling the promise of their current tagline: "Then. Now. Forever." The episode that follows this opening statement is mostly structured like a regular episode of *Smackdown*: it features wrestling matches, interviews, and various out-of-the ring segments—all of which further WWE's serialized storylines. The episode begins with a female tag-team match that sees the heel team of

34. Kim Kelly, "WWE Is Considered 'Essential' Furing COVID-19. Why Aren't Its Wrestlers?," *Esquire*, April 28, 2020, https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a32236195/wwe-wrestlers-coronavirus-essential-business/.

35. Andrea Listenberger, "WWE Elimination Chamber Fallout," *WWE Friday Night Smackdown*, season 22, episode 24, aired March 13, 2020, Fox.

Bayley and Sasha Banks take on babyfaces Alexa Bliss and Nikki Cross. The match features some instances in which the wrestlers cleverly acknowledge the circumstances under which they are performing, such as, for example, the heel team interacting with an invisible crowd during their entrance. However, overall the match highlights that due to the sudden impact of the pandemic, the in-ring performers did not have time to adjust to wrestling in front of an empty arena. Aside from a few small adjustments such as, for example, talking more to each other to make for the lack of crowd noise, the wrestlers perform as if they were wrestling in front of a live crowd: they pace their moves in a way that leaves room for audience reactions and, at one point, Nikki Cross even stomps her foot on the ring apron, which is the wrestling equivalent of asking a live crowd for their support. Cross even goes so far as to pretend that she has been energized by the nonexistent live crowd when she gets tagged into the match by her partner. Of course, some of these actions are meant to be read as comedic, but they also underline the absurdity of the performance. The match ends with an outside interference by the villainous Asuka who sneaks into the arena and costs the babyface team the win. Even with a live crowd, this classic pro wrestling scenario relies on the audience's willingness to suspend their disbelief. In an empty arena, it is rendered completely implausible. Picking up on the absurdity of the situation, the commentators react to the ending of the match by exclaiming: "She came right through the crowd. I never saw it coming!"[36]

As a result of COVID-19, televised wrestling events without live crowds became common in 2020; however, there have been instances of televised empty arena matches prior to the pandemic. Perhaps most notably, the Rock fought Mankind in a pretaped empty arena match that aired during the halftime break of the 1999 Super Bowl—a strategic move by Vince McMahon to get viewers, who normally would not watch television wrestling, interested in WWE's programming. Another famous empty arena match was the confrontation between Terry Funk and Jerry Lawler at the Mid-South

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36. Listenberger, "Elimination Chamber Fallout."

Coliseum in Memphis in 1981, which Ezell discusses at length in his work on the changing roles of pro wrestling audiences. He states that pro wrestling, as "a genre of performance," obviously requires a live audience while pointing toward the eerie quality of empty arena wrestling: "There is a sense of anxiety and absurdity in the absence of a live audience; the sounds of the men shrieking and screaming reverberate like attempts at echolocation."[37] Much of the online discourse surrounding the empty arena shows that aired during the COVID-19 mirrors Ezell's analysis. As Ron DeSantis predicted when he declared pro wrestling an essential service in Florida, some viewers were grateful that WWE and AEW, the two major wrestling promotions currently operating in the United States, continued to produce new content during the pandemic. In April 2020, a viewer in the pro wrestling subreddit SquaredCircle noted that they "got used to it by now"[38] whereas another viewer rhetorically asks, "What the fuck else is there to watch?"[39] These somewhat positive viewer reactions are offset by a wealth of negative viewer responses toward wrestling programs that have been produced without a live audience. Reddit user Arch_Angel666 states that they cannot get invested in empty arena matches and, consequently, feel no desire to watch WWE's weekly programs anymore.[40] Meanwhile, another fan describes getting through a few empty arena programs per week as "a chore"[41] whereas the user BlackfishShane proclaims that "wrestling without a crowd is just a

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37. Ezell, "The Dissipation of 'Heat,' " 10.

38. ANismanloMataron2, "Are You Watching the Empty Arena Shows?" Reddit, April 27, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/SquaredCircle/comments/g900f8/are_you_watching_the_empty_arena_shows/?utm_source=amp&utm_medium=&utm_content=comments_view_all.

39. Nitraw, "Empty Arena Shows?" comment, Reddit, April 27, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/SquaredCircle/comments/g900f8/are_you_watching_the_empty_arena_shows/?utm_source=amp&utm_medium=&utm_content=comments_view_all.

40. Arch_Angel666, "Empty Arena Shows?" comment, Reddit, April 27, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/SquaredCircle/comments/g900f8/are_you_watching_the_empty_arena_shows/?utm_source=amp&utm_medium=&utm_content=comments_view_all.

41. GhostandTheWitness, "Empty Arena Shows?" comment, Reddit, April 27, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/SquaredCircle/comments/g900f8/are_you_watching_the_empty_arena_shows/?utm_source=amp&utm_medium=&utm_content=comments_view_all.

hollow experience."[42] Tanya Horeck has highlighted that—particularly in the early stages of the pandemic—television provided many people with a sense of comfort in a time of uncertainty.[43] However, Horeck's analysis of the shifting meanings of binge-watching during COVID-19 focuses mainly on the reception of television programs that were produced before the pandemic. The negative responses toward pandemic empty arena wrestling programs indicate that—just like viewers of other types of television—wrestling fans wanted to be comforted, yet many of them found themselves disappointed since the empty arena shows that were produced during the initial phase of the COVID crisis did not resemble the wrestling programs they were used to. Thus, rather than providing them with a sense of comfort, for many viewers empty arena wrestling programs just became another reminder of the pandemic.

While the actual wrestling matches were most impacted by the lack of a live crowd on the first empty arena episode of *Smackdown*, the absence of the audience can also be felt during the interview segments. This is particularly true for the last segment of the show, in which the all-American hip-hop Superman John Cena, one of WWE's top babyfaces, discusses his upcoming *Wrestlemania* match with Bray Wyatt, an evil children's show host who possesses mystical powers. Cena adjusts his performance in subtle ways to the empty arena setting—for example, by directly addressing the camera. Yet his cadence and his booming voice are clearly meant to appeal to a live crowd. Toward the end of the segment, Wyatt interrupts Cena, and the two wrestlers have a verbal confrontation in the middle of the ring. Wyatt voices a mix of envy and disgust at Cena's Hollywood career, big muscles, and beautiful girlfriends. However, more notable than the content of their confrontation is how

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42. BlackfishShane, "Empty Arena Shows?" comment, Reddit, April 27, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/SquaredCircle/comments/g900f8/are_you_watching_the_empty_arena_shows/?utm_source=amp&utm_medium=&utm_content=comments_view_all.

