Introduction

In the fall of 2001, three espionage-themed dramas debuted on American network television: *The Agency*, *Alias*, and *24*. Notably, all three survived low ratings in their first season to make it to a second, a fairly rare accomplishment for a new series. Surprisingly, the highest rated of the three, CBS’s *The Agency*, was canceled after its second season in 2003, while ABC’s *Alias* garnered a respectable five-season run and Fox’s *24*, which had the least successful first season of the three, lasted for much of the decade as one of television’s most prominent scripted programs. The fate of these three series is an instructive window into the changes in television storytelling emerging in the 2000s, the topic of this book.

*The Agency* was by far the most conventional of the three programs, following an episodic procedural model that CBS had successfully ridden to ratings success with the growing *CSI* franchise and the hit *JAG*, followed by future hit crime procedurals in the 2000s, such as *NCIS*, *Without a Trace*, and *Cold Case*. Long-held assumptions about what makes for successful television would suggest that *The Agency*’s formulaic approach and noncontroversial take on contemporary issues would resonate with audiences (or at least generate high ratings), but the opposite proved to be the case—the CBS series’s viewership declined in its second season to the point that the network canceled it with little fanfare or protest.

The other two spy programs were far more innovative in their narrative approach and, despite the conventional wisdom that popular television must be formulaic, generated sufficient audience interest to justify their longer runs. *Alias* was one of the flashiest programs yet to appear on network television, with high-style visual and sonic flair, elaborate plotting, and a complex mythological backstory that attracted a small but dedicated audience that embraced the series as an heir to the cult phenomenon *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. While *Alias*’s ratings never
matched ABC’s hopes for the high-budget program, the program’s critical praise and high-profile stardom of Jennifer Garner led the struggling network to continue it for five seasons until it found greater success with hits such as *Desperate Housewives* and *Lost* in 2004.

24’s run was even more surprising, given its highly unusual narrative format: each episode features an hour of story time told in “real time” (minus commercial breaks) via split screens, counting clocks, and other self-conscious devices atypical of conventional television. Even the program’s title refers to how the story will be told—in 24 hour-long installments constituting a single day in the life of hero Jack Bauer—rather than anything notable about the story itself. 24’s popularity grew from a weakly rated first season and slowly developed a strong enough following to last eight seasons (and even return to the air in 2014) and consistently rank in the top 30 yearly ratings for much of the decade. 24 particularly benefited from DVD sales and rentals, a relatively new phenomenon for television series in the early 2000s, as viewers who caught up with the first season on home video helped increase second-season ratings by a rare 25%.\(^2\) Taken together, the story of these three spy programs points to a changing landscape of American television, where complex and innovative storytelling can succeed both creatively and economically, while a series with a safe, conventional approach can become a commercial failure.

*Complex TV* is about this shift, exploring how television storytelling has changed and what cultural practices within television technology, industry, and viewership have enabled and encouraged these transformations. Often these changes are framed as television becoming more “literary” or “cinematic,” drawing both prestige and formal vocabulary from these older, more culturally distinguished media; however, we can better understand this shift through careful analysis of television itself rather than holding onto cross-media metaphors of aspiration and legitimation. In the past 15 years, television’s storytelling possibilities and practices have undergone drastic shifts specific to the medium. What was once a risky innovative device, such as subjective narration or jumbled chronology, is now almost a cliché. Where the lines between serial and episode narratives used to be firmly drawn, today such boundaries are blurred. The idea that viewers would want to watch—or rewatch—a television series in strict chronology and collectively document their
discoveries with a group of strangers was once laughable but is now mainstream. Expectations for how viewers watch television, how producers create stories, and how series are distributed have all shifted, leading to a new mode of television storytelling that I term complex TV—this book tells the story of this narrative mode.

The book also chronicles a shift within the field of television studies. Back in 2001, when I first experienced this trio of espionage programs as a viewer, the field was not particularly interested in exploring television’s narrative form. Back then (and still today), the key questions that these three programs would have raised for television scholars concerned issues of cultural representation—after all, these programs appeared at a transformative moment in American history and were perfectly poised to tackle current events. All three series were created, scheduled by their networks, and well into production at the time of the September 11 terrorist attacks, but critics and pundits framed the programs, which debuted in October and November as part of a delayed television season, as direct responses to America’s proclamation of a “War on Terror” following the attacks. One useful line of inquiry would be for television scholars to explore the meanings circulated by these programs, especially in how they articulate norms of American cultural identity, the role of the state, and perceptions of foreign threats in the reconfigured cultural landscape.3

