

**“The Cross-section of a Single Moment”:
Bakhtin and Seriality**

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Summer 2017

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Introduction

Mikhail Bakhtin’s configuration of time resists a medium-specific reading: concepts such as the chronotope, polyphony, and dialogism are as relevant to visual and time-based media as they are to literature, making his writings increasingly salient in a contemporary context. Bakhtin’s interpretation of the novel, which drives nearly all of his writings, is both ephemeral and highly idiosyncratic, serving less as a genre than a temporal and epistemological mode that creates a dialogue between the reader and an open-ended present. At the heart of Bakhtin’s fascination with this extra-temporal “open time” is seriality, which I define as *the sequential arrangement of discrete episodes and the consequent manipulation of duration as a storytelling variable*. Like film, television, and other time-based media, it is paradoxically the novel’s fragmentation that creates an illusion of continuity by “[stringing] together events in an infinite series.”¹

In this paper, I argue that an emphasis on seriality and serialized narrative motivates an alternate way of interpreting temporality and indeterminacy in Bakhtin. After reviewing Bakhtin’s notion of open time in “Epic and Novel” [«Эпос и Роман»], I explore the ways in which distinct chronotopes represent different ways of compressing and stretching duration in “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel” [«Формы Времени и Хронотопа в Романе»]. Next, I consider Bakhtin’s writings on Dostoevsky in light of Dostoevsky’s history of serial publication and engagement with print media. I emphasize the correlation between Dostoevsky’s polyphonic narratives, which depend on an “intensified present” and an absence of causality, and the segmentation of novels such as *The Brothers Karamazov* in their original serialized form. Finally, applying Bakhtinian notions of temporality to late twentieth and early twenty first-century American television demonstrates the renewed relevance for discussions surrounding seriality and narrative complexity. Like the serial novel, the systemization and commodification of time in television exploits the singular event (contingency) in order to extend its narrative indefinitely (duration). Serial narratives, which demand viewer or reader participation in the “dead time” between installments, create a heightened awareness of the materiality of time.

A few terminological clarifications are necessary here: the primary Bakhtinian terms I will be employing are *chronotope* [хронотоп], *dialogism* [диалогизм or диалогичность], *polyphony* [полифонизм or полифония], and the above-mentioned *novel* [роман], all of which Bakhtin leaves intentionally inconclusive.² Using Bakhtin’s loose “definitions” as a starting point, then, allows us to push these terms beyond the linguistic into the pictorial, avoiding the

¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel.” In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 94.

² Because Bakhtin’s writings and terminology are opposed to strict formalization (thus making him an outlier among his Russian Formalist contemporaries), structuralist critics such as Tzvetan Todorov have criticized his seeming lack of consistency. Among the post-structuralists and more recent scholars such as Michael Holquist, part of Bakhtin’s appeal of his work is precisely the open-endedness and fluidity of categories such as the novel that have generally been defined in concrete terms.

limitations of a medium-specific analysis. Additionally, I treat *seriality* as an umbrella term that includes both *episodic* and *serial* narrative forms, which, as we will see, are difficult to separate entirely within the contexts of publication and broadcasting. Their differences and convergences notwithstanding, these two modes of seriality prove relevant for discussing various treatments of time and duration in both contemporary literary criticism and media studies.

Although several publications have placed Bakhtin in dialogue with critics such as Deleuze and Bergson, whose time-oriented ideas have been highly influential on film and media studies,³ little has been written on the underlying concepts of seriality in his work or the ways in which his theory of the novel seems to anticipate post-structuralist writings on the contemporary “post-medium condition.”⁴ As Caryl Emerson points out, Bakhtin’s theories extend beyond the literary, which partially explains the fifty-year lag between the time of his writings and their revitalization by Western post-structuralists, particularly Julia Kristeva, in the 1970s.⁵ Although Bakhtin takes the literary text as his subject, his primary investigation surrounds more abstract questions of time and space, which not only transcend discipline, but medium. The chronotope (“time-space”), generally taken as a Bakhtinian coinage in a literary context, was originally appropriated from Einstein’s Theory of Relativity. Bakhtin transforms and broadens the mathematical chronotope into “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.”⁶ Despite his apparent aim to limit his project to literature, it soon becomes clear that the chronotope, which acts as an organizing center for time and narrative, plays a visual and material role, making time “palpable and visible,” and thus allowing both text and time to take on physical form.⁷ The chronotope is located within a liminal, multimedia expanse, materializing and transforming the two entities that comprise it: time and space.