43. Tanya Horeck, "'Netflix and Heal': The Shifting Meanings of Binge-Watching during the COVID-19 Crisis," *Film Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (Summer 2021): 35–40, https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2021.75.1.35.

Wyatt's eccentric and spectacular performance clashes with the empty arena setting. Similar to Cena's performance, Wyatt's speech pattern and gestures seem to have been designed to appeal to a live audience, but, in accordance with the horror-inspired character he is portraying, his performance is even more exaggerated than Cena's. For example, Wyatt frequently pretends to be guided by the voices in his head and randomly breaks out in maniacal laughter while addressing Cena. As with most other segments in this episode of *Smackdown*, the confrontation between Cena and Wyatt is impacted by the lack of a live audience; however, in contrast to most of the other segments of the episode, it also offered a glimpse as to how television wrestling could successfully adapt to the pandemic circumstances. The segment sparked the interest of television critics and wrestling fans particularly for how the hyperbolic performances mismatched the empty arena environment. One critic referred to the segment as "Beckett-esque absurdist theatre"[44] and described it as "uncomfortably intimate, which to be honest is exactly how it should feel."[45] Fans also responded positively to the confrontation between Cena and Wyatt, with one viewer stating that "the lack of crowd actually made this more effective"[46] and another one remarking that the "silence of the room made Bray Wyatt's promo absolutely eerie."[47] It is safe to assume that the positive feedback to this segment, coupled with the less enthusiastic audience responses toward empty arena wrestling matches, led WWE to adjust their weekly programs and monthly PPVs in order to meet expectations of their mediated audience.

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44. Thom Dunn, "WWE Smackdown without an Audience Is a like Beckett-esque Absurdist Theatre," BoingBoing, March 16, 2020, https://boingboing.net/2020/03/16/wwe-smackdown-without-an-audie.html.

45. Sean T. Collins, "Pro Wrestling in Empty Arenas Is the Weirdest Show on Earth," *Vulture*, March 17, 2020, https://www.vulture.com/2020/03/pro wrestling-no-audience-corona-virus.html.

46. Thatdeal79, "Bray Wyatt Crashes John Cena's Interview En Route to WrestleMania: SmackDown, March 13, 2020," YouTube, March 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ruCcewe7IM&t=3s.

47. Alejandro Rodriguez, "Bray Wyatt Crashes John Cena's Interview En Route to WrestleMania: SmackDown, March 13, 2020," *YouTube*, March 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ruCcewe7IM&t=3s.

The Rise of the Cinematic Match

In addition to fans who find it difficult to engage with wrestling programs that are produced without a live audience, there have also been viewers who have been critical of pandemic wrestling programs because they regard their existence as solely economically motivated. Kelleter has previously discussed the capitalist nature of popular serial media in detail, stating that

> whatever else popular seriality tells us, whichever plot it offers us, whichever character it lets us love or hate, it always also assures us that there will be not end to the return of our stories, no end to the multiplication of our story engagements—and thus no end to the world we know and imagine and controversially practice as our own.[48]

Of course, the capitalist underpinnings of serial media that Kelleter describes here have been criticized before, but for many viewers the production of empty arena wrestling programs during a global pandemic brought this aspect of television seriality into sharp focus. Viewers particularly criticized Vince McMahon for his decision to hold *Wrestlemania*, typically the most spectacular televised wrestling event of the year, as a two-day event at the empty WWE Performance Center. One viewer argued that with this decision, McMahon showed "his greed as usual"[49] while, in the eyes of another fan, holding *Wrestlemania* at an empty arena highlighted that "nothing comes between Vince and money."[50] Overall, the two-day event received mixed reviews. As with the weekly empty arena programs, some viewers were happy that WWE provided them with some form of entertainment

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48. Kelleter, "Popular Seriality," 30.
49. Koopatheelephant, "This WWE Event Held in an Arena with No Fans Is So Insanely Surreal," comment, Buzzfeed, March 17, 2020, https://www.buzzfeed.com/christopher-hudspeth/wwe-coronavirus-caused-smackdown-event-in-an-empty-arena.
50. Sineadc4928ce1c5, "This WWE Event," Buzzfeed, March 17, 2020, https://www.buzzfeed.com/christopherhudspeth/wwe-coronavirus-caused-smackdown-event-in-an-empty-arena.

during the pandemic whereas others criticized the event since it did not provide the spectacle they associate with *Wrestlemania*, which usually takes place in front a live audience of over seventy thousand people and features not only the biggest wrestling matches of the year but also celebrity appearances and musical guests. Although the overall response to the event was mixed, viewers and critics praised the two cinematic matches that were part of the event, with *USA Today* going so far as to refer to the Boneyard Match[51] between the Undertaker and AJ Styles as "a masterpiece."[52]

The pretaped match, which was shot at an undisclosed graveyard in Florida, is remarkable in the context of this chapter since it highlights how the serial storytelling of television wrestling has evolved during COVID-19. Televised wrestling frequently features out-of-the-ring segments that progress the story and, over the years, WWE has developed a range of match types ("Hardcore," "Falls Count Anywhere," "I Quit") that allow the performers to fight all over the arena. Yet, what distinguishes such out-of-the-ring segments from the Boneyard Match is that they are typically concerned with preserving a certain sense of verisimilitude, which is often achieved through the use of handheld cameras that follow the performers as they fight their way through the building. In contrast, the Boneyard Match is essentially a short film set in the fictional world of WWE. The match was one of the last matches of the Undertaker—one of the most iconic wrestling characters of all time. Within kaybabe (wrestling vernacular for the fictional universe that pro wrestling creates), the Undertaker is a Western mortician who wears a black cowboy hat and possesses supernatural powers. Over the years, the Undertaker's persona has been slightly altered to include more aspects of Mark Calaway, who has been portraying the character since the 1980s. Perhaps most notably, in the early 2000s, WWE somewhat dropped the mystical aspects of the Undertaker

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51. Andrea Listenberger, "Night One,"*Wrestlemania 36*, TV special, aired March 25, 2020, WWE Network.
52. Nick Schwartz, "WWE Fans React to the Epic Undertaker-AJ Styles Boneyard Match," *USA Today*, April 4, 2020, https://ftw.usatoday.com/2020/04/wwe-fans-react-to-the-epic-undertaker-aj-styles-boneyard-match.

persona and transformed him into an outlaw biker. Since then, this biker persona has slowly merged with early incarnations of the Undertaker as a mystical heel. I discuss the character's gimmick in detail here because it is crucial for how the Boneyard Match unfolded. The match was mainly built around the notion that the Undertaker might be too old to defeat AJ Styles, whose wrestling persona is primarily based on the fact that he is widely regarded as one of the most athletic pro wrestlers in the world.

