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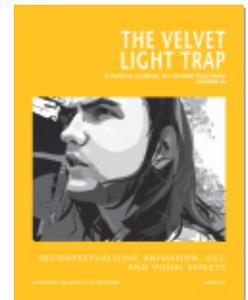
## From Beats to Arcs: Toward a Poetics of Television Narrative

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## From Beats to Arcs: Toward a Poetics of Television Narrative

**T**elevision is a story machine. Every day, thousands of hours of narrative zip through the airwaves and cables and into our sets and minds. Television does more than just tell stories, of course, but its function as a storytelling medium demands analysis, and with this essay I offer a framework for analyzing one kind of television narrative. Unlike some accounts of television as a storytelling medium, however, this one will not isolate the text from its makers and users.<sup>1</sup> My purpose here is to initiate a poetics of television form, an account of storytellers' strategies in crafting narratives that will solicit certain effects in viewers such as suspense and surprise, hope and fear, and aesthetic appreciation.<sup>2</sup> A poetics can help explain why so many people take so much pleasure in television's stories.<sup>3</sup>

In particular I am interested in one form of American television drama, the contemporary scripted prime-time serial, or PTS. For the past twenty-five years there have been two main forms of hour-long prime-time programs. Serials such as *St. Elsewhere* (NBC, 1982–88) dramatize long-form stories in ways similar to daytime soap operas. Shows such as *Law & Order* (NBC, 1990–) have an episodic format in which all of the problems raised in the beginning of an episode are solved by the end and questions do not dangle week after week. Evening serials became an important form of American television programming in the 1980s after the ratings success of *Dallas* (CBS, 1978–91) and the acclaim and awards bestowed on *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981–87).<sup>4</sup> They became a dominant form in the 1990s with shows such as *The X-Files* (Fox, 1993–2002) and *ER* (NBC, 1994–) consistently winning both high ratings and critical praise. Later in the 1990s and in the early 2000s the serial saw its presence diminish as episodic programs and reality shows grew in popularity, but as I write it is enjoying a revival at the same

time that many sit-coms (e.g., *Arrested Development*, Fox, 2003–) and reality shows (e.g., *Survivor*, CBS, 2000–) are also thoroughly serialized.

Over the quarter-century since the rise of the serial, American television has undergone enormous changes with the introduction of more than one hundred new channels, pervasive new structures of media ownership and synergy, and transformations in the technologies of media production and distribution. But in spite of all these developments, the past twenty-five years have seen a remarkably stable condition obtain in which the most basic narrative conventions of the PTS have not been significantly altered.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the period between *Hill Street* and *Lost* (ABC, 2004–), the general production practices of prime-time television have remained quite constant. A program is overseen by a showrunner who reviews all of the scripts and guides the storytelling; each serial episode resolves some questions but leaves many others dangling; serials tend to focus on ensembles, with each episode interweaving several strands of narrative in alternation scene by scene; a season has approximately twenty-four episodes, begins in fall and ends in spring, and offers sweeps periods every November, February, and May.

As critics have often noted of MTM Productions' seminal dramas of the 1980s, *Hill Street Blues* and *St. Elsewhere*, the PTS is really a hybrid of episodic dramas and serials such as soaps and miniseries.<sup>6</sup> Although evening serials have much in common with their daytime counterparts, prime-time shows still have fewer episodes, smaller casts, and greater episodic closure. And although they share many qualities with episodics, PTSs offer a distinct mode of investment in character, a product of their long-format storytelling. Beginning with those MTM dramas so often figured as "quality TV," the PTS has functioned as a distinct

group style whose norms of artistic production are shared among its makers. By calling it a group style I mean to assert a basic commonality among many different programs on the level of form. This commonality is independent of any program's "quality" and also of its genre status as cop, doc, legal, sci-fi, family, teen, or spy drama.<sup>7</sup> Programs that seem quite different from one another may still share their basic storytelling principles.

What narrative structures does the PTS adopt? What functions do its storytelling conventions serve in relation to television's commercial logic, and how do these conventions appeal to viewers? To answer these questions we must consider the interplay of commerce and art in the television industry. From the networks' perspective, programming is a means of selling audiences to advertisers. Producers follow a commercial imperative: on a weekly basis, deliver the largest and most desirable audience to the network's clients. Programs attempt to hook viewers and make them want to watch. The PTS's narrative design is a product of this basic industrial condition, the perpetual goal of getting millions of people to tune in and keep tuning in. This condition and the strategies it encourages have not changed over the past several decades.

Contrary to what some critics claim, I contend that within this industrial context network television flourishes artistically, that it rewards its audience and its advertisers at the same time. And it is not in spite of television's commercial logic but because of it that the PTS achieves its effects. Given the incentive to produce narratives that engage audiences week after week, television has developed a powerful mode of storytelling. Narrative practices that originate in maximizing the networks' profits, such as repetitive dialogue to remind viewers of details they might have missed and regular breaks in the story for advertising spots, might seem to inhibit artistic expression. But in the PTS, these and other constraints designed to boost advertising revenues have been adapted to narrative functions that can deepen and enrich the experiences of viewers. Looking at the PTS's narrative form, we may consider it to have three storytelling levels for analysis: a micro level of the scene or "beat," a middle level of the episode, and a macro level of greater than one episode, such as a multi-episode arc. On all three levels the commercial and aesthetic goals of television's storytellers are held in a mutually reinforcing balance. (Television's political or ideological goals, overt or implicit, are another matter; in such areas the effects of the networks' commercial goals are rather less salutary.)

American television's mission of selling viewers consumer products and services does not negate its possibilities for creative expression. On the contrary, if one function of art is to please its audience, a commercial incentive for spreading and intensifying pleasure dovetails with the goals of the artist. This is assuming, of course, that the artist is interested in gratifying rather than challenging the audience, which intellectuals often think art should do. But as a form of mass art television fosters no such avant-garde intentions. Mass art strives for accessibility and ease of comprehension. One way it does so is by appealing to emotions such as fear, anger, joy, and surprise.<sup>8</sup> The PTS aims to accomplish these goals by developing clear, on-going stories about compelling characters facing difficult obstacles. It appeals to viewers by satisfying their desires for knowledge about these characters and for forging an emotional connection with them. How television achieves such effects is the topic of this essay.

### Micro Level: Beats

Following a narrative is a process of accumulating information. Television writers strive to parcel out this information in such a way that it will seem urgent, surprising, and emotionally resonant. The way the story is unfolded bit by bit encourages viewers to take an interest in it, and as the unfolding progresses the storyteller seeks to intensify this interest. Thus television's most basic aesthetic and economic goals overlap: engaging the viewer's attention. This begins on the micro level, the smallest node of narrative.