Likewise, these series all offer interesting possibilities for the representational analysis of identity, arguably the most active research area within the field of television scholarship in the 1990s. Alias presents a particularly evocative vision of gender politics, with a nearly omnipotent lead heroine, Sydney Bristow, globetrotting and kicking ass in high style while negotiating her strained relationships with male father figures, potential romantic partners, and a succession of villainous female friends, rivals, and an evil mother returned from her presumed grave. 24 also foregrounds gender norms, although in a more conventional form, with a hypermasculine hero working in the first season to rescue his wife and daughter in jeopardy from what turns out to be a treasonous former lover, a conventional example of a sexualized demonic woman. Both programs also portray a range of ethnic and racial others defined in opposition to their white heroes, charting an array of representational strategies for 21st-century television.4
While I would never suggest that scholars should ignore such questions of representation or nation, this book is not focused on analyzing meanings as conveyed by television narratives. Instead, I aim to explore how such meanings are given expressive possibility through the form of televised stories, analyzing how such content is conveyed via storytelling. One reason why television’s formal narrative properties have been so ignored is the assumption that television storytelling is simplistic. Previous accounts of the medium’s narrative tendencies tend to focus on the centrality of genre formulas, repetitive situations, redundant exposition suited for surfing viewers, and structural constraints based around commercial breaks and rigid schedules. While many contemporary television programs follow such patterns, albeit with more nuance and subtlety than dismissive critiques admit, new developments over the past two decades have led to the rise of a particular model of narrative complexity on mainstream commercial American television, one that is unique to the medium and thus must be examined on its own terms.

As a television scholar in 2001, I felt that the field was not equipped to answer my questions about the successful narrative innovations featured in *Alias* and *24* and the comparative failure of *The Agency’s* conventions. However, in the years since such programs debuted—arguably motivated in large part by earlier examples of complex television series from the 1990s, including *Twin Peaks, Seinfeld, The X-Files, Babylon 5, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, The West Wing*, and *The Sopranos*—television studies has broadened its account of the formal and aesthetic dimensions of television storytelling. This book, along with numerous pieces I have written over the past decade both in formal academic publications and informally on various websites, represents my own attempt to engage with television’s formal dimensions in concert with a broader approach to television as a cultural phenomenon, where form is always in dialogue with cultural contexts, historical formations, and modes of practice. This book strives to offer a model of formal analysis that is not divorced from issues of content, context, and culture but rather is a vital component of those concerns that are more central to media and cultural studies.

The guiding concept for my approach is *poetics*, building on a model that has emerged within literary and film studies. Poetics can be defined
broadly as a focus on the specific ways that texts make meaning, concerned with formal aspects of media more than issues of content or broader cultural forces—in short, the guiding question for poetics looking at a cultural text such as a television series is “how does this text work?” This focus on poetics is different from more common questions of interpretation, which seek to answer “what does this mean?” or of cultural power, asking “how does this impact society?” As suggested earlier, questions about meaning and power are not off-limits within a poetic analysis but rather operate on a different analytic level. Throughout the book, I point to ways that poetics might lead to more nuanced understandings of broader social issues that often concern cultural scholars, but the focus of my analysis is understanding the way television tells stories, not the cultural impact or interpretation of those stories. Looking at storytelling from a poetic approach can be quite similar to narratology, as developed by literary scholars, but I prefer labeling my approach as poetics to distance myself from the structuralist and strictly textual model often found in narratology—although certainly many narratologists and their analytic work has shaped my own thinking, and like poetics, narratology can encompass a wide range of issues and methods. My own approach to poetics is influenced by a model of cultural circulation, in which practices of the television industry, audiences, critics, and creators all work to shape storytelling practices, and thus questions about form are not restricted to the realm of the text but deeply connected to contexts.

The poetic approach has been adopted and adapted by scholars in three crucial ways that have inspired my work. First and foremost, the concept of historical poetics developed by film scholar David Bordwell provides an essential contextual anchor for the study of narrative form. Historical poetics situates formal developments within specific contexts of production, circulation, and reception, where innovations are viewed not as creative breakthroughs by visionary artists but at the nexus of numerous historical forces that work to transform norms and possibilities. Such an analysis examines the formal elements of any medium alongside the historical contexts that helped shape innovations and perpetuate particular norms. If we are to understand how complex television works today, we need to contextualize its development within the
technological, industrial, and reception shifts of the 1990s and 2000s, functioning not as straightforward causes of these formal innovations but certainly as essential factors to allow particular creative strategies to flourish. Throughout the book, I connect creative choices to these crucial contexts both to account for how complex television emerged and to suggest why it may have developed as it has.

Bordwell’s model of historical poetics focuses primarily on the interplay among industry, technology, and the creative choices of filmmakers, downplaying the reception contexts of cinema; instead, he models an approach that others have more broadly termed cognitive poetics to account for how viewers engage with texts. According to this model, we can best understand the process of viewing (or reading literature) by drawing on our knowledge of cognition and perception and then positing how the formal elements in a text might be experienced by such a viewer—while viewers are not reduced to their mental mechanics, the insights of cognitive psychology inform how we imagine the possible ways that viewers engage with film or television. For some facets of viewing practice, such as processes of comprehension and memory, a cognitive poetic approach is well suited to understand how viewers might engage with television serials.