Right from the beginning, WWE establishes that the Boneyard Match will be different from a regular pro wrestling match. The match begins with the Undertaker's eerie entrance music while the camera pans around the graveyard to give the audience a sense of the location that the match will take place in. The production design of the graveyard immediately recalls old horror films: the audience is introduced to stone busts and gravestones that are covered in moss, and the entire graveyard is enclosed in thick fog. After the audience has been introduced to the locale, we learn that AJ Styles is already at the graveyard, awaiting his opponent's arrival. The match then cuts to images of an empty highway. Rock music starts playing as the Undertaker suddenly appears on his motorcycle. He races through the night toward the graveyard. Once he arrives, the two wrestlers begin to brawl all over the graveyard as AJ Styles mocks the Undertaker by insulting his wife and reminding the audience that the wrestling legend might be too old to keep up with Styles's athletic wrestling performance. From a wrestling standpoint, the match is somewhat unremarkable, but the way in which it is shot sets it apart from other backstage wrestling matches and the empty arena matches that have otherwise characterized television wrestling during the pandemic. Rather than primarily relying on one handheld camera and limited editing, the match continuously cuts back and forth between wide shots, handheld medium close-ups, and extreme close-ups of the competitors' facial expressions. This is common for cinematic fight scenes but unusual for television wrestling. Throughout the match, WWE uses nondiegetic music to heighten the emotional impact of the fight. For example, the beginning of the match is scored with what might be described as an eerie, low-key horror film

soundtrack and, toward the end of the match, melancholy string music begins to play as AJ Styles relentlessly beats up the Undertaker. In the context of this cinematic match, the performers' continuous talking and frequent use of nondiegetic music does not seem as if the wrestlers are compensating for the lack of a live crowd. Instead, the way in which the two performers brawl all over the graveyard while insulting each other is reminiscent of different types of genre filmmaking. This impression is heightened by the fact that the match features a number of "spots" (wrestling vernacular for a complicated wrestling move that has been designed to capture the viewer's attention) that specifically recall action and horror films. For example, the match features the Undertaker being attacked by a group of druids and, toward the end of the match, just when it seems as if AJ Styles is going to win by burying his opponent in an empty grave, the wrestling legend teleports out of the grave. The Undertaker's iconic silhouette mysteriously appears behind Styles, who has to come to terms with the fact that his opponent possesses supernatural powers. From this point forward, the Undertaker dominates the younger wrestler, and it becomes clear that the story WWE is telling is that Styles underestimated the Undertaker and his mystical powers and now has to pay the price. After the Undertaker teleports out of the grave, the match crescendos with a series of spectacular moves that clearly have been designed to provide viewers with the emotional catharsis they expect from pro wrestling. The Undertaker performs the tombstone—one of his signature moves—on AJ Styles before using his supernatural powers to set off an explosion at a nearby barn. The two wrestlers fight on top of the barn and, in the most spectacular move of the night, the Undertaker grabs Styles by the throat and throws him off the barn. He then carries the motionless body of Styles to the empty grave and wins the match by using a tractor to cover his opponent with dirt—all the while mocking Styles for underestimating him. The match comes full circle as the Undertaker rides off into the night on his motorcycle while Metallica begins to play on the soundtrack before the camera zooms onto the gravestone that the Undertaker seems to have custom built for AJ Styles.

The online audience response to the Boneyard Match underlines that it provided many viewers with the type of spectacle they expect from televised wrestling but found missing from pandemic empty arena matches. For example, in the post-*Wrestlemania* Reddit discussion, user smokedspirit describes the match "movie epic"[53] while another user refers to it as "one of the coolest things I've seen in wrestling in a long time."[54] Meanwhile, the user Rikkimaaruu admits that "it wasn't a great wrestling match" but still praises it for being "a great action segment with nice cinematic feeling to it."[55] In many ways, the Boneyard Match encapsulates the evolution of television wrestling during the pandemic. It is the result of the pressures of serial production and the constant feedback loop between serial production and reception. The mediated audiences of television wrestling largely reacted negatively to the empty arena wrestling programs that began airing early on in the pandemic. As a result, in order to entice viewers, wrestling promotions had to think of new ways to tell their stories without being able to rely on the interplay between live crowds and wrestling performers that has been an integral aspect of pro wrestling since its inception. The solution that wrestling companies came up with, the cinematic match, is a result of modern television wrestling's status as serialized transmedia storytelling. Television wrestling has assimilated elements of popular culture for decades—cinematic matches are only the next logical step in this evolution, which has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. To put it differently, in keeping with serial storytelling's desire to "practice reproduction as innovation,"[56] cinematic

53. Smokedspirit, "Post WWE WrestleMania 36 (Day 1) Discussion Thread!" Reddit, April 5, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/SquaredCircle/comments/fv5vjm/post_wwe_ wrestlemania_36_day_1_discussion_thread/.

54. TheBrumAbisde, "Post WrestleMania 36," comment, Reddit, April 5, 2020, https:// www.reddit.com/r/SquaredCircle/comments/fv5vjm/post_wwe_wrestlemania_ 36_day_1_discussion_thread/.

55. Rikkimaaruu, "Post WrestleMania 36," comment, Reddit, April 5, 2020, https://www. reddit.com/r/SquaredCircle/comments/fv5vjm/post_wwe_wrestlemania_36_day_1_ discussion_thread/.

56. Kelleter, "Popular Seriality," 30.

wrestling matches such as the Boneyard Match adopt elements (e.g., editing, lighting, iconography) from film genres such as horror and action and incorporate them into the serial storytelling fabric of television wrestling. On a moment-to-moment basis, the Boneyard Match provides wrestling fans with spectacular fight scenes that evoke genre cinema, but it is also furthers AJ Styles and the Undertaker's respective plotlines while particularly acknowledging the history of the Undertaker within WWE's ever-evolving story world.

Conclusion

The Boneyard Match paved the way for a number of experimental cinematic matches that WWE and AEW produced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among others, WWE produced the Firefly Inferno Match, which saw John Cena fight his way through a nightmarish recreation of his career that seemed to be inspired by the films of David Lynch, and a swamp fight that was based on slasher films such as the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) and the *Friday the 13th* series. Meanwhile, over the course of the last year, AEW staged a number of extended cinematic matches at an empty football stadium in Florida. The Boneyard Match and, more generally, the evolution of cinematic wrestling during COVID-19 are notable examples of how contemporary popular seriality operates in practice. One of the underlying principles of popular seriality is that it perpetuates itself while adapting to the desire of its consumers, which is exactly what happened when wrestling fans reacted negatively to the empty arena wrestling programs that premiered during the initial phase of the pandemic, thus forcing television wrestling to innovate. In May 2021, AEW produced one of the first matches (Stadium Stampede) that combined a pretaped cinematic segment with a live wrestling performance. The cinematic segment of the match paid homage to a wide range of action films and featured various stunts that could not be carried

out in a live environment whereas the wrestling performances in the live segment were primarily dictated by the enthusiastic audience response of the live crowd. The match signals that although cinematic wrestling might have begun as a pandemic phenomenon, the serial storytelling of television wrestling has already entered its next phase of reproduction through innovation.

