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Binge-Reviews? The Shifting Temporalities of Contemporary TV Criticism

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When should television criticism happen? The answer used to be pretty simple for critics: reviews were published before a series premiered, with daily or weekly columns commenting on noteworthy storylines in a given series. However, over the past decade, television criticism shifted to mirror the medium, embracing ongoing narratives of contemporary television to critically examine individual shows on a weekly basis. Sites like *Television Without Pity* and critics like Alan Sepinwall took advantage of the open form of online journalism to construct television criticism as an ongoing project—critics and “recappers” would write about every episode of a series, in the process developing strong reader bases and beginning a trend that would extend to other pop culture websites (*The A.V. Club*, *New York Magazine*’s *Vulture*) and even venerable print publications (*The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*). It created what journalist Jaime Weinman has dubbed “the golden age of taking TV seriously,” in conjunction with what has been widely discursively constructed as “a new golden age of television” with the likes of *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, *Game of Thrones*, and other shows generating dozens of episodic reviews each week.^[1]

But while these developments transformed online television criticism into a substantial cultural project, this project has itself faced its fair share of criticism. *The Wire* creator David Simon told Sepinwall in 2012 that “when people try to assess the opening chapters of a book as if they are the book, the efficacy of the exercise is damaged.”^[2] Expanding on an interview with *The New York Times*,

Simon expressed his belief that “if television reviews could be done at the end of each season, they could say more and do more. And I don't just mean they'd just be full of praise. They could even be more critical of things, and say, ‘This show's ambition was X, and it failed to achieve X, and here's why.’ It's only possible to do it at the end, and that's all I'm saying.”^[3] Critic Ken Tucker, meanwhile, argued in 2013 that such episodic reviews are “ultimately a mug's game—there is no way to maintain that kind of writing without becoming either burned out or a hack.”^[4] These concerns ultimately fell on deaf ears from a business perspective: episodic criticism dramatically multiplies the number of online articles published around a given series, driving weekly readership to sites and serving online-journalism business models. This adds a new complication to the question of when exactly television criticism should take place: while online journalism has created a strong market for episodic reviews, should those reviews follow the viewer's weekly experience, or should such critical examinations come after a season has concluded, when there is a “complete” text to be evaluated?

This debate was raging around the same time shifts in the television industry created a critical crossroads. When Netflix announced they would release entire seasons of their own original series on a single day, their appeasement of binge-viewing practices changed the temporality of viewership and raised the question of how critics intended to cover these shows.

When I was assigned to write episodic reviews of *Orange is the New Black* for *The A.V. Club* in the summer of 2013, I was able to see first hand some of the editorial struggles that came with the streaming service's experiment. The site had previously varied its methods for Netflix's series: the first season of *Hemlock Grove* was reviewed as a whole, while *House of Cards* was covered weekly, as though it were a traditional series. Eventually, in light of *Orange is the New Black*'s creative strength, the site posted three different types of reviews in its first and second seasons: a pre-air review written on the basis of four-to-six episodes streamed for critics in advance, a full season review posted five days after the season began streaming, and seven episodic reviews that each covered two episodes, posted on a weekly basis.

The decision reflects how episodic reviews have reshaped the role of television criticism within the space of reception: readers on sites like *The A.V. Club* have been conditioned to come to the site to find a review following an episode, potentially commenting before moving onto the next. This model may appear ephemeral, an of-the-moment reaction tied to weekly distribution, but the dialogue it creates lasts in the site's archives, which readers visit as they binge-watch older

series or catch up on episodes they've missed. Although they may be watching at a faster pace, the role of criticism as an ongoing, concurrent dialogue is still valued. In fact, websites and critics have begun shifting to a model of "binge criticism," with *The New York Times* and *Vulture* posting reviews as quickly as reviewers could write them. *The A.V. Club*, meanwhile, has shifted to daily reviews for Netflix's series. This returns us to the question of whether episodic criticism holds value when the entire season is able to be consumed as a whole: Sepinwall, who wrote about two *Orange is the New Black* episodes per week during season three, concluded with some frustration in his final review that "I don't think I'm going to take this weekly approach again next year, and will simply watch them all and weigh in at the end, however long that takes."^[5]

I am a proponent of episodic criticism: it prompts us to think about how seasons are structured, and how the episodic nature of television remains an organizing principle. It also gives audiences a space to react, offering—from a scholarly perspective—insight into how reception shifts over the course of a series' run. In both writing and reading this form of criticism, I have gained a closer appreciation for the medium, and the culture surrounding it within online communities—I would therefore reject Tucker's dismissal of episodic criticism as hackery.

However, Simon's reproach emphasizes that TV criticism is most meaningful when cumulative, when critics engage the forest as much as the trees. As popular television criticism becomes more focused on micro-level dimensions, it becomes important for critics to also address the macro-level dimensions of television creativity. The future of television criticism depends on economically-valued formats being joined by long-form criticism, a balance that will become more challenging as sites focused on such criticism—ESPN's *Grantland*, Pitchfork's *The Dissolve*—are shuttered, but remain within the grasp of a vibrant critical community that has emerged and matured online in recent years.

Author biography:

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Notes

1. Jaime Weinman, "A Golden Age of Taking TV Seriously," *Maclean's*, September 7, 2010, accessed October 20, 2015, <http://www.macleans.ca/authors/jaime-weinman/a-golden-age-of-taking-tv-seriously/>. ↗
2. Alan Sepinwall, "Interview: David Simon Doesn't Want to Tell You How to Watch 'The Wire,'" *HitFix*, April 6, 2012, accessed October 20, 2015, <http://www.hitfix.com/blogs/whats-alan-watching/posts/interview-david-simon-doesnt-want-to-tell-you-how-to-watch-the-wire>. ↗
3. Jeremy Egner, "The Game Never Ends: David Simon on Wearing 'Wire' Love and the Surprising Usefulness of Twitter," *The New York Times*, April 5, 2012, accessed October 20, 2015, <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/05/the-game-never-ends-david-simon-on-wearing-wire-love-and-the-surprising-usefulness-of-twitter/?src=tp&r=0> ↗
4. Ken Tucker, "The Masculine Mystique," *Bookforum*, June/July/August 2013, accessed October 20, 2015, http://www.bookforum.com/inprint/020_02/11665 ↗
5. Alan Sepinwall, "'Orange is the New Black' Season 3 in Review," *HitFix*, July 21, 2015, accessed October 20, 2015, <http://www.hitfix.com/whats-alan-watching/orange-is-the-new-black-season-3-in-review> ↗

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