On this level of storytelling most television narratives look quite similar. Situation comedies, episodics, and serial dramas all organize their stories into rather short segments, often less than two minutes in length. Viewers might call these scenes, but writers call them "beats," and they are television's most basic storytelling unit. The length of individual beats and consequently the number of them in an episode are variable to a degree, but it is exceedingly rare to see long, drawn-out beats on prime-time television. The networks bristle at scenes that take up more than two and a half script pages, with a page of script roughly equivalent to a minute of screen time.<sup>9</sup> They believe that the audience's attention is unlikely to be sustained for much longer than that. In a fast-paced story a long scene can derail the sense of forward progress. Given the commercial imperative of keeping the audience interested, most forms of television present a rapid succession of short segments.

Thinking in short segments is a constraint on writers, demanding that their storytelling be clear and efficient. No moment is without a dramatic function, no scene is redundant with other scenes or digressive from the narrative's forward progress. This isn't to say that every beat advances the plot in the traditional sense. Many beats consist of reactions rather than actions, especially on shows centered principally around interpersonal relationships. But a reaction is a new bit of narrative information and is often the point of a beat. Each beat tells us something new, something we want—need—to know, and amplifies our desire to know more.<sup>10</sup> Each one solicits feelings in relation to this information, such as satisfaction, excitement, worry, puzzlement, or frustration on a character's behalf. Each beat also usually reminds us about several old bits of information before offering us the new bit. With these missions accomplished one beat gives way to the next.

When writers approach the creation of a television script, their first task is to “break” the story into a moment-by-moment outline, or “beat-sheet,” a task often done collaboratively by a writing staff.<sup>11</sup> The writers know in the most basic terms what the episode has to accomplish before they beat out the story, but the story only takes shape when they begin to think of it as a series of moments. Each episode has a total of between twenty and forty beats; the average might be twenty-five.<sup>12</sup> This means that each of the four acts in an hour-long show has around six beats.<sup>13</sup> PTSs are typically ensemble dramas, and each episode has multiple, intertwined plots. Major plots (“A plots” in teleplay jargon) involving a main character have at least six beats, often more. An episode usually has two or more A plots and several B or C plots with a smaller number of beats each. Each act ideally includes at least one beat from all of the episode's plots.

In breaking stories for *Judging Amy* (1999–2005) its showrunners would demand that a plotline set in Amy's courtroom have six to eight beats to make it dramatic and engaging—a three-beat situation would not suffice. They told an interviewer that freelancers would sometimes pitch dramatic ideas that were not suitable for the PTS's format: “For example, a kid goes missing. The beats are: (1) a kid goes missing, (2) call the cops and (3) the cops find him or they don't find him. That's not enough. That's a [dead-end] idea.”<sup>14</sup> To make the idea suitable for an hour show it would need to unfold with more intricacy, with a measured pattern of revelations and developments taking us through this series of eight moments and holding our

attention across four commercial breaks. Since A plots involve the characters portrayed by a show's stars, giving them eight beats per episode keeps them on screen at regular intervals. Very convoluted stories and very simplistic ones are unsuitable to the formula. Thus the reliance on twists and turns in the plot; one way of adding beats to a straightforward story is to introduce complications and reversals. By demanding that scenes be short, the networks create the conditions for a sophisticated mode of ensemble storytelling.

In general, then, the patterning of two-minute beats aims to hold the audience's attention and make the story lines cleverly unpredictable. Out of industrial constraints come aesthetic strategies. Given a set amount of weekly programming time, a cast of actors under contract, and a need to show the audience something new at least every two minutes, writers work out a system of parceling the narrative into small pieces in regular alternation, each of which makes a new claim on the audience's interest and aims to intensify its emotional response.

In addition to new information many scenes also contain what we might call old information, expository material that regular viewers already well know. Recapping is a ubiquitous feature of television in all genres.<sup>15</sup> Television assumes that we don't watch everything and can always use a bit of reminding when it comes to the most important things to know. In serialized narratives recapping is especially important because of the large quantity of data about the story world that forms the background of any new developments. It takes many forms, one of which is the perpetual naming of characters: in every beat, characters address each other by name, often several times in a two-minute segment. Along with naming comes role reiteration: *Alias* (ABC, 2001–) constantly reminds us that Jack and Irina are Sydney's parents; Giles is always reminding Buffy (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, WB, 1997–2001; UPN, 2001–03) that he is her watcher; Joel on *Northern Exposure* (CBS, 1990–95) is often called “Dr. Fleishman,” even away from his practice, and his favorite leisure activity, golfing, reinforces his role stereotype.

A more elaborate form of recapping restates the show's basic premise in episode after episode. *Veronica Mars's* (UPN, 2004–) voice-overs in its first season reiterate the known details of the Lily Kane murder and investigation and Veronica's ostracism from the popular crowd at Neptune High. *Buffy* characters remind us that Sunnydale sits above a Hellmouth. Episode after episode of *Northern Exposure*

works in references to New York City, Joel's hometown. Many also reiterate the deal he made with the state of Alaska that in exchange for funding his medical education it would get his services as a doctor.

Dialogue also recaps recent events, often redundantly with the "previously" segment that precedes most shows but in a way that contextualizes the information and clarifies its relevance to the present situation. It is a norm of PTS storytelling that events should be recapped, and, given this constraint, writers have to find ways of accomplishing this redundancy without irritating the audience. Indeed, this norm seems to have the opposite effect, riveting the audience to the screen. Often this redundancy is accomplished with remarkable elegance and economy without seeming at all like clunky exposition. This is a matter of motivating the dialogue that conveys the redundant expository material.

One way of accomplishing this is by structuring storytelling as a series of revelations from one character to the next, a standard narrational strategy of melodrama in film and television, making action less significant than reaction and *interaction*.<sup>16</sup> In the May sweeps episodes of *Gilmore Girls*'s (WB, 2000–) fifth season, Rory has a series of encounters with the family of her blue-blooded Yale boyfriend, Logan Huntzberger.<sup>17</sup> After being insulted by the Huntzbergers over dinner when they openly disapprove of Rory as a match for Logan, Rory is offered a plum internship at Logan's father's newspaper. At the end of her stint at the paper the elder Huntzberger tells Rory quite bluntly that she is not suited to a career in journalism, which has been her lifelong aspiration, and she is crushed. These events are recapped by Rory in conversations with her mother, Lorelai, and by Lorelai in conversations with her parents, Richard and Emily.