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

BRIAND GENTRY

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 television, 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 necessarily 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 establish 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 perpetuation 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]

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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.

The Patchwork That Makes a Global Streaming Giant

Review of *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* by Ramon Lobato, New York University Press, 2019

GRACE ELIZABETH WILSEY

In *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution*, Ramon Lobato provides an insightful map of the complex processes and negotiations involved in Netflix's transition to a global online streaming platform. Lobato, who is an associate professor of media and communication at RMIT University, describes his research question as twofold: "How are streaming services changing the spatial dynamics of global television distribution, and what theories and concepts do scholars need to make sense of these changes?"[1] In answering these questions, Lobato situates Netflix as an object of study within both the academic fields of television studies and digital media studies, arguing that Internet television "adds new complexity to the geography of distribution."[2] He focuses on controversies surrounding the platform, beginning with its global switch-on in 2016 in order to theorize about the relationship between global television and Internet distribution.[3] Based on a combination of firsthand platform use and research from journalistic, academic, governmental, and public corporate sources, *Netflix Nations*

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1. Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 4.
2. Lobato, *Netflix Nations*, 5.
3. Lobato, 16.

provides a complex picture of the operations of global Internet television by foregrounding the regionally specific relationships between Netflix and its international markets.

Lobato writes about Netflix from an outsider perspective, unaffiliated with the company directly but one that provides convincing insights into the global strategies and complicated negotiations that Netflix navigates as it continues to expand internationally. The first chapter builds the theoretical framework for the text by seeking to define Netflix as a medium and a technology through reference to notable television scholars such as Amanda Lotz and platform studies scholars such as Tarleton Gillespie. Lobato concludes that "Netflix is a hybrid technology that remediates a range of earlier media technologies in different aspects of its operation, and this mix of associations is constantly changing."[4] Netflix proves difficult to pin down; as a company, its identity is constantly in flux both due to changes in offerings and due to localization of catalogues for different regions. As a media producer, its content also varies widely and changes constantly.

Much of the fluctuations of Netflix's identity seem to revolve around its transnational expansion, which is the topic of the second chapter. Chapter 2 contextualizes Netflix in academic debates surrounding transnational television and describes how Netflix is both a national and a transnational technology with many complex operations that differ significantly based on region. This provides valuable context for the third chapter, which considers the infrastructure behind Netflix's operations. Here, Lobato examines the complicated "ecology of small, purpose-built systems" that make up the platform and argues that the "hard, soft, and human infrastructures" of Netflix need to be studied simultaneously.[5] One of Lobato's most salient examples in this chapter involves the role of Internet bandwidth in various global regions. The data he collects on relative Internet speeds not only reminds readers of the imbalance in Internet infrastructure globally but also

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4. Lobato, 44.
5. Lobato, 79.

underlies one of his key points that infrastructural issues directly affect Netflix's market positioning and the customers that it caters to globally.

After outlining Netflix's infrastructural operations, Lobato focuses chapter 4 on how Netflix adapts to global markets and the efforts the platform has made thus far to localize content. Centering on three case studies of their attempts to expand into India, Japan, and China, Lobato considers the specific regional factors influencing Netflix's market strategies in these three countries in a way that underlies his point that it is both a transnational and national platform. In chapter 5, Lobato grapples with Netflix's potential role as cultural imperialist by analyzing the cultural-policy debates surrounding the company internationally. Lobato formulates the platform as largely an add-on service to existing television systems and, while he makes a valid point that "export power does not transfer directly into cultural power,"[6] he also seems to resist directly criticizing Netflix and their potential for interrupting culturally specific local programming. In this chapter, Lobato alludes to the fact that the Netflix original show *Orange Is the New Black* has been universally popular worldwide, opening up questions about the company's role as content creator in addition to distributor. Though analysis of Netflix as a production company may fall outside of the scope of the book, Lobato does recognize that Netflix's identity undergoes a transition from "a new-economy Silicon Valley company" to that of "an old-fashioned media company," with its clampdown on virtual private networks in chapter 6, which focuses on Netflix's decision to implement geo-blocking, a form of restricting access to certain programming based on geographical location.[7] Chapter 6 provides a fascinating view into Netflix's so-called proxy wars and left me curious to learn more about how the company's identity shift maps onto its global strategy.

Overall, Lobato provides compelling industrial analysis of Netflix as a platform. One of the many strengths of the book is its wide-ranging global

6. Lobato, 142.
7. Lobato, 175.

perspective; not only is Lobato himself located in Australia but he takes care to focus on how Netflix operates in many parts of the world and provides an excellent set of country-specific case studies. It would have been helpful to see more data on the types of programming that is popular across many of the highlighted regions (as with the case of *Orange Is the New Black*), but this would likely require insider data and Lobato clearly identifies the book as coming from an outsider perspective. This points to one of the key difficulties of researching major digital media platforms. Companies such as Netflix keep a tight hold on their analytics, and gaining access to such information (if even possible) typically requires a sacrifice in neutrality. Lobato navigates this hurdle by focusing on the effects of Netflix's expansion into various global regions and the differing techniques instituted in each of these regions, proving a complex and nuanced picture of the global streaming giant.

