

Streaming and the Return of Williams' Flow

"A Never-Ending Stream of Custom-Tailored Pleasure:" Binge-Viewing and Digital Flows

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In 1974, Williams reconfigured how we look at TV programming by emphasizing the "mobile concept of flow" in opposition to the "static concept of distribution" (71). He demonstrated that analyzing "sequences" rather than "discrete units" of TV could help us understand how the medium functions as a cultural institution. Through an extension of Williams' conception, we can see how digital technologies create new kinds of flows, in which viewers gain control over the content of the sequence—but not necessarily over the addictive pull of that content. Binge-viewing, an increasingly dominant mode of TV consumption, represents a shift from a delayed gratification model of narrative relation to one of instant gratification. I posit that we can trace a direct line from Tryon's "on-demand culture" (2013), characterized by instantaneous access, to what we might think of as "binge culture," which thrives on access plus experiential accumulation. If televisual flow "establishes a sense of the world" (Williams 110), then bingeing orders our world in ways that are different from previous media moments.

In describing the addictive nature of televisual flow, Williams writes:

[I]t is a widely if often ruefully admitted experience that many of us find television very difficult to switch off; that again and again, even when we have switched on for a particular 'programme', we find ourselves watching the one after it and the one after that. The way in which the flow is now organised, without definite intervals, in any case encourages this. We can be 'into' something else before we have summoned the energy to get out of the chair. (86-87).

We can easily see how this passage evokes many of the same experiential logics of binge-viewing. Although Williams describes getting sucked into a flow that contains different kinds of programming, it is a similar sense of rhythmic continuity—heightened when bingeing a single show—that produces "the impulse to go on watching" (87). I argue that this impulse is especially prominent with "complex TV" (Mittell), in which intense seriality propels narrative (and viewing) momentum.

In our age of VOD, streaming platforms provide interfaces that encourage the user to design her own flow—increasing what Williams calls the "planned" nature of "an evening's viewing" (85). By analyzing the different models of flow that a given streaming platform allows (e.g. autoplay, suggestions, playlists, etc.), we can see how the operational structures of binge-viewing reflect and extend residual media forms. In a similar methodological gesture, William Uricchio proposes "reposition[ing] flow as a means of sketching out a series of fundamental shifts in the interface between viewer and television, and thus in the viewing experience" (165). He argues that with digital interfaces, "Neither the viewer nor the television programmer dominate the notion of flow. Instead, a new factor enters the equation: the combination of applied metadata

protocols [...] and filters” (176-177). Therefore, it’s important to remember that the apparent user autonomy of digital flows is still subject to the possibilities and limitations of a given technology—as well as the nonhuman logics of algorithms.

Writing in 2004, Uricchio anticipates the telos of VOD: “[T]he envisioned result would seem to be a prime case for flow—a steady stream of programming designed to stay in touch with our changing rhythms and moods, selected and accessible with no effort on our part” (177). He goes on to argue that “[e]xperientially, the new technologies promise to scan huge amounts of programming and in the process package relevant programs into a never-ending stream of custom-tailored pleasure” (178). Uricchio’s prediction might’ve read as somewhat hyperbolic 10 years ago, but the reality of VOD experience in 2014 is not far off from this conception. While VOD allows for an array of viewing patterns, I am particularly interested in the unique role that bingeing plays in a transmedia environment that promotes diverse experiences of flow. I posit that serial TV encourages bingeing through “the reiterated promise of exciting things to come” (Williams 87), linking narrative form and streaming interface in the production of complex digital flows.

Works Cited:

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