But these bits of dialogue are not only repeating what we already know; the moments of recapping are important bits of plotting because they are revelations, and we have been primed to notice the interlocutors' reactions. For many viewers, one of serial narrative's greatest pleasures comes from the tension-resolution pattern of anticipating how a character will respond to a narrative detail they already know and witnessing the moment of revelation. Rory is hesitant to tell Lorelai about the internship because she thinks her mother disapproves of Logan. When Rory slips in the news, it is a moment of tentativeness between the mom and daughter, who often act more like best friends than like family, and we are invited to wonder if Lorelai's

breeziness in response to Rory's news is feigned. Thus the recapping of Rory's news about interning with Logan's father's paper is turned into a beat in the mother-daughter plotline and an opportunity to consider the characters' emotions. It is also a device aimed at engaging *our* emotions, encouraging our fear for the Gilmore girls that Logan will cause a rift to form between them and our hope for them that it will not.

An even bigger plot point comes in the season finale, after Rory is devastated by her conversation with Mr. Huntzberger. Lorelai reports to her parents not only about Rory being told she is unsuitable to be a reporter but also about how the Huntzbergers insulted Rory over dinner, recapping events of several episodes earlier that are essential to understanding the conflict. This is the first that Richard and Emily have heard of this, and it makes them both furious with Logan's family, affronted by their behavior, and sympathetic with Rory, reversing their eagerness to see the two youngsters get engaged. Again, this recapping solicits an emotional connection: regular viewers were likely already angry at the Huntzbergers and frustrated and disappointed on Rory's behalf, but in this scene we are invited to share Richard and Emily's anger and sympathy even as we might get a superior sense of satisfaction—which we likely share with Lorelai—from seeing them realize that they were mistaken about Logan's family. Because the characters' relationships are multiple and complex, considering old information in a new context is designed to generate a fresh charge of feeling.

The repetitiveness of PTS storytelling originates in a commercial function of making the narrative easily comprehended even by viewers who watch sporadically, who pay only partial attention, or who miss part of an episode when the phone rings or the baby cries. The same contextual factors result in similar kinds of repetition in many kinds of television storytelling, from soaps and news magazines to reality programs and sit-coms. Consider, for example, the number of times in an episode of *Survivor* that we are reminded of the contestants' names: during the credit sequence, when contestants are addressed by the host, when they are referenced in other contestants' interviews, when they are addressed directly by other contestants, and when their names (and occupations) are printed onscreen during their own interviews. Redundancy in many forms of television is aimed at maximizing accessibility. But this adaptation has an additional benefit. Television's redundancy has its causes in making narratives intelligible, but

it turns out that it can also allow even regular viewers to be gratified by being reminded constantly of who the characters are, what they do, why they do it, and what is at stake in their story. Our interest and engagement can be increased when the narrative makes its most important elements clear and relevant, artfully underlining what we should pay most attention to and care most about. Redundancy functions not only to make stories comprehensible but, more importantly, to make stories more interesting and to deepen our experience by appealing to our emotions.

To paraphrase Christian Metz, there are no television police. No one forces us to watch these weekly dramas. But the structure of television storytelling on the micro level—the way a story is broken into beats and the way each beat works—functions to compel our attention. Television storytellers, more than their counterparts in literary, dramatic, or cinematic storytelling, are under an obligation constantly to arouse and rearouse our interest. Beating out the story as they do has a strong rhetorical force, giving us reasons to care about characters and to want to know more.

### Middle Level: Episodes

Given the ongoing nature of its stories, one might assume that the PTS lacks closure on the level of the episode. According to one critic, daytime serials dispense with beginnings and endings in favor of “an indefinitely expandable middle.”<sup>18</sup> Scholars refer to serial form as “open,”<sup>19</sup> and some propose that the pleasure of watching serials is heavily invested in this formal openness. Soap opera viewers, according to John Fiske, experience “pleasure as ongoing and cyclical rather than climactic and final.”<sup>20</sup> In this section I argue, however, that an emphasis on openness misses much of what is interesting about television’s evening serials. Each episode of a PTS leaves some causal chains dangling, but seldom at the expense of sacrificing resolution and coherence, seldom in a way that promotes textual instability or radical, modernist aperture. The serials I am considering have not only closure in their story lines, which is also true of soap operas,<sup>21</sup> but a rigorous formal unity on the level of the episode, a quality daytime dramas rarely display. Thus there are two kinds of closure and aperture we can consider: the resolution of narrative cause-effect chains, as in the culmination of a courtship in marriage, and the unification of themes and motifs into an orderly, integrated whole. Both of these kinds of formal unity offer pleasures that underlie other appeals of the narrative.

While some cause-effect apertures may run across many months of a PTS, the main action of any given episode tends to be resolved.<sup>22</sup> Most typically, certain questions go unanswered for episode after episode, but they are not the kind of questions that obstruct narrative clarity. Highly focused questions that determine the outcome of the main events of a particular episode may be deferred by a cliffhanger and promptly answered in the beginning of the next episode, as is often done on thrillers such as *Alias*, but less focused questions can be deferred long-term. This kind of balance between episodic closure and serial deferment is standard in many forms of serial storytelling, from Victorian fiction to contemporary Hollywood cycles such as *Star Wars*. A strong dose of episodic unity mitigates any textual instability caused by serialized aperture. Without this unity, casual viewers are less likely to watch. And while the regular audience may relish being strung along by the ongoing story lines, it also may dislike feeling frustrated at the end of an episode. Like all of the formal devices I consider here, effects of closure are aimed at satisfying the audience, in this case its desire not only for resolution but also for coherence.

There is a commercial rationale underlying these effects beyond the value to a network and producer of their programs telling good stories. Prime-time shows, in contrast to their daytime counterparts, depend on off-network syndication contracts to earn a profit. PTS producers want their programs to play well in reruns. According to the industry’s conventional wisdom, heavily serialized storytelling makes reruns less likely to attract viewers.<sup>23</sup> In the 1990s and early 2000s the astonishing success of *Law & Order* repeats on A&E and TNT demonstrated that hour-long episodic narratives can achieve impressive ratings in syndication to the point that the audience for original episodes on the network might increase.<sup>24</sup> *Law & Order* is the most profitable drama on television and is also a success in foreign markets.<sup>25</sup> Episodic closure is thus a product of an industrial context in which serials are under increasing pressure to offer episodic pleasures to casual viewers at the same time that they offer additional, serialized pleasures to their faithful regulars. Episodic unity pays off to the viewer, casual or committed, but also to the producer and the network.