Open Time in the Bakhtinian Novel

No one writes about the novel like Bakhtin. Familiar topics such as style, length, narrative structure, and fictionality all define the novel within a specific historical and literary context—that is, the development of the canonical nineteenth-century realist novel.⁸ While

³ Notable publications include *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism and Film* (Robert Stam, 1989), *Bakhtin and the Movies* (Martin Flanagan, 2009), and “The Chronotopic Imagination in Literature and Film: Bakhtin, Bergson and Deleuze on Forms of Time” (Bart Keunen, 2010).

⁴ The term “post-medium condition” was first coined by Rosalind Krauss in *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (2000), in which she defends and expands on Clement Greenberg’s eponymous notion of “pure” art forms. Krauss argues that this drive for purity still exists, but the fact that different media have become indistinct in today’s postmodern context means that “the essence of Art itself” must be located within these hybrid forms. Likewise, critics such as Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard have discussed the relationship between postmodernism and the inevitable convergence of media and aesthetic forms.

⁵ Caryl Emerson, “Introduction: Dialogue on Every Corner, Bakhtin in Every Class.” In *Bakhtin in Contexts: Across the Disciplines*, ed. Amy Mandelker (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 1-33.

⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel.” In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 84.

⁷ *Ibid*, 250.

⁸ Examples include Catherine Gallagher’s “The Rise of Fictionality” (in *The Novel, Vol. 1*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006)), which traces the development of the “fictionality” that distinguishes

Lukács' *Theory of the Novel* (1920), Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), and Lucien Goldmann's *Towards a Sociology of the Novel* (1964) all elevate one particular literary form into a conclusive definition of "the novel" as such, Bakhtin proposes an unprecedented radical ontology of the novel.⁹ Unlike Lukács' more pessimistic assessment of the novel as a postlapsarian search for meaning,¹⁰ the Bakhtinian novel is "plasticity itself," a celebration of open-endedness and a rejection of literary canonization and generic conventions.¹¹ Because the novel functions as a "countergenre" that inserts indeterminacy and open-endedness into preexisting genres, it has no canon of its own; in Bakhtin's words, these genres become "novelized" [романизируются] when they are subjected to the anti-canonical and anti-generic properties of the novel.¹² This process of novelization epitomizes the novel's ultimate paradox: the creation of a new genre through the annihilation of preexisting genres.

We could also phrase the above sentence another way: by displacing and disrupting genres that have become anachronistic, a new and relevant genre comes into being. More than just a hybrid of literary forms, the Bakhtinian novel is ultimately a temporal mode "that [has] at its core a new way of conceptualizing time."¹³ Unlike other genres, particularly the epic, the novel is *dialogic* [диалогический], allowing for a "new orientation in the world and time... through personal experience and investigation."¹⁴ Whereas the epic is a completely finished generic form situated in an "absolute past," the novel is an ever-evolving genre that requires "contact with the spontaneity of the inconclusive present."¹⁵ The novel's dialogic relationship with contemporary reality represents a profound temporal shift from epic to novel, or the transition from the inaccessible distance of the past to an open-ended, ever-evolving present.

Bakhtin's obsession with the present and the means by which the singular instant merges present, past, and future allows the novel to transcend both temporal and material categories. As he writes:

The present... demands continuation, it moves into the future, and the more actively and consciously it moves into the future the more tangible and indispensable its inconclusiveness becomes. Therefore, when the present becomes the center of human orientation in time and in the world, time and world lose their completeness as a whole as well as in each of their parts.¹⁶

the present-day novel to the divergence of the 18th-century European novel from the romance genre. She points to the novel's "unreferentiality," or the ways in which it novel both narrows and opens the space of fictionality, creating believable stories without soliciting belief from its readers.

⁹ Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, "Introduction." In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), xxvi-xxvii.

¹⁰ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971).

¹¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. and trans. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 19.