The History of the American Comic Book, Revised

Review of *Comic Books Incorporated: How the Business of Comics Became the Business of Hollywood* by Shawna Kidman, University of California Press, 2019

ASHER GUTHERTZ

> Financing tends to choose the winners and then wait for the industry narrative to catch up and call those winners great storytellers.
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> —Shawna Kidman, Comic Books Incorporated

Shawna Kidman's *Comic Books Incorporated: How the Business of Comics Became the Business of Hollywood* is a phenomenal work of media history predicated on the premise that the history of comic books has been told wrong—at least, told from one particular perspective. In the history that comic book culture produces of itself, "the embattled but worthy comic book, with the help of fans and creators, stands up to those who would destroy it. . . . In this version of the story, comic books are fundamentally subversive, subcultural, and resistant."[1] Kidman argues that attending to the various legal, social, and industrial infrastructures of comic book culture can illustrate that same history—the ebbs and flows of comic book popularity, its shifts in genres and tone, its movements across mediums—as the path of a "fundamentally corporate" medium, "a dominant form in a culture built to support its growth." *Incorporated*

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1. Shawna Kidman, *Comic Books Incorporated: How the Business of Comics Became the Business of Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 7–8.

succeeds in telling an alternative and extremely convincing narrative of the American comic book across the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries

In order to demonstrate the usefulness of its approach, the first chapter sketches the broad industrial history that it illustrates in greater detail in the chapters to come. It begins with a sharp takedown of the famous formulation of a golden, silver, and bronze age of comic books. Kidman rightly criticizes the overemphasis of superheroes in that historical narrative and provides a more useful periodization for understanding the medium's trajectory: "An establishing era (1933–1954), a phase of crisis and experimentation (1955–1988), and an age of institutionalization (1989–2010)."[2] The chapter ends with the provocative claim that the comic book medium's historical precarity within the larger media landscape is exactly what has made it such a bedrock of that landscape:

> The comic book industry had learned very early on to mobilize its characters across various media platforms simultaneously and to assimilate itself into corporate networks and infrastructures. They had also, importantly, fostered a more reciprocal exchange with audiences. In all these ways, comic book culture had been a culture of convergence for nearly half a century when the rest of the entertainment industry began moving toward this logic.[3]

In the precise and understated fashion that characterizes this book, this passage disrupts a fantasy held by many comic book fans: that there is something textually special about comic book stories that have made them such a successful locus for contemporary convergence culture. Instead, Kidman provides a strong case for the centrality of the legal and industrial strategies of the comics industry in its current media dominance.

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2. Kidman, *Comic Books Incorporated*, 19.
3. Kidman, 43.

The centerpiece of *Comic Books Incorporated* is its second chapter, in which close attention to industrial logics and distribution infrastructures shatters the prevailing story of the medium's massive collapse. In the 1950s, comic books ceased to be a mass medium, falling from a readership of half of the entire US population and more than 90 percent of all children to a current-day readership of one-half of 1 percent of the population. In the usual narrative of that decline, iconoclastic auteurs like Bill Gaines of EC Comics faced public scrutiny from conservative McCarthy–era politicians who forced the industry to develop a self-censorship strategy that vastly limited its creative faculties and audience capacity. Kidman demonstrates that the industry had actually faced several waves of public scrutiny earlier in its history. By the mid-fifties, however, the comic book market was oversaturated, television was siphoning the attention of younger consumers, and distribution infrastructures were breaking down. McCarthy–era hearings, deeply probusiness and invested in a free-market ideology, explicitly aimed to aid entertainment industries in bringing themselves to financial stability and public favor. Kidman even notes that the hearing subcommittee explicitly ignored the now infamous antisuperhero rhetoric of Frederic Wertham, instead focusing on small publishers' "bad taste" comic books like *Tales from the Crypt*. The creation of the Comics Code allowed large publishers, with control of the physical distribution networks, to tighten their stranglehold on the industry and utilize stringent content standards to push out small publishers who were reliant on specific genres: "The comic book industry—disciplined by content codes and constricted distribution networks—became less contentious, more predictable, safer for investors, and less open to independents. It became more corporate."[4]

Chapters 3 and 4 consider the legal and interpersonal infrastructures that led to the transformation of the comic books industry from a mass medium to a niche loss leader whose value lies in its licensing potentials. Chapter 3 uses the famous legal battles of Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, creators of

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4. Kidman, 90.

Superman, to demonstrate that from the beginning, publishing companies employed a rhetoric of auteurism to ignore the multitude of creative labor involved in comic production while simultaneously wresting copyright control from the very people they claimed author their stories (the writers). Kidman argues that DC and Marvel strategically catered to growing fan interest in individual comic authors to bolster affective engagement, but at the same time, both publishing companies (now part of larger media conglomerates) refused to improve labor conditions and maintained tight control of their right to own their workers' intellectual property. Chapter 4 contends that the cultivation of a small but dedicated consumer base of young adult men in the '60s and '70s generated the conditions for media dominance. In a historically creative gesture, Kidman argues that the Underground Comix movement reshaped distribution infrastructures and strengthened the medium's appeal to college-educated men. The short-lived Comix movement demonstrated that a direct market operated out of specialty stores could minimize overhead by buying for small, dedicated audiences. The modern comic book store arose in the wake of this innovation. This distribution shift explains why textually, comic books became more serialized, continuity heavy, and male-centered. The cultural power of college-aged white men, and their overrepresentation in media production itself, along with the rise in prestigious works like *Maus*, transformed the comic book into something closer to a respectable cultural object.

Chapter 5 picks up where the last chapter left off, explaining how shifts in film financing aligned with shifts in the status of the comic book to create the perfect storm for the adaptation mania of the last two decades. Even while fans of comic books gained cultural power and the status of the medium changed overall, a slew of adaption flops in the '80s, including *Howard the Duck* and *Supergirl*, resulted in an industry myth that comic books were bad adaptation material. Around the turn of the century, studios dedicated themselves to a blockbuster logic in which large budget films were advertised so heavily that studios could virtually guarantee weekend openings massive enough that a sharp drop-off in later weeks did not prevent overall

profit gain. Films like *X-Men* and *Spiderman* were perfectly positioned to do well, and when they did, they launched not just a fad of interest but a real reliance on big-budget superhero films.

That chapter ends by pulling together the greatest thread of *Comic Books Incorporated*: its dogged demystification of industry narratives about the intrinsic cultural value of comic books. We must lay bare the financial logics that enabled this cultural moment, Kidman proves, to counteract Marvel Studios' story that its success stems from the strength and their deep understanding of the source material. The book is a major historical intervention because of the quality and consistency of its rebuttal to that narrative. I can't tell you how many comic book writers and journalists fetishize and self-reflexively write about the Kefauver hearings, implicitly suggesting that the iconoclasm they find in comic book history gives their work value and political edge (which it very often lacks). I actually began this project because of *616*, a Marvel Studios documentary about the history of Marvel Comics. The series is surprisingly rigorous in some ways, but it is no coincidence that it elides from comic book history much of what Kidman brings forth. Everyone who has something to say about comic books or superheroes should read *Comic Books Incorporated*.