The PTS thus patterns its weekly episodes into structures of problems and solutions so that the central conflict introduced in the beginning of an episode has often been overcome by the end. The standard architecture of the

PTS organizes the hour into four acts of roughly equal length, each of which is followed by a commercial break.<sup>26</sup> The first and last acts of a four-act episode correspond to the first and last acts of the three-act Hollywood film. In both media the first act is the set-up and the last act is the resolution. The middle two acts of a television show correspond to the second act of a movie: complication and development.<sup>27</sup> Television dramas introduce problems in the first act and end it with a surprise. Characters respond to complications caused by this surprise in the second act, see the stakes raised in the third act, and resolve the problems in the fourth act.

Unlike movies, television acts have strongly punctuated endings, often with a clearly focused question, sometimes with a cliffhanger, typically with a fade to black and a cut to a commercial.<sup>28</sup> Different writers have different names for act endings; following theater usage I will call them “curtains.”<sup>29</sup> Writers often compose backward from the curtains, beginning with the fourth-act curtain that concludes the episode.<sup>30</sup> In the *Felicity* (WB, 1998–2002) episode “The Fugue” (2 March 1999), the fourth-act curtain, the most significant dramatic moment in the episode, comes when Felicity decides to sleep with an acquaintance from her art class, Eli. This tentatively answers the main question posed in the first act: will Felicity and her boyfriend Noel stay together or break up? At the fourth-act curtain not only are they apart, but Felicity has moved on to someone else. Each of the previous curtains functions to pose a question or problem. The precredit teaser asks what Noel’s ex-girlfriend, Hannah, is really doing in New York City. The first-act curtain has Noel and Hannah kiss. The second-act curtain has a confrontation between Noel and Felicity. By the third-act curtain Noel has left Felicity for Hannah, and at the act’s end Felicity goes off with Eli to retrieve some sketches from the art studio, focusing the question of whether she will get together with him, which is answered at the final curtain.

As in a stage melodrama, a television program’s curtains crystallize the dramatic developments of the act and sometimes introduce a surprise or *coup de théâtre*, as in the act 1 curtain of “The Fugue,” when Noel and Hannah kiss. Like the PTS’s beat structure, its curtains function to rivet the audience to the screen.<sup>31</sup> One teleplay manual puts it like this: “Remember your goal. It’s to pull ’em back from the refrigerator.”<sup>32</sup> It is thus standard that writers save their strongest beats for the curtains. It is also typical for a curtain to fall on a reaction shot of the main character, a classic

soap opera device that intensifies our interest in character psychology.

This act structure is another example of how the interplay of commercial and aesthetic functions structures television storytelling. There is no natural reason for the segmentation of the narrative to be in four equal portions with breaks each quarter-hour, but this formal arrangement serves a variety of interests, not least the economic one of interspersing advertisements at regular intervals during the broadcast. From an aesthetic perspective a four-act structure achieves a sense of proportion and symmetry, ensures steadily rising action, and organizes patterns of attention and expectation, with first acts opening causal chains that are carried across the second and third acts to be resolved (at least partially) in the fourth.

On legal shows the first act may introduce the case, the fourth may bring a decision. *Buffy* unveils a threat to Sunnydale in act 1 and removes it in act 4. Dramas with a stronger focus on the domestic still raise focused questions in act 1, as in the *thirtysomething* (ABC, 1987–91) episode “Prelude to a Bris” (29 September 1990). When their son, Leo, is born, Hope and Michael must decide if he will have a bris, and Michael must decide whether being Jewish is an important part of his identity. Act 4: the bris, a symbolic moment not only of the child’s entry into the world but also of Michael’s embrace of his heritage. Of course, these episodes also have narrative elements that continue across the span of a season or series (the birth of Leo is a moment in the Steadman family arc), but they tend to raise and resolve significant plot problems each week.

This tight dramatic act structure satisfies the audience’s desire for resolution—not totally but adequately. It is gratifying to discover novel but apt solutions to well-posed problems, as television narratives often do week after week. But this is not the only means by which episode-specific structures appeal to the audience. Another perennial option is thematic parallelism. It would seem an obvious one when dealing with multiple story lines: have them inflect and play off each other, revealing contrasts and similarities.<sup>33</sup> The most straightforward kind of parallelism has a pair of A plots share a theme. The final act of “The Fugue” uses crosscutting to establish parallelism. Shots of Noel and Hannah are alternated with shots of Felicity and Eli, while sounds of rain and of Hannah’s piano composition bleed over from one scene into the next to tie them together. Congruent thematic material is also frequently ironically inverted, as in the *Lost* episode “Do No Harm” (6 April

2005), in which one character is born at the same time that another dies.

In a typical *Judging Amy* episode Judge Amy Gray's juvenile court case *and* her mother, Maxine's social work case *and* the various family story lines are all tied up in the same set of thematic concerns, with inversions and variations running up against one another. "Spoil the Child" (11 January 2000) has Amy and Maxine both face instances connecting children and violence. As is often the case not only with *Judging Amy* but with programs as different as *Rescue Me* (FX, 2004–) and *Once and Again* (ABC, 1999–2002) the episode's title keys us into the theme. In Amy's case a father's custody is challenged on the grounds that he spans his children. In Maxine's case it is the child who is violent, striking her when she tries to counsel him. As well, the main characters face inverse career-defining questions: Amy is up for a promotion from juvenile to criminal court, while Maxine considers quitting her job with the Department of Children and Families because of the stress it causes her. In the course of offering her the promotion Amy's boss derides the juvenile bench as "social work," making it clear to the audience that Amy and her mother both toil at the same kind of job despite many differences. The work of helping children and families is at stake in both characters' choices.

As in most *Judging Amy* episodes, the troubled families depicted in the professional plots are a foil for the Gray family. However, in this episode both Amy's and Maxine's performances as mother are questioned. As always, Amy must balance her obligations as a judge and as a single mom, and in the first act of "Spoil the Child" she takes her six-year-old daughter, Lauren, to pick up a butterfly outfit for her dance recital. Because Amy's life is so busy she has put this errand off too long. The shop has sold out of butterflies, and Lauren throws a tantrum. The only option left is for Amy to sew the outfit herself, and Lauren fears it will be different from the other kids' costumes. With all of the family looking on before dinner Lauren shouts, "You're a bad mommy and I hate you! You ruined my life!" Meanwhile, Amy is upset with Maxine because she has never come to her courtroom to see her on the bench, and when she tells her mother this Maxine becomes angry and says, "It's not my job to make you feel better." Thus the six year old's dance recital and her mother's job as a judge are parallel performances where a mother, as spectator, is supposed to take pride

in the child. Each mother is accused of failing to make the performance happen.

As is often the case, a question before Amy in court—how should a parent treat a child?—is one she faces in her own family. It is also typical that Amy's inability to have her own life go smoothly is an ironic contrast against the role she takes on as a judge, assuredly making crucial decisions affecting other people's lives. It is typical of *Judging Amy* that episodes are built on this kind of complex structural coherence.