¹² *Ibid.*, 6-7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

As I mention throughout this essay, seriality paradoxically relies on the spontaneity of the instant in order to extend its duration. Like the novel, serialized narratives involve manipulating the flow of time, relying on a constant back-and-forth between creator and audience. Thus, we can see how Bakhtin's conception of the novel is also applicable to other time-based media, which both compress and extend narrative by emphasizing the singular event: the Bakhtinian novel seamlessly passes between print and visual media along the axis of time. In what follows, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which Bakhtin's various chronotopes correspond to different modes of narrative and televisual serialization.

Seriality and Sequence in the Chronotope

In "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel," Bakhtin introduces the chronotope as a narrative device in which "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole."¹⁷ More than simply a tool, however, the chronotope reveals the inseparability of time and space by exposing them as physical entities: "Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history."¹⁸ It is precisely this intersection of time and space that characterizes the chronotope, which demonstrates the boundary between the represented world and the world outside the text. The various chronotopes Bakhtin posits as different literary conventions represent unique ways of manipulating duration, which, as I aim to demonstrate, correspond to specific modes of seriality in narrative.

Although one could easily write an entire essay exploring the unique temporal functions of Bakhtin's chronotopes, I limit my analysis to two that I feel best represent *episodic* and *serial* modes of seriality: the Greek Romance and the Chivalric Romance, respectively. Appropriately for an essay dealing primarily with time, Bakhtin develops his thesis chronologically, beginning with the Greek Romance [греческий роман], which he argues "utilized and fused together in its structure almost all genres of ancient literature."¹⁹ The Greek Romance marked the emergence of a new temporal mode known as *adventure-time* [авантюрное время], which served as the template for the later nineteenth-century European adventure novel. Adventure-time distinguishes itself by its emphasis on random contingency [совпадение] and interruption, which are manifested by words such as "suddenly" [вдруг] and "just at that moment" [как раз]. Because adventure-time is "composed of a series of short segments that correspond to separate adventures,"²⁰ at the end of each adventure everything returns to a state of equilibrium, in which characters and setting remain unchanged. Between distinct episodes, the narrative of the Greek

¹⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel," 84.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, 89.

²⁰ Ibid, 91.

Romance can escape its chronotopic confines to take an “extratemporal hiatus,”²¹ after which it returns to its own self-contained “empty time.”²²

Thus, the adventure-time of the Greek Romance not only relies on the abstraction of time and space,²³ but also an inside/outside dichotomy: time is organized externally (“from without”), allowing the reader to escape, catch up, or outstrip the infinite progression of its internal adventures.²⁴ The chronotope creates a division between diegetic and extradiegetic realities: the time of the narrative and the time of the reader. In an episodic narrative in which “nothing changes,”²⁵ these events have no internal limitations; because they do not build on each other, they are entirely reversible and interchangeable. Contingency, unlike a linear narrative, which is bound to the past, is allied with the spontaneity of the present moment, making it resistant to rationalization.²⁶ Episodic seriality paradoxically depends on singular events and chance occurrences in order to extend duration indefinitely; time is linear in scope, yet cyclical in its repetition.

If the Greek Romance demonstrates the irrational escape from narrative time, the Chivalric Romance [рыцарский роман] involves a higher degree of diegetic temporal manipulation, or what Bakhtin calls the “hyperbolization of time.”²⁷ While both Greek and Chivalric Romances employ the fragmented sequentiality of adventure-time, the Chivalric Romance differs in its fusion of hero, setting, and event. In “a miraculous world in adventure time”²⁸ where the “unexpected... is expected,”²⁹ there is no separation between the hero and the valorized world he occupies. In this sense, the Chivalric Romance sits firmly on the border between novel and epic, whose time Bakhtin deems “utterly finished” and distanced from the temporality of the reader.³⁰ It is this emphasis on the miraculous of the Chivalric Romance that time is hyperbolized: “hours are dragged out, days are compressed into moments, it becomes possible to bewitch time itself.”³¹

Whereas the Greek Romance is only able to augment time in its separation of narrative from the exterior world, the internal narrative of the Chivalric Romance represents a constant “subjective playing with time” in which logical temporal-spatial relationships and perspectives are violated and distorted, as in *The Divine Comedy* or *Roman de la Rose*.³² Chivalric adventure-time sheds the episodic stagnation of its Greek predecessor; with its ability to stretch and compress time, it most closely corresponds to today’s *serial* narratives, which contain within

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid, 99.

²⁴ Ibid, 91.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 12.

²⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” 154.

²⁸ Ibid, 154.

²⁹ Ibid, 152.

³⁰ Ibid, 154.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid, 155.

their diegesis multiple levels of temporal subjectivity. Like a serial narrative, the Chivalric Romance is perceived as being within a *single time*, “in the synchrony of a single moment.” This simultaneity stands in stark contrast to the episodic time of the Greek Romance, in which discrete time frames are arranged sequentially.

Polyphony in the Serialized Novels of Dostoevsky

Up until this point I have been discussing the ways in which the chronotope closely mirrors different modes of serial narrative construction. In this section, I bring in Bakhtin’s writings on Dostoevsky’s relationship to time and the ways in which this relationship is largely dependent on Dostoevsky’s history of serial publication and engagement with print media. While Bakhtin never explicitly addresses serialization or the ways in which the serialized novel medium affected the temporal structures in Dostoevsky’s work, Dostoevsky’s reliance on the intensification of the present to liberate his characters from causal necessity is acutely reminiscent of episodic seriality. What Bakhtin emphasizes as *polyphony*, or the coexistence of multiple voices within a single narrative, functions as an extension of the chronotope. Just as the chronotope merges time and space by manipulating duration as a storytelling variable, a polyphonic narrative has the capacity to contain a multiplicity of different worlds and time-scales.

In his in-depth study of Dostoevsky, *The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* [«Проблемы Поэтики Достоевского»] (1929), Bakhtin emphasizes the ways in which the “heteroverse” of Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novels liberate characters and events from causal necessity through an innate “present-ness,” or the intensification of a single moment. It is precisely Dostoevsky’s obsession with “the instant in its essence” that allows him to, much like a Cubist painting, simultaneously depict multiple temporal and spatial configurations within a single image.³³ Bakhtin writes:

Dostoevsky attempted to perceive the very stages themselves in their simultaneity, to juxtapose and counterpose them dramatically, and not stretch them out into an evolving sequence. For him, to get one’s bearings on the world meant to conceive all its contents as simultaneous, and to guess at their interrelationships in the cross section of a single moment.³⁴

For Bakhtin, Dostoevsky’s novels create an indeterminate temporality, synthesizing multiple instants into “the dramatic principle of the unity of time.”³⁵ What makes Dostoevsky’s approach to writing installments unique, however, is his obsession with accelerated motion, compressing time and “[directing] it in a spiraling flight of demented rhythm.” Unlike his contemporary

³³ Jacques Catteau, *Dostoevsky and the process of literary creation*, trans. Audrey Littlewood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 365.

³⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 28.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 29.

Tolstoy, whose tomes unfold in a more rationalized “biological time,”³⁶ Dostoevsky relies on the individual installment to punctuate his narratives rhythmically, this percussive speed allowing him to “[overcome] time in time.”³⁷ This notion of “overcoming time in time” proves to be the paradox of seriality: the creation of an ongoing sequence that escapes “real time” by eliminating distinctions between past and present.

Serialized novels first came into being in 19th-century England and France as a means of commodifying and organizing narratives for reliable reader consumption. Not to be confused with individual novels in a series, in which the sequel “continues a work not to bring it to a close, but... in order to take it beyond what was initially considered to be its ending,”³⁸ the serialized novel consists of fragmented installments published individually in a journal or newspaper, eventually adding up to a cohesive whole. In mid-19th century Russia, the typically monthly installment ranged from 30-100 pages, which would allow the novel to be completely serialized over the course of a subscription year.³⁹ Dostoevsky tended to work in longer and more flexible serial forms - his last and most ambitious novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* [Братья Карамазовы], was an attempt to embrace the separateness and episodic nature of each installment, which was released in “book” rather than chapter form.⁴⁰ Dostoevsky also distinguished himself from writers such as Dickens and Thackeray in his insistence on preserving the original serial forms of his novels (intertitles, subtitles, and segmentation, as well as the summaries, repeated phrases, and recurring imagery meant to bridge the gaps between installments), even when they were eventually rearranged into separate editions,⁴¹ suggesting that eliminating indications of serialization would mean sacrificing content as well as structure.⁴²

Much of Dostoevsky’s understanding of the mechanisms of serialization was due to his personal passion for newspapers and other print media. Not only was he himself, along with his brother Mikhail, a co-founder and editor of the journal *Time* [Время], he also read newspapers and periodicals obsessively, sourcing these serial publications for inspiration for his own writing. It was through working at *Time* that Dostoevsky’s growing interest in narrative form was brought to fruition; by experimenting with the order and array of publications he placed in the journal, he was able to not only juxtapose his writing with a diverse array of nonfictional forms, but also draw attention to themes and ideas expressed within his novels.⁴³

³⁶ Ibid, 170.