After such a precise and measured book on a subject that does not usually get treated in that manner, I was disappointed by Kidman's epilogue, in which she declares, "Socially and structurally, comic book culture is hegemonic."[5] The book's innovative focus on comic book infrastructures allows it to avoid the fan-studies trap of overstating the democratic power of a devoted audience that we should all know by now has truly nominal control over their beloved cultural products. However, by relying so much on industrial and economic data, the conclusion conflates "comic book culture" with the industrial infrastructures that have shaped and enabled it. *Incorporated* discusses human infrastructures, such as the vocal fan communities that shaped the industry's transformation and the

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5. Kidman, 231.

comic-fans-turned-Hollywood-creatives who facilitated its transmedial movements, but leaves out of its assessment that comic culture is a multitude of reading relationships that occurred in the history of American comics. The epilogue goes on to commend recent diversity efforts in superhero films like *Black Panther* and *Wonder Woman* while warning that those shifts likely came about because shifts in corporate decision-making allowed them to. Kidman argues that "a better cultural future" is predicated upon "the right distribution networks and the right laws," in addition to accommodating corporate structures and available financial backing. Without negating the importance of those industrial changes, I would ask how we know what a better cultural future for comic books looks like without paying close attention to the role comic books have played and continue to play in real people's lives.

Which leads me to a suggestion for some areas of further research suggested by the history presented in *Comic Books Incorporated*. This is the best book of comic book history I have ever read, and I believe it is crucial to hold on to the insights and revelations that this text finds through its industry-studies approach while introducing a closer attention to comic book reading practices. One major lingering question that seems to necessitate ethnographic historical work is, Why did women turn their backs on the comic book medium in the 1950s? Scholars, including Kidman, seem to assume that the industry's turn away from romance comic books and toward superheroes explains the demographic shift in and of itself, but according to the history presented in this book, comic book genres cycled in and out of popularity in the '40s and '50s, suggesting to me that women were not exclusively or even primarily reading romance comics. What comic books did women read, and what did they find (and then cease to find) in those stories? Similarly, *Incorporated* effectively argues that a dedicated cult audience of college-aged white men drove the trend toward serialized storytelling in comic books (and that the comics industry capitalized on that demographic's investment). In the context of the American soap opera, however, seriality is associated with female audiences and consumption within the

domestic sphere. Why did the comic book serial-reading relationship become so associated with male reading? What are the similarities and dissimilarities between the serialized pleasures of comic books and the serialized pleasures of soap operas?

Comic Books Incorporated is a stellar industrial history of the American comic book that thoroughly demonstrates that its evolution was driven not by creativity and iconoclasm but by corporate logics. Its publication will hopefully inaugurate new directions in comics studies, some of which Kidman herself points to, such as an infrastructural analysis of comic book industries outside of America (and, we might add, the relationship between American and other graphic arts industries). While we absolutely need "to bring these changing infrastructures out of the shadows," we also need to revisit the well-trod arguments and questions of comic book studies. Medium specificity, serialized reading practices, shared narrative universes, demographic shifts in readership and fan cultures, and the relationship between superheroes and other forms of myth need to be recontextualized within this fascinating history of corporate infrastructure.

Film Review

Review of *Zola* (Janicza Bravo, 2020)

ANNE METCALF

Zola is a comedy-drama film directed by Janicza Bravo and starring Taylour Paige and Riley Keough, based on a "mostly true" 148-tweet long thread by A'Ziah "Zola" King that went viral in October 2015.[1] The story follows the titular character, a waitress and an exotic dancer named Zola, on a road trip to Florida to dance at a strip club with a new friend and sex worker, Stefani.

In many ways, King's tweets constituted one of the first, and certainly the most dramatic, demonstration of Twitter's capacity to offer a compelling, serialized narrative. The original tweets were posted before Twitter had even implemented its capability for "threading" linking tweets together so that they could be read in a serial format, in chronological order. Twitter followers began "tuning in live" to follow the story as King posted each week. New followers who noticed King's tweets going viral had to scroll far back enough on her timeline to read the tweets in reverse order from the beginning. Soon, users compiled the tweets in their correct order and distributed them as. jpgs for those who hadn't been following along in real time. The next month, David Kushner of *Rolling Stone* published a feature fleshing out King's tale, which had circulated via the dramatic hashtag #TheStory.

While King was initially tweeting the story on the microblogging platform, which limits each tweet to 140 characters, Kushner says King was "riffing on the reactions of her followers who were responding in real time."[2] Even as the story was emerging, Twitter fans discussed their dream casts for a film adaptation of the story. Not only did the story go viral, it sustained a

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1. Janicza Bravo, dir., *Zola* (New York: A24: 2020).
2. David Kushner, "The Story Behind the Greatest Stripper Saga Ever Tweeted," *Rolling Stone*, July 1, 2021, https://www.rollingstone.com/feature/zola-tells-all-the-real-story-behind-the-greatest-stripper-saga-ever-tweeted-73048/.

remarkable level of investment by its devotees, which Bravo counts herself among, telling NPR she wanted to direct the film adaptation from the moment she read it.

The film premiered in January 2020 at the Sundance Film Festival, a largely white space despite its conscious attempts to lift up filmmakers of diverse backgrounds and a revered taste-making institution in US film. After its festival premiere, *Zola*'s theatrical release was delayed until summer 2021. As distributors were scrambling to find a business model for premiering movies during the dismal theater box office numbers during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was released via video-on-demand (VOD) a mere three weeks after its theatrical release.

Produced by the independent company Killer Films, and financed and distributed by A24, the projected started with a screenplay written by Andrew Neel and Mike Roberts for James Franco to direct but eventually landed in the hands of writer-director Janicza Bravo, and she brought on playwright Jeremy O. Harris, whose *Slave Play* broke the record for most Tony nominations after its Broadway premiere in 2019, as her cowriter. There was little precedent for optioning the rights for a Twitter thread. Still, King was given an executive producer credit on the film and consulted closely with Bravo throughout the writing process.

Bravo's first short film *Eat* (2011) was acquired by VICE Media, and her second, *Gregory Go Boom* (2013), notably premiered during YouTube Comedy Week before screening at the Sundance Film Festival. In these films, Bravo focused on the emptiness and absurdity of her white protagonists, explaining to *OkayPlayer*, "I tend to be a lone black person in a lot of white space. I am constantly navigating white space and feeling like a bit of a foreigner, an alien, or I'm always in the minority and I guess what I wanted to be engaging with or in a conversation with was how I saw whiteness. How I saw white people together."[3] In *Zola*, she works with her first black female

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3. "'Lemon' Director Janicza Bravo on Navigating the Industry as Woman of Color [Interview]," Okayplayer, August 18, 2017, https://www.okayplayer.com/culture/janicza-bravo-lemon-director-brett-gelman-interview.html.

protagonist but still approaches whiteness in her work with the same critical eye, "I would say that one of my themes is an anthropological relationship to whiteness. . . . Something I am really attracted to in my own work is treating white as visible rather than invisible."[4]

Bravo acknowledged that the script that existed when she was brought onto the project, written by two white men, felt "very masculine." She brought on queer, black playwright Harris to rewrite the script with her. The result is a story about sex work, sex trafficking, and race that upends both the male gaze and the white gaze. The *Rolling Stone* article on which it is based summarizes King's tweet thread in this way: "It reads like *Spring Breakers* meets *Pulp Fiction*, as told by Nicki Minaj."[5] Bravo's film indeed shares stylistic similarities with Harmony Korine's 2013 *Spring Breakers*. It is set in Florida and conveys a sense of place with an aesthetic of hyperreal, neon grittiness. Alluding to the importance of the medium's relationship to the content, cinematographer Ari Wegner told Kodak's blog the decision to shoot on 16-millimeter film came from Bravo and Egner's love for "how film records skin tones, and this is a film that in many ways is about skin and bodies."[6] Wegner and Bravo pulled inspiration from wide-ranging references such as William Eggleston's photography and Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, and the result is sumptuous and stylish.