How does "Spoil the Child" resolve its situations? Amy stays on the juvenile bench, affirming her commitment to "social work." Maxine continues at her job, fighting for a psychiatric placement for her assailant. The Gray women affirm their commitment to public service on behalf of children and families. Amy also stays up all night sewing Lauren's costume, and the dance recital is a success. Most important, Maxine attends Amy's court session and hears her judgment on the spanking case. Amy rules that the parent may not strike his child and speaks eloquently about the importance of the parent-child bond, absorbing and reiterating all of her mother's teachings. Maxine's eyes well up with tears, and after Amy is finished her mother turns to the person next to her and says, "That's my daughter." This scene epitomizes the way *Judging Amy* works: in a single moment all of the narrative threads of the episode are brought together in an affirmation of reciprocal familial obligations and pleasures.

As "Spoil the Child" makes clear, closure is not simply a matter of questions being answered, problems being solved. A closed form is one in which the elements all hang together in an integrated pattern. The parallelisms in "Spoil the Child" give the episode a clear shape and can make the experience of watching it satisfying not only because of its affirmation of ethics that the audience likely shares, not only because of the emotional charge of the sentimental ending, but also because of an aesthetic sophistication that can bring its own rewards. It has harmony that no open form can claim, a counterpoint of narrative voices that satisfies a desire not only for resolution but also for formal unity and thematic clarity. *Judging Amy* achieved similar effects week after week, balancing its episodic "case" plots with arcing story lines about Amy's family and coworkers and integrating all of them thematically. It is the epitome of the post-*Law & Order* serial poised to snag casual viewers in reruns while also satisfying its loyal fans week after week.

## Macro Level: Arcs

What most distinguishes the PTS from other forms of programming is the way it is invested in character.<sup>34</sup> It is not merely plots that carry over week after week but characters whose lives these plots define. We don't just want to know what's going to happen but what's going to happen to Pembleton and Bayliss (*Homicide: Life on the Street*, NBC, 1993–99), Buffy and Spike, Angela and Jordan (*My So-Called Life*, ABC, 1994–95). Continuing stories make characters more likely to undergo significant life events and changes.<sup>35</sup> In reaction to these changes in circumstances the characters themselves are more likely to change or at least to grow.

Characters in serials demand an investment in time. They invite regular viewing over a long term, charting a progression of the characters' life events. It is true that in episodic forms such as the traditional sit-com there may also be a strong investment in character, but it is of a different nature, based more on the familiarity bred by repetition than on engagement with unfolding events. In a given episode of *Happy Days* (ABC, 1974–84) the viewer's interest in character is often a product of recognizing familiar bits of action, *mise-en-scène*, and dialogue: taking dates to Inspiration Point, eating at Arnold's, asking Fonzie's advice in the men's room, blue cardigans for the boys, long skirts for the girls, Fonzie's jacket, Chachi's bandana, "Aaaay," "Yowza," "I found my thrill," "I still got it," "Mrs. C," "wa wa wa." In contrast, the investment in a serial character is based on a more novelistic progression of events over a long duration, with episodes like chapters in an ongoing saga rather than self-contained stories.<sup>36</sup> (It is arguable that in its later seasons *Happy Days* began to offer some of these pleasures as the characters grew up and changed.) Characterization in the PTS is more likely to have a certain kind of depth as the audience knows more about the characters' inner lives in serials than in many episodic shows. Especially in comparison to the episodic drama represented by the recent crop of procedurals in the mold of *Law & Order*, the PTS is a character-driven form, and this is one thing that makes it more easily figured as "quality TV" in popular and critical discourse.

It is sometimes incorrectly said that on episodic shows characters seem to have no memory of the previous week's events.<sup>37</sup> What is more important than character memory, however, is that *viewers* of episodic shows need no memory of the previous episodes to understand and appreciate the

present one. Episodes may be seen in any order and may be skipped without compromising future comprehension and engagement. The PTS, on the other hand, makes significant demands on the audience, which it rewards with a much fuller experience of character. The audience is expected—ideally—to watch the episodes in sequence, to track character and plot developments carefully, and to tune in every week.

The device that best ensures this commitment to the narrative is the character arc. Arc is to character as plot is to story. Put slightly differently, arc is plot stated in terms of character. An arc is a character's journey from A through B, C, and D to E. This term has remarkable utility in describing PTS storytelling: although each episode, sweeps period, season, and series may have its own shape and unity, each character's story can be individuated, spatialized as an arc overlapping all of these and all of the other characters' arcs.<sup>38</sup>

Character arcs may stretch across many episodes, seasons, and the entirety of a series. The shape of the largest character arcs are those of the life span, with its progression from youth to adulthood, innocence to experience. Some call this a show's "emotional through line."<sup>39</sup> It is not only children such as Angela Chase, Lindsay Weir, and Willow Rosenberg who grow up on television shows. Joel Fleishman gains the folk wisdom of his Alaskan neighbors as a complement to his formal schooling. Boomer on *St. Elsewhere* begins as a greenhorn intern and grows through his survival of multiple traumas. The detectives on *Homicide* each come to grips, at some point, with a life-changing moment that marks a passage into greater maturity.

These life-span arcs operate on the level of the series, but there are more manageable-sized arcs that writers deal with more commonly in crafting stories. Like beat and episode structures, arc structures function under commercial and aesthetic imperatives. There are two salient commercial constraints. First, in addition to focused cliffhangers connecting the end of one episode and the beginning of another, the questions that dangle week after week serve to maintain suspense. On *Dawson's Creek* (WB, 1998–2003) will Joey tell Dawson that she is in love with him? On *Homicide* what if any consequences will Kellerman face for killing Luther Mahoney? Perhaps the most famous of these dangles has its own slang term—a will-they-or-won't-they—as on *Moonlighting* (ABC, 1985–89): will Maddie and David sleep together or won't they? By posing these questions programs strive to maintain our viewership, to keep us interested and drive up ratings.

Another commercial imperative has to do with the organization of the season into segments.<sup>40</sup> The season has at least five definable segments: fall premieres (September–October), fall sweeps (November), a holiday rerun period (December–January), winter sweeps (February), another rerun period (March–April), and spring sweeps/season finales (May). Most PTSs run around twenty-four episodes per season. Networks save new episodes for sweeps periods, on the basis of which advertising rates are set according to each show's Nielsen ratings. They avoid reruns at the beginning of the season, figuring that new episodes will maintain and increase interest in a show. This gives the network at least eight weeks of episodes to begin the season and another eight to air during the winter and spring sweeps for a total of sixteen episodes. The remaining episodes are aired in December, January, March, or April.