³⁷ Ibid, 29.

³⁸ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: thresholds of interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, forward Richard Macksey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 206.

³⁹ William Mills Todd III, “*The Brothers Karamazov* and the Poetics of Serial Publication,” *Dostoevsky Studies* 7 (1986), 89.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 90.

⁴¹ Ibid, 88.

⁴² Although serial publication is increasingly rare today, it has not completely died out. Haruki Murakami’s *IQ84* (2010), originally published in three volumes in Japan, was condensed into a single volume in its English translation. The result was a daunting and often repetitive tome that almost certainly would have been better received by English-readers if it had been released serially worldwide.

⁴³ John Bartle, “Conceptualizing the Space of a Journal’s Pages: Dostoevsky as Editor of *Time*.” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 40, no. 3 (September-December 1998): 373.

In addition to experiencing the roles of both writer and editor, Dostoevsky often used newspaper articles as inspiration: the famous murder of *Crime and Punishment* [*Преступление и Наказание*], for example, was based on a true occurrence that happened in 1865, in which a young man killed two old women with an axe.⁴⁴ The juxtaposition of journalism with fiction allowed him to establish a precise chronology with an objective time;⁴⁵ simultaneously, he was able to contract and manipulate this chronology as he saw fit. The events of *Crime and Punishment* take place over the course of two weeks, whereas the novel was released in twelve installments over the course of a single year (1866). The contrast between the objective time of the narrative and the experienced time of the reader is emblematic of the tension between Dostoevsky's journalistic realism and disregard for temporal rationality. As Catteau summarizes: "Dostoevsky kneads time like bread, accelerating and contracting it and stuffing it with a thousand events and possibilities, but his sense of reality forbids him to abolish it."⁴⁶ Both writer and reader must abstract themselves from clock or calendar time, dislocating real time in the process.

Thus, while the polyphony and "present-ness" of Dostoevsky's novels is partially indebted to the serialized form itself, Dostoevsky also possessed an innate awareness of the ways in which the medium would allow him to mediate between the external publishing world and the internal world of the text, in which "the viewer is [made] also a participant."⁴⁷ As William Mills Todd reveals, "Serialized fiction, including *The Brothers Karamazov*, presents particular challenges to...the reader's ability to respond to an integral text, or...the dialogue between novelistic discourse and other forms of discourse that may have been published alongside the novel's installments." In this sense, serial novels are necessarily dialogic: because Dostoevsky often published individual installments without knowing their eventual outcome (he published the first part of *The Idiot* without any sense of what would happen next⁴⁸), he was able to respond to his critics and audience as the narrative unfolded.⁴⁹ The time lapse between narrative and reception results in a form of "double time": time manipulated by the author and time experienced in the mind of the protagonist. The reader, however, sees this double time as one time—this is precisely the simultaneity of Dostoevsky's polyphonic narratives, the ability to condense multiple consciousnesses and time frames into a single text.⁵⁰

Because serially published novels eventually conclude, their eventual publication in a single volume creates a conflict between the original open-endedness of the narrative and the external completeness of the final product. The contingency of the instant (in this case, Dostoevsky's intensified present), once compiled in narrative form, represents the archiving of

⁴⁴ Jacques Catteau, *Dostoevsky and the process of literary creation*, 189.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 336.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 372.

⁴⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 18.

⁴⁸ Gary Saul Morson, "Strange Synchronies and Surplus Possibilities: Bakhtin on Time," *Slavic Review* 52, no. 3 (Autumn 1993), 486.

⁴⁹ William Mills Todd III, "*The Brothers Karamazov* and the Poetics of Serial Publication," 88.

