
Will Straw

BIRTH OF THE BINGE:

Serial TV and The End of Leisure

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Over more than a decade of productive research and reflection, Dennis Broe has produced a solid body of book-length works engaging with the politics of U.S.-based popular culture. (Along the way, he has written a detective novel set during the Hollywood blacklist period.) This new book, whose title effectively conveys its focus and one of its key arguments, goes further than the others. It offers nothing less than an exhaustive, theoretically-grounded account of audiovisual media in the current moment.

Some of Broe's work has been tightly focused (a slim 2015 volume on the 1950s-1960s television show *Maverick*, for example), but much of it has taken the form of ambitious projects capturing the multiple intersections of politics and cultural expression in different historical periods. The first of these projects gave us the book *Film Noir, American Workers, and Postwar Hollywood* (2009), which added much, both in original research and in new thinking, to our understanding of a period which had already been much studied. My own few quibbles with the book centred on what has become one of the major lines of disagreement in readings of post-World War II U.S. cinema – whether one sees the post-1945 vogue for semi-documentary, institution-centred suspense films, like *House on 92nd Street* (1945) or *Boomerang* (1947), as emblematic of the consolidation of the Cold War security state or as a playing out of the wartime progressivism of the “Cultural Front.” (I have, perhaps too easily, embraced the second of these readings, though Broe, I thought, might have lingered a little longer on this interpretation even as he built a very different reading of these films.)

The multiple themes of Broe's 2015 book *Cold War Expressionism: Perverting the Politics of Perception*. Bombast, Blacklists and Blockades in the Postwar Art World are clear from its title. Among its many strengths, this book sets U.S. Cold War culture within the broader international contexts in which it was received; an international frame has been one of the strongest features of all of Broe's recent writing. (His 2014 book *Class, Crime and International Film Noir: Globalizing America's Dark Art* was one of a number of welcome books in the last decade or so recasting film noir as a global phenomenon.)

Reading his earliest works, one might have said that Broe exemplified the best traditions of a U.S. progressive (and Marxist) cultural history. With Cold War Expressionism, as with his new book on televisual streaming, his work has been marked by an increasing engagement with other traditions as well. In particular, it has demonstrated a deep engagement with French intellectual culture and a strong commitment to investigating the broader cultural politics of Europe (where Broe has recently spent a great deal of time). He is almost certainly the only one to write about the late 1950s/early 1960s television show *Maverick* in relation to the ideas of Guy Debord, the author of the widely-read *Society of the Spectacle* and leading figure in the trans-European Situationist movement.

However, Broe's work is not about the simple application to American culture of "French theory," if we mean, by that label, the complex of methods developed in structuralism and its aftermath. Broe will find theoretical affinities in French thought – most clearly, in his new book, in the work of Bernard Stiegler, to whom I shall turn shortly – but the strongest effect of his engagement with France, in my view, is to defamiliarize the culture of the United States, to write about it with a constant awareness of possible alternatives.

My first response to Dennis Broe's new book, *Birth of the Binge: Serial TV and The End of Leisure*, was to wonder how someone who has so thoroughly mastered the U.S. culture of the immediate post-World War II period found the time to view the immense corpus of recent television programming which is examined here. Broe has deeply immersed himself in the key examples, from the last twenty years, of what many continue to call "television." These range from the long-form dramatic cable series of the first decade of this century, like *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under*, typically watched over several weeks (or in later DVD packagings) through the more recent one-drop seasons of series on streaming services (like Netflix' *House of Cards*). While extended close readings are not the main feature of this book, it nevertheless conveys a strong sense of key structural transformations in the form of televisual narrative entertainments and in the manner in which they are consumed. These transformations become visible across large numbers of examples, which simultaneously lay the shared ground and chart the seemingly infinite variety of present-day audiovisual entertainment.

Birth of the Binge is the only book I know in which many of the ideas developed within U.S.-based fan studies of television are interwoven with key claims from the work of the prominent French media theorist Bernard Stiegler. (Stiegler's death in August of 2020 has been one of the sad events of this horrific year.) If this combination is unusual, it is because fan scholars' attachment to the last two decades of cable and streaming television has found virtue in the abun-

dance of choice, and in the multiplicity of ways in which viewers may “talk back” to the producers of the programming set in front of them. (This “talking back” may range from simple social media commentary to collective campaigns to the successes of fans in reversing show cancellations, character deaths or other unwanted developments.) Stiegler, in contrast, with his sharpened attentiveness to contemporary media’s capacity to diminish our lives and experiences, would seem an unlikely theoretical fellow-traveller for those seeking grounds on which to embrace aspects of this new world of audiovisual entertainment.