The implications of this season segmentation for narrative form are clear. Just as episodes build toward strong curtains, seasons build toward strong sweeps episodes. Some shows have definable arcs that stretch across a whole season, but the demands of the three sweeps periods make arcs more easily constructed in units of around six or eight episodes than in units of twenty-four. Thus we may think of the season, as well as the episode, as having acts. Each season has three.

When writing staffs begin to work on a season they will sometimes plot out the most major developments of the whole year of shows. Some writers' rooms keep an outline of the whole season's story on the wall. But even on a show such as *24* (Fox, 2001–), which has a tightly focused season structure, the conception of arcs happens in a more piecemeal fashion. *24* does not plot out its whole season in advance. Its staff breaks the story in groups of six or eight episodes.<sup>41</sup> Eight, it turns out, is a much more manageable chunk of story to break. This isn't to say that the eight episodes have the same kind of coherence as an individual episode. But across these larger segments of story—call them “season acts”—definable problems are introduced, developed, and resolved. Intuitively it makes sense, moreover, that viewers experience television stories in segments larger than episodes but smaller than seasons. We engage with the narrative on an ongoing basis but certainly do not have the memory that would allow us to hold a whole season, as it were, in our heads.

Since the main plots of any given PTS episode may be largely self-contained, many an arc is strung along episode after episode with a few lines of dialogue or a scene or

two that just barely pushes it forward. On *Judging Amy* Peter and Gillian's quest to have a child takes two seasons to resolve fully, with no single episode in which it is an A plot. It is, however, broken up into smaller units of storytelling, beginning with the pilot: considering and trying in vitro, pursuing an adoption, losing Ned when his birth mother changes her mind, and so on, until finally during May sweeps of the second season they have their son back for good.<sup>42</sup> Although this is a very long arc, it is broken up into more manageable chunks that overlap with the season acts.

Season acts made up of several episodes do not necessarily coincide neatly with character arcs, and the idea of an arc suggests that each character's may begin and end at different points. But there is considerable overlap between the season act and the main characters' arcs, if for no other reason than because plot and character are not independent of one another. Rory's arc in the fifth-season episodes of *Gilmore Girls* discussed above offers a clear example. The shape of season act 3 is defined by Rory's encounters with the Huntzbergers. Just as individual episodes present problems and solutions, so do season acts. What will happen with Rory and Logan? How will the Huntzbergers, Lorelai, Richard, and Emily respond? What implications will these events have for Rory's future? These questions span the series of episodes culminating in the season finale, when Rory decides to quit Yale and move in with her grandparents.

Arcs also share a shape with season acts because characters' lives are intertwined, with each character's goals shaped by the other characters' goals. Lorelai Gilmore's arc in season act 3 could be independent of Rory's and often seems so. Lorelai faces a cluster of related questions that scarcely involve her daughter. What kind of relationship should she have with her meddling, snobbish parents? Should she sell the Dragonfly Inn and take a job that might mean moving away from Stars Hollow? What will happen in her relationship with Luke? Unbeknownst to Lorelai, during all of this time Luke is planning on asking her to marry him, considering buying a new house where they both will live, and hoping eventually to have children together. So Rory's arc with Logan and the internship and Lorelai's arc with Richard and Emily, the Dragonfly, and Luke are hardly intertwined.

In the season finale, “A House Is Not a Home” (17 May 2005), they come together when Lorelai responds to Rory's decision to quit school. She reluctantly goes to

her parents to ask them for help in convincing Rory to return to Yale, and they agree, only to go back on their word and allow Rory to move in with them and take time off. This answers question number one: Lorelai will return to her policy of having nothing to do with Richard and Emily. But when she tells Luke about this he becomes hyperbolically irate and insists that they kidnap Rory and force her to go to school every day. In this moment Lorelai is so moved by Luke's concern for her and Rory that she asks him to marry her, a cliffhanger season-ending curtain. This suggests likely answers to questions two and three: at the end of season five it seems likely that Lorelai will not sell the Dragonfly and that her relationship with Luke will progress to marriage, if not to the new house and kids of his dreams. What's most important to this discussion, however, is the way the various characters' arcs resolve in unison. Rory's decision to quit school and move in with her grandparents and Lorelai's proposal to Luke are caught up in the same dramatic progression. Rory's actions affect Lorelai's, which affect Luke's, which affect Lorelai's. The arcs resolve as one, making the May sweeps episodes into a coherent unit of narrative. This pattern of coalescing arcs means that in any given episode the various plots might not seem to be connected. Ultimately, however, they can be brought together as part of a single pattern of dramatic resolution. Again the PTS form tends toward narrative unity and coherence.

What, then, of units of storytelling larger than a season act? What about the season as a unit of storytelling? Cable dramas such as *Nip/Tuck* (FX, 2003–) and *The L Word* (Showtime, 2004–) have thirteen-episode seasons, making it easier to think of the season as a meaningful narrative unit. Each *Buffy* season has a season-spanning conflict in which the characters confront a “big bad.” But each season has many episodes in which the “big bad” figures only marginally into the conflict. Certainly *24*, with its high-concept narrative structure, demands to be considered as a season. But *24* segments the season's conflicts into subconflicts. The first few episodes of season four follow the attempted assassination of a cabinet secretary; when this is averted the characters realize there is a nuclear attack under way and turn their attention to averting it; and so on. Their overarching goal is to defeat the terrorists, but this is accomplished through subgoals that structure smaller units of narrative as other shows do. In general, the season is at best a loose kind of narrative unit, but the season acts culminating during sweeps function as tight, coherent segments.

Arcs, like beats and episodes, have their own functions and effects. They are a way of managing story material, of crafting it into a meaningful whole. Arcs and the season acts subtending them are, no less than beats and episodes, a product of an advertising-driven industrial context of narrative production. They are a means of compelling weekly viewing and of maximizing ratings when it matters most to the networks. But they also come with the aesthetic functions of generating interest in character, of engaging the audience in the struggles and discoveries, the lives and loves of their TV friends, and of maximizing formal unity. As at all levels of television storytelling the largest, macro level is designed to best please the audience.