⁵⁰ Catteau, 334.

present as past.⁵¹ While Mary Ann Doane argues that it is the medium of cinema, whose “capacity...[is] to perfectly *represent* the contingent, to provide the pure record of time” that first “made archivable duration itself,”⁵² I would argue that serialized narratives preceded cinema as a way of simultaneously indexing and capturing the instant. Although novels are rarely published in serialized form now, the transition from print to time-based media, such as radio, video, and television, has made these epistemological questions all the more relevant. It is the replacement of novelistic serialization by televisual programming that constitutes the remainder of this essay.

Manipulating and Troping Time in Television

Having explored the ways in which seriality provides an alternate way of looking at Bakhtin’s writings on time in *The Dialogic Imagination* and *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, I now turn from written to recorded media. These new technologies and time-based media, from their very inception, marked a reconceptualization of time and its representability.⁵³ While radio, film, and television are all considered “time-based” in their ability to both record (“keep”) and relay (“tell”) time,⁵⁴ I narrow my focus to the increasingly complex modes of serial narration in contemporary television. As Robert Stam discusses, “Television...constitutes an electronic microcosm, a contemporary version of Bakhtin’s omnivorous ‘novel,’ which reflects and relays, distorts and amplifies.”⁵⁵ The contrastive modes of seriality contained within a single TV show represent a contemporary counterpart to Bakhtin’s writings on open time and indeterminacy, as do the ways in which the medium of television facilitates a participatory dialogue between viewer and time.

The medium of film consists of static frames (instants) that produce an illusion of continuous time—within any given film, there is always a tension between continuity and fragmentation. It is in television, however, that this tension becomes magnified and the viewer is made increasingly aware of the materiality of time by oscillating between “TV time” and the “real time” of their own external reality. Even more so than film, television maintains an insistent “present-ness, a celebration of the instantaneous... TV fills time by ensuring that something happens.”⁵⁶ While the illusionism of film is primarily defined spatially, the construction of television is conceptualized temporally.⁵⁷

A good place to begin is Raymond Williams’ seminal work *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974), which, despite the substantial technological developments and changes in the television industry that have occurred since its publication, still remains one of the most

⁵¹ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, 22.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁴ Karen Lury, *Interpreting Television* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2005).

⁵⁵ Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism and Film* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 220-221.

⁵⁶ Mary Ann Doane, “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe,” in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 222.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 225.

influential publications on the subject. Williams centers his argument on what he calls the “televsual flow” of the medium: that is, the never-ending sequence of images that continue even after the TV has been turned off. Television, unlike film, creates an experience of infinitude, both in terms of temporality and sequential possibility: with the remote control (and today, online streaming), the viewer is able to control the sequence of images, consequently changing the temporal logic of the medium.⁵⁸ Although it was radio that initially served as the primary medium for “telling” serialized narratives, television soon overtook it as the most immersive method of commodifying and systematizing time. Even more so than the phenomenon of “going to the movies,” the television industry expertly exploits and capitalizes on leisure time via the TV schedule, in which specific programs are aired in time slots that are thought to be the most lucrative. Thus, even on a superficial level, television began as a mass medium that organized itself around the event.⁵⁹

During the typical weeklong interval between new episodes, time passes for the viewer as usual—a day is a day, an hour is an hour—but as soon as they return to the same TV show, nothing has changed since the previous week. Perhaps last week’s episode ended on a cliff-hanger in which a gun was fired at the protagonist, the bullet physically suspended mid-air: despite the microscopic interval of time it would take for the bullet to reach the protagonist in reality, the viewer’s off-screen space functions as “dead time” and has no effect at all on the narrative’s temporal rhythm. Like Bakhtin’s adventure-time, serial television treats duration hyperbolically, cutting units of space-time into individual segments in order to “[extend] world and time.”⁶⁰ Whereas the basic unit of film is generally thought to be the shot, in television, the smallest unit of narrative time is the “beat,” each of which is interspersed and interrupted by commercial breaks. Even when we now have the ability to skip commercials entirely, as Linda Williams denotes, the fragmentation of a single episode into often-repetitive micro-units (originally intended for viewers who may have tuned in after the commercial break) creates the perception of a constant flow and temporal rhythm that is “the very essence of television.”⁶¹ The viewer is constantly made aware of “the pressure of the hour” (the standard TV time-slot) as a container, after which time for them will return to normal.⁶²

As I elucidated to in “Seriality and Sequence in the Chronotope,” there are two primary modes of organizing time within a serialized narrative: *episodic* and *serial*. Within the context of television, the semantics can become somewhat confusing: an episodic TV show is a *series*, whereas a serialized program is a *serial*. While I will explain the major differences between series and serials, it is important to note that to a certain extent, this is a false dichotomy. While I provide a few examples of TV shows I consider emblematic of series and serials, these programs are actually anomalies: just as Bakhtin’s chronotopes often overlap in their treatment of time, there are very few examples of “purely” episodic or serial shows. Even within the seemingly

⁵⁸ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974).