The term “seriality,” evoked in Broe’s title, offers the point of intersection of the two broad bodies of cultural analysis which are this book’s focus. The serial organization of culture, in its many dimensions, has preoccupied Marxist and other radical critiques of media for at least a century, functioning therein as the clearest symptom of culture’s subservience to a capitalist mode of production. At the same time, “serial” television is the focus of a great deal of recent writing in television studies which is concerned with new modes of story-telling and viewing but unlikely to speculate as to the broader relationship of these modes to capitalism. Broe’s book is welcome, in part, for the ways in which it suggests that the shared use of “serial” in Marxist cultural theory and recent television studies might be more than coincidental.

The “seriality” of cultural production has been the focus of a number of works of cultural analysis over the last decade or so. Academic writing on seriality includes examinations of the multiple “lives” of texts as they move from one media to another (a focus of so-called “adaptation” studies), as well as of the parodies, re-writings and mash-ups of works which constitute that broad field of what the French literary theorist Gerard Genette called “hypertextuality” (of any possible relationship of one text to another). If one broad purpose of this work was to unravel older, lofty notions of the self-contained cultural text, that unravelling had become more or less a *fait accompli* in literary theory by the 1970s.

The recent boom in studies of cultural “seriality” has come from scholars interested in popular media texts (like television shows) and the transformations of story-telling and audience engagement which such logics have helped to bring about. I read Broe’s *Birth of the Binge* concurrently with the book *Fictions à la chaîne : Littératures sérielles et culture médiatique*, by the literary theorist Matthieu Letourneau. Like a number of present-day Francophone literary and cultural historians, Letourneau is interested in how the demands of the market generated new forms of story-telling — like the novels, serialized in 19th century newspapers, which remained open-ended until that point at which public interest in them had waned and they were quickly brought to their conclusions. Letourneau is interested, as well, in the ways in which popular fictional characters of the early twentieth century, like *Fantomas* or *Sherlock Holmes*, were

scattered across media franchises, such that film adaptations, for example, promoted the sale of comic strips or drove the production of new fictional texts which perpetuated the lives of characters beyond the original corpus of works in which they appeared.

Broe writes with a clear understanding of the roots of present-day media seriality in the 19th century. If he is not the first to draw connections between the heavily serialized novels of Emile Zola and David Simon's television show *The Wire*, he goes further than other commentators in thinking through the ways in which serial form, in both cases, becomes a device for exposing the relationships constitutive of a social totality. As his book unfolds, Broe will suggest other ways in which the serial form might express progressive impulses. These include the "acceleration of genre hybridity" (p. 8), which he sees as one feature of the work of J. J. Abrams, the creator of such television programs as *Lost*, and, in Broe's view, "the ultimate serial auteur" of twenty-first century U.S. media culture to date (p. 9).

A certain kind of Marxist criticism might see Abrams' promiscuous mixing of genres as little more than the omnivorous cultural chaos produced by an unstoppable capitalist machinery. Broe is willing to go some distance with the idea that, in the ways it pushes genres to their breaking points, Abrams' work as writer and producer upsets a militaristic logic which would confine genres to their historical conventions and use the self-contained character of the traditional episodic drama to restore order. Broe finds this militaristic logic to be most obvious in what he calls the "the post-9/11 return of the police procedural" (p. 9).

To arrive at such positions, however, Broe, like any left-leaning cultural critique, must work his way through the critiques of seriality which run through the work of the T. W. Adorno, the Frankfurt School and other mid-twentieth-century critiques of an industrialized popular culture. Put simply, these critiques saw, in the repetitive forms of the radio soap opera or the newspaper comic strip, the simple illusion of difference and transformation. Like the world of capitalist commodities themselves, which offered a choice which was empty of real meaning, serial cultural entertainment consisted of moments of pleasure and apparent release which were confined to ritual set pieces and disconnected from any possibility of broader social transformation.