Instead of shying away from the way phones and social media dominate everyday life, Bravo leans into it. Bravo and Harris consciously capitalized on the first-person narration, peppering the film with actual tweets from the original thread, delivered directly to camera and punctuated with the Twitter whistle notification sound. The iPhone lock-screen clock appears throughout the film. The interjections simultaneously refocus viewers on the fact that this story is based on a true one, honoring A'Ziah King's

4. Jourdain Searles, "Janicza Bravo Loved 'Zola' When It First Hit Twitter. Here's How She Brought It to the Big Screen [Interview]," Okayplayer, July 9, 2021, https://www.okayplayer.com/culture/zola-movie-janicza-bravo-interview.html.

5. Kushner, "The Story Behind."

6. "How DP Ari Wenger ACS Used Kodak 16mm to Create a Wild and Colorful . . ." Kodak, October 28, 2021. https://www.kodak.com/en/motion/blog-post/zola.

first-person point of view, and reminding the viewer of the mediated nature of the story. It is a filmic retelling of a retelling, where the audience is repeatedly reminded of the artifice of the spectacle in a Brechtian Verfremdung (distancing) or alienation effect.

With its fidelity to King's original narration of events, the screenplay by Harris and Bravo and the film itself stays firmly grounded in Zola's experience as a black woman but also takes time to invite its white audience in. On the first page of the screenplay, after referencing the women putting gel on their baby hairs, an asterisk explains to the reader that "baby hairs are the wispy hairs that grow along the hairline." The screenplay and the film take time to define terms and situate the scenes culturally for those not in the know. Later, once Zola has commenced her "hoe trip" with Stefani, her foolishly devoted boyfriend, Derrek, and her "roommate," known only as X, the cracks begin to show. When X takes them to a dingy motel, Stefani tells Zola that X takes care of her. Zola pauses to explain to the audience (again a direct quote from King's original tweets) that "'taking care of me' in stripper language means that was her pimp." These asides, acknowledging that at least some of the audience will be viewing this film from outside the culture it represents, invites them in but also serves to alienate, reminding white viewers that they are outsiders, tourists in this particular segment of society.

The tension between Zola (Paige) and her new friend Stefani, played by Riley Keough, is present from the first shot. The film opens with Zola and Stefani getting ready in the mirror, their gestures mirroring each other. Immediately Zola breaks the fourth wall with the first line, the very same line that opened King's original Twitter thread: "You wanna hear the story of how me and this bitch here fell out?" From the first frames, Stefani and Zola are framed as foils, placed in visual opposition with each other, the narrative tension derived primarily from this initial question of not whether but *how* they will fall out. Shortly after Stefani asks Zola to "go somewhere with her," they are again found face to face in a literal hall of mirrors.

The theme is underlined further as the new friends bond over their shared experiences with duplicitous and jealous "frenemies." Zola states, "Same bitch

that wanna smile in your face be the same bitch that wanna come for you later." The air of playful, sisterly solidarity they share as femmes and sex workers is shown as precarious from the start. As Bravo told *Salon*, "I think it's a cautionary tale about making friends with white people, actually."[7]

Bravo's direction and Paige and Keough's performances turn the mirror back on white viewers, and the laughs generated by Keough's performance as Stefani are particularly complicated in an era of ever-increasing digital blackface on platforms like TikTok. Stefani is, as Bravo put it to *Rolling Stone*, "a sort-of minstrel character,"[8] and as the story progresses, she becomes increasingly grotesque. The screenplay introduces Stefani as "white, shifty-eyed and ratchet." In *Double Negative*, Raquel J. Gates writes, "In common parlance, 'ratchet' connotes behavior that is crude, socially unacceptable, and, more often than not, associated with lower-class black vernacular culture."[9] Once their road trip to Florida to dance at what Stefani promises will be a particularly lucrative club commences, Stefani's charm starts to wear thin. Zola's unamused, deadpan expression in the face of Stefani's appropriation of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) signals the critical distance Bravo encourages viewers to take. Paige's face ripples with disgust, disbelief, and exhaustion. White viewers are offered the opportunity not just to see themselves but to see how they are seen. Keough's satirical performance garnered significant praise, and her own biography adds yet another layer of complication to her character's appropriation of black mannerisms and vocabulary: Keough is the granddaughter of Elvis Presley. The tension between Stefani's appropriation of black culture and her ready reliance on white victimhood, added to her culpability in Zola's endangerment and sexual exploitation, neatly and compellingly make white viewers complicit in any identification with her character.

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7. "Zola" Director on Making a Stripper and Sex Movie That Looks and Feels 'Consensual,'" Salon, June 29, 2021, https://www.salon.com/2021/06/29/zola-janizca-bravo/.
8. Kushner, "The Story Behind."
9. Raquel J. Gates, *Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

The reality of racism continually asserts itself in their sex work. After arriving in Florida, Zola's first dance at the club is interrupted by a skinny white man who tucks a dollar into her panties while telling her, "You look a lot like Whoopi Goldberg." When their night at the strip club yields disappointing results, X informs them he set them up on Backpage, a website where "you buy and sell sex." Zola tries to leave, and X threatens her, reminding her he knows where she lives. Once X has left, Zola informs Stefani she will not be sleeping with anyone, and when Zola greets a customer at the door, he stares at her blankly, resentfully spitting out, "I ordered a white chick." Even after Stefani has deceived and attempted to exploit her, Zola encourages Stefani to ask for better compensation than X is offering her. "Pussy is worth thousands, bitch," she implores as she helps Stefani increase her prices and take new photographs for her ad.