⁵⁹ Mary Ann Doane, “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe,” 222.

⁶⁰ Linda Williams, *On The Wire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 74.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶² *Ibid.*

linear progression of a TV serial, there are short breaks between episodes and an even greater hiatus between seasons. Within the past two decades, these categories have begun to break down with time, leading to an increase in what Jason Mittell calls “narrative complexity,” or the merging of episodic and serial forms.⁶³ Just as serialized forms of mass media are constantly changing, so are the ways in which they manipulate duration and incite new modes of viewer engagement and participation.

Earlier, I drew parallels between the adventure-time of Bakhtin’s Greek Romance chronotope and episodic seriality in its repeated return to a state of temporal equilibrium, in which everything remains the same as it was. An episodic television series contains no extended narrative arcs; instead, each episode contains a “micro-narrative” in which a conflict arises, escalates, and finally resolves itself. These “stand-alone” episodes may be broadcast in any order; like the Greek Romance, time is entirely reversible.⁶⁴ Perhaps the most obvious example of an episodic series is *The Simpsons* (1989- the present, the longest running TV show in history), whose characters have remained unchanged after twenty-seven seasons. *The Simpsons* and other animated comedies have an advantage that their live-action counterparts lack, however: the ability for cartoon characters to resist aging and other physical changes. The fact that live-action programs have more difficulty sustaining a suspended narrative instigates another discussion: the correlation between genre and modes of seriality.

Bakhtin’s essay on the chronotope is one of the most significant pieces of critical writing to draw this parallel between time and genre—the Greek Romance is a genre as well as a temporal mode, and thus its treatment of time also depends on its generic conventions. Ultimately, it is the relationship between time and space within a given narrative that predetermines its genre: “It is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time.”⁶⁵ The same can be said for television, in which genre and temporality have a similar causal relationship: comedies, sitcoms, and children’s shows (which are often animated) seem the most conducive to the episodic form of seriality. Because there is less at stake for the protagonist, viewers are free to join in at any time, and the basic premise is usually relatively self-explanatory. By contrast, serials are more likely to develop a cult following of a smaller but more consistent audience, their unfolding narratives making it more difficult for a novice to begin watching mid-season. Consequently, dramas, thrillers, and narratives that contain an ongoing mystery or conflict are best suited to the serial form.

⁶³ Jason Mittell, “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 58 (Fall 2006): 29-40.

⁶⁴ While television networks technically have the power to broadcast any given series or serial in whatever order they choose, doing so when the program in question contains extended narrative arcs can be detrimental. Many fans of Joss Whedon’s two cancelled shows, *Firefly* (2002-2003) and *Dollhouse* (2009-2010), both of which aired on Fox, blame their cancellation on the network, which disrupted the flow and logic of the narrative by rearranging or refusing to air certain episodes entirely.

⁶⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” 85.

A serial contains an unfolding narrative structure with continuous story arcs and little to no “stand-alone” episodes. Each episode acts as an “extended temporal signifier”⁶⁶ that provides tantalizing tidbits of new information for the viewer, foreshadowing future conflicts and plot twists. The overall narrative is open and future-oriented, and the order of episodes is specified because they are not self-contained.⁶⁷ As Linda Williams elucidates, the “diegetic expansion” and “audience investment” of serial television bears multiple similarities to the 19th-century serialized novel: both serial novels and serial television further the discovery that “short parts afford more worlds and longer arcs of storytelling.”⁶⁸ Similarly to a serialized novel as suspenseful as *The Brothers Karamazov* or *Crime and Punishment*, a serial such as *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991), *The Wire* (2002-2008), or *Orphan Black* (2013-the present) rewards patience with eventual absolution. The constant potential and promise of disruption in a TV serial oscillates between the safe reassurance of linear narrative and its disruption, in which the future hangs in the balance.⁶⁹ It is this very extension of temporal experience that makes serial TV so seductive: “By parceling itself out in small ‘parts,’ [a serial] gains ‘world enough and time’ to spin longer stories over possible many social worlds.”⁷⁰