The narrative forms of present-day television, Broe suggests, work differently. At the heart of this new media environment, for Broe and for others, is the notion of seriality, but this involves more than simply the replication of character, situation and tone in television programs organized as episodic packages, of the sort which has marked most dramatic entertainment since the rise of network radio in the 1930s. The new temporalities of television may be traced back to a

period marked, for Broe, by the Reagan presidency and what he calls the “emergence of neoliberalism.” This takes Broe’s historical account back to the era of what has been called the “quality television” of the 1980s, a category represented best, for most of those who write about it, by the program *Hill Street Blues*.

If television of the current binge era is marked, for Broe, by features he defines on the very first page of his book – “a blend of multicharacter narratives, overlapping time periods, and most prominently a circumvention of the contained episode in favor of a sustained story arc lasting an entire season” -- these may be found, in embryonic form, in the aesthetically adventurous “quality television” of the Reagan era. The further elaboration of these aesthetic principles (and logics of production) was temporarily slowed down in the 1990s, but a new momentum arrived in the early 2000s, exemplified by HBO series such as *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) and *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005).

In this book, as in much of the writing on this new televisual environment, one finds intertwined two apparently very different conditions. On the one hand, we have a media programming production environment marked by artistic ambition, the auteurist organization of production, and by aspirations to complex, long-form storytelling. The risk has always been that these welcome, engaging features of our contemporary media environment might disarm the familiar tropes of a Marxist critique. On the other, at the level of consumption, we are confronted with “binge viewing,” a psychosocial condition described in relation to such conditions as addiction, bulimic intake, and the loss of control over one’s own time. Here, arguably, we find reason to condemn our present-day streaming universe as embodying logics of capitalist cultural production in their most extreme, perfected form.

Broe faces the seeming incompatibility of these positions head on, and his willingness to do so is one of his book’s greatest strengths. I will quote, at length, his own posing of this dilemma, which comes near the end of his book and is the most succinct summary I’ve seen of the challenges which a progressive analysis of contemporary media must resolve:

This book began, though, with the question of whether Serial TV was simply part of new accelerated forms of symbolic accumulation in the hyperindustrial era or whether it challenged those precepts. Is the form simply a key palliative that capital is offering to numb us as it proceeds on its path of accelerated unemployment through automation, global devastation of the environment, and a reengagement - in the form of a reconstructed Russian and Chinese menace - with the possibility of nuclear destruction? Or could this most-seductive element of the digital economy in its new mode of transmission as constantly available streaming and in its heightened narrative devices that duplicate the

mobility of that economy also be the purveyor and even harbinger within the belly of the beast of a more enlightened mode of being (244).

Broe will conclude (spoiler alert!) with the claim that television is both progressive and palliative, both testing the limits of story-telling within a capitalist media system and binding us to streams of content in which our own consciousness is ensnared and organized. Even as he acknowledges the ways in which new narrative forms are dislodging older, regressive modes of story-telling, in which capitalist/militaristic power had been encrusted, Broe finds, in the functioning of what some would call the televisual apparatus, a broader transformation of experience. It is in these latter moves that the influence of Bernard Stiegler is most apparent, as in the claim that streaming services demand of viewers the “perpetual productivity” of viewing, the “mapping of the time of the life processes to the [time of] media itself” (p. 21).

It has been common, perhaps since the 1960s, to take television as emblematic of the structuring of consciousness and experience in late capitalist societies. Broe’s emphasis on what he calls the “retreat and isolation into an inner world” (75) of contemporary subjects and the withering of interpersonal relationships continues this tradition. He takes the addictive relationship to long-form television programs as the clearest symptom and cause of these social and subjective conditions.

Other observers of present-day media might offer a different account, in which it is our use of social media – the unending performance of self or quest for attention – that mark our contemporary lives more profoundly than does the loss of being Broe associates with the binge-viewing of this thing called “television.” The brief impulses of Twitter or Instagram posts, for many, are more effective indices of our contemporary condition than the elaborate, elongated narratives of the streamed television series. This is a debate that I hope will transpire. In preparation for it, I hope that everyone with an interest in media, entertainment and culture will read this important, thoughtful book.