When Zola confronts Stefani about the deceptive pretense of the trip, Stefani denies any responsibility for entrapping Zola in this sex trafficking scheme, invoking her own victimhood as she claims she's scared of X, too, and is doing "everything for my baby." Dreama G. Moon and Michelle A. Holling describe the kind of rhetorical strategies that Stefani's character embodies: "White victimhood, 'well-meaningness' and cluelessness, as well as discourses of disgust and patronage directed at black women—in a way that operates to both reproduce and conceal white privilege."[10] Bravo not only upends the white gaze in her filmmaking but the male gaze as well, confronting the audience with a montage of customers arriving and touching Stefani, and then a succession of flaccid penises of various shapes and sizes and grotesque orgasmic facial expressions. Notably, Bravo made a conscious choice not to include any full female nudity in the film, instead sourcing actors from a local nudist colony to comprise the montage of penises.

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10. Dreama G. Moon and Michelle A. Holling, "'White Supremacy in Heels': (White) Feminism, White Supremacy, and Discursive Violence," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 17, no. 2 (2020): 253–60, http://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2020.1770819.

Nowhere is Stefani's identification with whiteness more clear, and clearly satirized, than in the dream-like sequence inserting Stefani's rebuttal of Zola's version of events. After arriving at a house for group sex, which Zola again refuses to participate in, Stefani is on her knees, surrounded by men in matching boxers, when she breaks the fourth wall to defend herself against Zola's narrative authority. Underscored by lullaby-like music, Stefani, now dressed in a prim and professional pink skirt suit with her hair tied back properly, addresses the camera as she denies Zola's account of the trip. The text itself is drawn from the Reddit post by the woman Stefani's character is based on, disputing King's version of events. Stefani denies ever prostituting herself, claiming instead that Zola sold sex for money. The sequence is heightened and absurd—Keough's performance, the baby-pink costuming, and the dramatic irony of her claims, offered after we have seen so much duplicity and exploitation from Stefani, is stark. Here, the filmmakers seem to say, "See, the satire of white people writes itself."

As Zola and Stefani walk down the hallway toward their final out-call appointment, X's voice notes that this client wanted "two bitches." Zola encourages Stefani once again to stop working for X. Stefani ignores her, and when the door opens, a man Derrek met at the motel pulls Stefani into the room by force as Zola runs down the hall to safety, calling X for help. X arrives with a gun while Zola and Derrek panic downstairs.

Though it was Derrek's mistake that put the women in the danger, X chastises Zola for abandoning Stefani: "You're supposed to be looking out for her!" To which she replies, "Who's looking out for me?" In their attempt to retrieve Stefani, X, Zola, and Derrek are held in the room at gunpoint. We see Stefani's heeled foot sticking out of a closet, unsure if she is dead or not. While X and the man argue, a shot of Zola transforms into a swirling mass of light, reminiscent of an early computer screensaver accompanied with white noise. Her dissociation is broken when X offers Zola to the man in repayment. While the man sexually assaults Zola, X pulls a gun and creates a distraction long enough for them to escape with the guns and the unconscious Stefani. They escape to X's house, where Zola insists it is time for

her to leave. X promises to get her and Derrek tickets home. Upon realizing that Stefani will be staying with X, Derrek threatens suicide, jumping over the balcony of the modernist white-marble beach house.

Zola grapples with racism and sex trafficking from the point of view of a black femme sex worker, but rather than leaning into melodrama and moralizing, it preserves King's original authorial voice—flippant, confessional, intimate but with a degree of comedic distance. As King herself told Kusher for his original *Rolling Stone* article, "I made people who probably wouldn't want to hear a sex trafficking story want to be a part of it," she says, "because it was entertaining."[11]

Despite a spine-tingling sense of suspense in the final sequence, Bravo insists the film is a comedy, "And in every great comedy you have your straight man, and you have your buffoons. Aziah wrote the story as the straight man. So that meant that everyone else was the buffoon." Indeed, Bravo pulls off a tremendous feat of tone with *Zola*, the tension of the culminating assault-at-gunpoint scenario closely followed by a sight-gag vomit moment that would fit in a conventional Apatow-style comedy. Still, throughout, the specter of racial violence looms in the background, from a confederate flag waving out the car window on their way to Florida to a scene of police violently arresting a man as the car ferries them from one appointment to the next.

If the original Twitter thread is, as the film's cowriter Jeremy O. Harris put it, "an epic poem," then the film flirts more with Brecht's epic theater.[12] The fourth wall is continually broken with Zola's narration and its accompanying Twitter whistle sound effect. We identify with Zola's "straight-man" narration and even empathize with the horrors she is subjected to (it should not be lost on the viewers that it is only Zola's subjection to sexual assault that allows them all to escape the group of men that have

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11. Kushner, "The Story Behind."

12. Debanjali Bose, "'Zola' Writer Jeremy O. Harris Says the Movie's Abrupt Ending Mirrors the Dissolution of Zola and Stefani's Friendship," Insider, July 3, 2021. https://www.insider.com/zola-abrupt-ending-mirrors-stefani-zola-friendship-ending-2021-6.

taken Stefani hostage). The stylish aesthetic and buoyant dialogue make the otherwise dark material palatable. At the same time, the use of montage, interruption, and repetition in the editing continually remind the viewer of the constructed nature of the story, refusing immersion and identification and prompting analysis of the intersecting web of race, class, and gender in which the characters operate. The plot evolves episodically, and, in the end, we are denied any meaningful narrative closure. Harris has said that the film's abrupt ending intentionally mirrored the abrupt end to Zola and Stefani's friendship. After enacting the violence of trafficking and assault on Zola, in the final shot, as they drive Stefani's boyfriend, Derrek, to the hospital, Stefani leans from the front seat of the car, looking pleadingly at Zola, still in effect a hostage, and says, "Girl, you know I love you." The voice-over from the beginning returns: "You wanna hear a story about how me and this bitch here fell out? It's kind of long, but it's full of suspense." It is effectively jarring: we are not offered a moment of Zola's escape from her captors (only the knowledge that, to narrate the story, she must have), nor do we see Stefani or X meet any consequences—this white woman's betrayal of another black sex worker is papered over with the language of love and sisterhood while nothing meaningfully changes.

What could have easily been a cautionary tale, or "human interest" story about human trafficking, *Zola* delivers a stylish, visually stunning film that speaks the language of the social media generation, urging deeper thought about the power structures at play in such exploitation and the audience's own complicity in them. Stefani is perhaps so deep in denial of her own complicity and her own violence that she believes what she says. A classical, Aristotelian resolution of the story might have allowed the white feminist spectator to disidentify with the contradictions Stefani presents, getting to see her either learn her lesson or be punished accordingly. Instead, in that final moment, Zola's distant gaze and her silence allows the absurdity of Stefani's condition to rattle around in its own self-made container of justification, denial, and self-importance—and unsettles the viewer to examine their own.

CONTRIBUTORS

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