Within the past two decades, the television industry has undergone its own evolution, both materially and narratologically. The increasing prevalence of online streaming, or the ability to select a program without waiting for commercials or needing to flip back and forth between channels, has created new and increasingly complex modes of viewer engagement. Netflix Original series such as *Orange is the New Black* (2013-the present), *Bojack Horseman* (2014-the present), and *Stranger Things* (2016-the present) are released one season at a time, increasing the likelihood that viewers will “binge-watch” multiple episodes, thus compressing and blurring distinctions between distinct narrative arcs.

Simultaneously, there has been an increase in what Jason Mittell calls “narrative complexity” in contemporary American TV shows, or hybrids of the aforementioned episodic and serial forms.⁷¹ Beginning in the late 1990s and early 2000s with groundbreaking programs such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Lost* (2004-2010), narratively complex TV shows contain multiple story arcs, as well as a high number of characters with their backstories, oscillating between character subjectivity and diegetic reality.⁷² Because stories emanate from different episodes and constantly refer back to one another, these shows often suspend one narrative strand to make way for another, creating complex breaks in chronology and time.⁷³

⁶⁶ Linda Williams, 50.

⁶⁷ Christine Piepiorka, “You’re Supposed to Be Confused! (Dis)orienting Narrative Mazes in Televisual Complex Narratives,” in *(Dis)locating Media and Narrative Mazes*, ed. Julia Eckel (Transcript-Verlag: 2013), 188.

⁶⁸ Linda Williams, 74.

⁶⁹ Patricia Mellencamp, “TV Time & Catastrophe, Or Beyond the Pleasure Principle of Television,” in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990): 244.

⁷⁰ Linda Williams, 48.

⁷¹ Jason Mittell, “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television.”

⁷² Christine Piepiorka, “You’re Supposed to Be Confused! (Dis)orienting Narrative Mazes in Televisual Complex Narratives,” 189.

⁷³ Ibid.

Time in complex television narratives is often reversed and sped up through flashbacks and flash-forwards, or likewise told multi-perspectively from the points of view of different characters. Now we even see such things as “spin-off shows” and crossover episodes, in which the same fictional universe can span multiple television networks and narrative spaces.

For example, the episode “Darla” from the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* spinoff *Angel the Series* (S02E7), was aired concurrently with the *Buffy* episode “Fool For Love” (S05E7), both narratives converging in a single flashback, each revealing the backstory of a different character. The conclusion the viewer draws from this flashback, however, entirely depends on which version he or she has seen: the same sequence of events has a completely different meaning when shown from Spike’s perspective in “Fool For Love,” as opposed to Angel’s in “Darla.” If the viewer in question had watched both episodes consecutively—as they were originally aired back-to-back on the WB in 2001—they would have experienced a doubling of time via the oscillation between flashback and flash-forward, with the addition of multi-perspectival time creating yet another layer of temporal complexity.

Can narratively complex TV shows such as *Buffy* and *Angel* be called “novelistic TV?” Mittell asks.⁷⁴ Perhaps, but does this mean we can retrospectively call serialized literature “tevisual novels?” Rather than essentialize the categories of series and serial, narrative and time-based media, it seems more productive to contemplate the ways in which different media are constantly being “novelized” in Bakhtin’s sense of the word.

My aim throughout this essay has been to illustrate how Bakhtin’s reading of the novel with its emphasis on the creation of an “open-ended present” can be used to understand the structure of narrative time in other media, specifically serialized television narratives.

The use of seriality in late 20th- and early 21st-century television draws the viewer into a dynamic, dialogic participation in the temporal unfolding of the televised narrative itself. Like Bakhtin’s novel, then, the contemporary TV serial brings the viewer into direct contact with the materiality of time. While the economic and consumer-driven motives of late capitalist television may seem antithetical to the revolutionary potential of the Bakhtinian novel, today’s narratively complex television serials present a temporally malleable viewing experience emphatically reminiscent of Bakhtin’s dialogic “open time.”

⁷⁴ Jason Mittell, “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television,” 30.

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