## Conclusion

These are a handful of narrative givens shared among writers and viewers of hundreds of different programs. Beats, episodes, and arcs offer proven means of winning audiences over. But the direction of influence is not simply from the corporate office to the writers' room. Although they serve commercial functions, once these become norms of storytelling practice the networks recognize their narrative utility, and thus a kind of feedback loop is initiated between the creative and corporate branches of the industry. A device like redundancy is seen to serve everyone's interests. A network's executives might not appreciate true originality, but they respect the proven storytelling resources of television's craft tradition. Other means of prospective profit boosting than those I have considered have come along (e.g., interactivity, product placement, sweeps season cross-overs, and “super-size” episodes). Whether they originate in the writers' room or the boardroom, if they ultimately do not amount to a way for television to tell better stories, they are unlikely to become integrated into narrative television's norms.<sup>43</sup>

One veteran writer of television dramas sums up her job as follows: “Once I have decided on a story to tell, I then get out the entire bag of writer's tricks in order to make the audience feel what I need it to feel—otherwise, I won't hold its interest, and it won't hear anything I have to say. . . . I always write with the audience in mind.”<sup>44</sup> The bag of tricks, the audience in mind: the television artist is as attuned as any storyteller to the effects of narrative. The programs I have discussed here are at once a source of handsome profits and intense pleasures. These profits and pleasures transcend critical judgments of quality. The

practices that produce them—the tricks in the bag—compel the attention of anyone interested in the narratives of popular culture.

## Notes

I would like to thank Elana Levine and the *Velvet Light Trap* editorial board for the help they offered me in completing this article.

1. Sarah Kozloff, "Narrative Theory," *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Robert C. Allen, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1992) 67–100, asserts that narrative theory "leaves to other critical methods questions about where the story comes from . . . and the myriad effects (psychological or sociological) that the text has upon its audience" (68). Cf. Michael J. Porter, "The Structure of Television Narratives," *Critical Approaches to Television*, ed. Leah R. Vande Berg, Lawrence A. Wenner, and Bruce E. Gronbeck (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998) 140–57.

2. My conception of poetics comes from Aristotle's *Poetics* and from David Bordwell's call for a historical poetics of cinema. See, for example, Bordwell, *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988) and *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989) 263–74. See also Henry Jenkins, "Historical Poetics," in Joanne Hollows and Marc Jancovich, eds., *Approaches to Popular Film* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995).

3. Other approaches such as ethnographic or reception studies also illuminate aspects of the audience's experience, but poetics takes as its central object of study the text itself and offers insights about its origins and uses on the basis of its design features. Thus poetics might logically be seen as a first—but certainly not last—step in understanding how a narrative text functions within the contexts of its modes of production and reception. Other approaches might better explain the social circulation and the political use value of narratives; poetics seeks to illuminate a text's aesthetic strategies.

4. There are antecedents of the prime-time serial in the 1960s (*Peyton Place*, ABC, 1964–69) and the 1970s (*Family*, ABC, 1976–80). As well, at least since the 1970s in shows such as *Soap* (ABC, 1977–82) and *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* (syn., 1976–78), situation comedies have also been increasingly serialized, so some of my points here apply to some sit-coms as well.

Why did the serial emerge in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a major prime-time form? One must consider a complex interaction of social and industrial forces in speculating about this kind of phenomenon, and no body of research has yet offered a thorough consideration of them. Julie D'Acci, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of "Cagney & Lacey"* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1994) 72, briefly considers the "soapoperafication" of prime time in relation to the construction of a "working woman" audience in the early 1980s. This topic is an important and intriguing one for future research.

5. Although many of my examples are of fairly recent programs (those most easily available to me to watch), I intend my points to apply to the PTS in general, not only to recent examples.

6. Jane Feuer, "Quality Drama in the U.S.: The New 'Golden Age?'" *The Television History Book*, ed. Michele Hilmes (London: BFI, 2003) 99; Robin Nelson, "Hill Street Blues," *Fifty Key Television Programs*, ed. Glen Creeber (London: Arnold, 2003) 104, refers to *Hill Street* as the program that "paved the way for the dominance of the series/serial

hybrid"; Thomas Schatz, "St. Elsewhere and the Evolution of the Ensemble Series," *Television: The Critical View*, ed. Horace Newcomb, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford, 1987) 94, writes that *St. Elsewhere* "struck a compromise between . . . episodic and serial strategies." See also Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi, *MTM: "Quality Television"* (London: BFI, 1984) 25–26, 85–100.

7. Robert J. Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1996), argues that some prime-time serials of the 1980s and 1990s constitute a genre of "quality TV." He thus links a formal criterion—serialized, ensemble storytelling—to one of aesthetic value, though he notes that at least one critic uses the terms "quality drama" as a put-down (13). This confuses categories of narrative form and critical judgment. Unlike Thompson, I am interested in understanding what instances of the PTS generally have in common regardless of any program's "quality" or lack of it, however construed.

8. Noël Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 245–90.

9. Madeline DiMaggio, *How to Write for Television* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1990) 88. Certainly the actors' pace of delivery affects this page-to-minute ratio, and scripts for shows such as *Gilmore Girls* have longer page counts than less talky, slower-paced programs.

10. Larry Brody, *Television Writing from the Inside Out: Your Channel to Success* (New York: Applause, 2003) 77, 150–51.

11. Some writers call this "cracking" or "beating" the story. A good description of this process of group story construction can be found in John Wells, "Team Writing," in Julian Friedman, ed., *Writing Long-Running Television Series* (Shoreham-by-Sea, UK: Gwynprint, 1996) 2:194–205; Amy Sherman-Palladino discusses her experiences with team writing on *Roseanne*, *Veronica's Closet*, and *Gilmore Girls* in a 5 May 2005 radio interview on "Fresh Air with Terry Gross," archived online at [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org).

12. Brody 76.

13. *Ibid.*, 92. According to Brody, first acts usually have more, shorter beats and last acts fewer, longer ones. See also Douglas Heil, *Prime-Time Authorship: Works about and by Three TV Dramatists* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2002) 133–34.

14. Rich Whiteside, "The Small Screen: Judging Amy," *scr(i)pt* 9.1 (Jan.–Feb. 2003). I accessed this and other *scr(i)pt* sources either online at [www.scriptmag.com](http://www.scriptmag.com) or through interlibrary loans delivered as PDF files; in both formats the page numbers were not available.

15. Robert C. Allen, "The Guiding Light: Soap Opera as Economic Product and Cultural Document," Newcomb 150 (4th ed.), analyzes this repetitive exposition in daytime drama.

16. David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1988) 70–73; Tania Modleski, "The Rhythms of Reception: Daytime Television and Women's Work," *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches—An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1983) 67–74.

17. These *Gilmore Girls* episodes are "But I'm a Gilmore" (26 April 2005), "How Many Kropogs to Cape Cod?" (3 May 2005), "Blame Booze and Melville" (10 May 2005), and "A House Is Not a Home" (17 May 2005).

18. Dennis Porter, "Soap Time: Thoughts on a Commodity Art Form," *Television: The Critical View*, ed. Horace Newcomb, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1979) 89.

19. Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1985) 82–84; Ellen Seiter, "Eco's TV Guide—The

Soaps," *Tabloid* 5 (Winter 1982): 35–43. Allen and Seiter's usage follows Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979), which contains a reprint of his 1959 essay, "The Poetics of the Open Work," 47–66. See also Jane Feuer, *Seeing Through the Eighties* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995) 121–30. Allen, Seiter, and Feuer all apply Eco's notion of the open work to soap operas.

20. John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 1987) 183.

21. Laura Stempel Mumford, *Love and Ideology in the Afternoon: Soap Opera, Women, and Television Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995) 67–93.

22. Feuer, *Seeing Through the Eighties* 122, makes a similar point about episodic closure in the serial form.

23. Brian Lowry and Jim Benson, "New Hours of Power?" *Variety* 24 Oct. 1994: 39; John Dempsey, "FX Hopes for Big Effects of New Buys," *Variety* 1 Oct. 2001: 30; Brian Lowry, "Tuning In," *Variety* 4 Apr. 2005: 19.

24. Gary Levin, "Reruns Have Some Viewers Seeing Double," *USA Today* 30 Sept. 1999: 3D; John Dempsey, "Wolf Pack Leads Cable with 'Law & Order'" *Variety* 6 Oct. 2003: 26.

25. Elizabeth Guider, "Franchise Mints Global Coin," *Daily Variety* 18 Nov. 2003, special section 1: A1.

26. Many shows today begin with a teaser, one or two beats that precede the credit sequence, which functions as part of act 1. Some, including *Lost* and *The O.C.* (Fox, 2003–), break act 4 into two shorter segments. However the commercial breaks are distributed, a four-act structure obtains as a norm of the PTS, even in premium cable shows, as Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in Film and Television* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003) 51–55, has shown in an analysis of *The Sopranos*.

In the 2005–06 season there seems to be a new near-universal practice of having more than four segments per hour, with some programs such as *Commander-in-Chief* (ABC, 2005–) having some nonteaer segments of less than five minutes. The 2005–06 season has also revived the convention of the "tag," a short epilogue scene before the closing credits that was standard in the 1970s. It remains to be seen whether inserting extra commercial breaks and segments will force a reconsideration of the notion of a four-act structure, which may obtain regardless of where the breaks are inserted.

27. Indeed, Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999), has convincingly argued that Hollywood movies are better understood as having four rather than three acts, and in *Storytelling in Film and Television* 40–55, she shows that the same four-act pattern applies in television storytelling.

28. Syndicated reruns often rearrange the commercial breaks to add extra ones, doing a kind of violence to the text by betraying the viewer's expectations of forward progress midact and of a pause at act's end.

29. Two industry terms for the end of an act are "act end" and "act out," but neither of these has the strength of connotation that "curtain" has.

30. DiMaggio 90; Brody 126; Rich Whiteside, "The Small Screen: *Alias*," *scri(i)pt* 9.2 (Mar.–Apr. 2003).

31. It is a television industry mantra that the second-act curtain should be the strongest because the commercial break on the half-hour is twice as long as those on the quarter-hours, but I have not noticed a difference in the strength of curtains between acts 1 and 2, both of which are typically quite forceful. My sense, however, is that

third-act curtains are less likely to be as dramatic or surprising. On the second-act "cliffhanger" see DiMaggio 44–45.

32. *Ibid.*, 45.

33. On some shows, such as *Nip/Tuck*, coming up with the theme precedes breaking the story. See Rich Whiteside, "The Small Screen: *Nip/Tuck*—A Slice of the New Americana," *scri(i)pt* 10.1 (Jan.–Feb. 2004): 56–59. The writers on *Judging Amy* claim that they begin with ideas for Gray family stories, then find their themes, and only then conceive of cases for Amy and Maxine. See Whiteside, "The Small Screen: *Judging Amy*."

34. Porter asserts that this is a general feature of television without distinguishing between serials and episodic shows ("The Structure" 141). He then goes on to analyze an episode of *ER*, a serial narrative.

35. This kind of serialization is increasingly common on half-hour shows such as *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004) and *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998–2004), and many of my points in this section would apply to them.

36. In some ways these observations about *Happy Days* apply as well to traditional episodic dramas such as *Baywatch* (syn., 1989–2001), which draw heavily on the repetition of motifs. But some episodic dramas, such as *Magnum P.I.* (CBS, 1980–88) and *The Closer* (TNT, 2005–), combine minor serial arcs with an overriding emphasis on weekly cases. As such, they combine the appeals of sit-com repetition and serialized long-format character engagement. Recent sit-coms such as *Friends* and *Sex and the City* offer a similar mix, with the emphasis more heavily on the serialized mode as the programs matured through their runs.

37. Kozloff calls this a "truism of television criticism" (91).

38. Because television writing advice is aimed at aspiring writers who have not yet made it to staff positions, their focus is on writing spec scripts of episodes. Thus there is scant treatment of long-form storytelling in books and articles on teleplay writing. Ironically, arcs come up more in movie screenwriting manuals than in those for television, though the term most likely originates in TV, not film. See, for example, Linda Seger, *Advanced Screenwriting: Raising Your Script to the Academy Award Level* (Los Angeles: Silman-James P, 2003) 167 ff.

39. LaDuke 133.

40. One hears many reports that the September-to-May season is a thing of the past, but the six networks still debut new episodes of most shows in the fall, conclude them in the spring, and rerun them in the summer. Furthermore, as long as the main sweeps seasons are in the fall, winter, and spring, the networks are likely to save many of their best episodes for these periods. In cases in which high-profile network programs (e.g., *Survivor*, *The O.C.*) have aired during the summer, it has almost always been a stunt to attract attention before the regular season has begun. Such programs tend to fall into the regular schedule once they become fixtures on a network's slate of shows.

Fox continues to premiere many programs in August rather than September because of its contract to air baseball games during prime time in October, which puts its regular programming on hiatus. But in most ways Fox still adheres to the traditional season; the aesthetics of season-long storytelling are not affected by this practice.

41. Rich Whiteside, "The Small Screen: *24*," *scri(i)pt* 9.3 (May–June 2003): 56–59.

42. "Grounded" (8 May 2001).

43. I am not suggesting here that television writers have no motive for narrative experimentation or that commercial factors stifle the desire to try new things. I am also not implying that all narrative

virtues have a source in the networks' profit motives. I am only arguing that the PTS as a group style is unlikely to adopt *as a stable, consistent norm* any commercially motivated innovation that is not also a means of telling stories efficiently or effectively.

44. Karen Hall, "American TV Writing: Musings of a Global Storyteller," *Screenwriting for a Global Market: Selling Your Scripts from Hollywood to Hong Kong*, ed. Andrew Horton (Berkeley: U of California P, 2004) 130.