We can complement a cognitive approach by studying actual viewing practices of ongoing serial television consumption, especially for cases that are not easily explicable by cognitive norms, such as fans consuming narrative spoilers or contributing to fan wikis. Thus I draw on Robert Allen’s notion of reader-oriented poetics that fuses literary reader-response criticism with close analysis of televusl form in his landmark study of daytime soap operas; Allen explores the genre’s formal elements as creating potential pleasures, interpretations, and modes of engagement for its viewers, and he cross-references that analysis with a history of the genre’s reception. In looking at the texts of contemporary complex prime time serials, I try to connect their narrative strategies with the broadly circulating reception practices of these popular programs. One of the chief reasons that complex television has become a mainstream trend is the broad availability of online fan sites to facilitate collective discussions and decoding practices among fans, so these sites can provide research resources for accessing and understanding consumption practices among a program’s dedicated and engaged viewership.
Typically, poetics are a form of textual analysis, where the primary (or sometimes sole) object of analysis is the bounded creative work, whether a poem, a film, a novel, or a television program. But as my three modifiers to poetics suggest, we cannot isolate a text from its historical contexts of production and consumption—but also we cannot treat a text as a bounded, clearly defined, stable object of study. Especially (though not exclusively) in the digital era, a television program is suffused within and constituted by an intertextual web that pushes textual boundaries outward, blurring the experiential borders between watching a program and engaging with its paratexts. Similarly, the serial text itself is less of a linear storytelling object than a sprawling library of narrative content that might be consumed via a wide range of practices, sequences, fragments, moments, choices, and repetitions. Media scholars have explored a range of terms and concepts to iterate these fluid and changing modes of textual engagement, including “convergence,” “overflow,” “paratextuality,” and “televisual moments,” all of which have challenged traditional notions of bounded, self-contained texts. Although I refer to such concepts throughout the book, I consider all of these elements of variable engagement as part of serial television textuality itself—texts only come to matter in their consumption, circulation, and proliferation, and thus when I discuss the forms and structures of complex television programs, I treat them as part of a lived cultural practice, not a static, bounded, and fixed creative work. To understand television textuality, we must look beyond what appears on a single screen to explore the range of sites where such texts are constituted, and serially reconstituted, through practices of cultural engagement.

My research within these sites warrants a bit of methodological discussion—I have spent the past decade as a participant-observer among various television-viewing communities centered around complex television series. I have avidly read (and written) episode-by-episode television criticism, read (and written) comments on blogs and discussion forums, referenced (and edited) fan wikis about ongoing series, read (and written) academic analyses of serial narrative, read (and conducted) interviews with television producers, and watched (and rewatched) over a thousand hours of television programming and associated paratexts. I bring this immersive experience as viewer and fan to my analysis and hope to accurately represent experiences that many
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others have in watching these programs and engaging with their para-
texts. Although much of the research material I have gathered was pub-
licly available online or in television programs, I have not documented
every single example with a citation to a fan forum or specific moment
in a program. I have made the choice to be less citational than much
scholarship to emphasize readability and flow; hopefully the account of
television textuality and viewer practices that emerge from this account
is sufficiently convincing not to require hundreds of links to now-
defunct fan forums or specific episodes of television programming.

When doing such research with online fans, it is vital to remember
that the type of die-hard fan who participates in forums, creates remix
videos, or seeks out spoilers is not a typical television viewer. But the
rise of online fandom has made a fan who does embrace such prac-
tices less of a fringe outlier and more one who resides on one end of
a spectrum of engagement. We have little concrete information about
how representative fan practices might be, but one example is instruc-
tive: the active fan wiki Lostpedia reports that since it was set up on
the wikia.com server in 2008, more than 28,000 registered users have
edited the site at least once. This is obviously a small portion of the
millions of viewers who watched Lost every week and the uncounted
more who caught up on DVD or downloads. However, factoring in the
large size of Lostpedia’s assumed nonediting readership, following the
typical pattern of high reader-to-editor ratios at most wikis, plus the
active traffic on numerous other Lost fan sites, it seems fair to imagine
that the practices of this comparatively small number of participatory
viewers represent broader interests that matter to a significant segment
of the program’s viewership. Moreover, it is a highly influential minor-
ity, as reader-oriented poetics can highlight how series address such
participatory viewers directly, which I discuss in depth in chapters 8
and 9. Throughout the book, I assume that the behaviors exhibited by
small groups of active online fans are indicative of broader tendencies
among many less participatory television viewers, on the basis of how
they fit with poetic textual strategies and broader cultural trends, mak-
ing such fans an important and influential minority viewership. There
are certainly many other viewing practices for such programming, and
I do not explore those that I do as a prescriptive norm to be followed—I
hope other critics build on this foundation to offer accounts of other
ways that viewers (and nonviewers) engage with complex television to broaden our understanding of reception practices.

With these poetic approaches as my guide, this book explores the formal dimensions and cultural practices of contemporary television serial storytelling. I do not claim to be comprehensive in my analytic scope, as there are far more programs that I do not consider that might support or contradict some of my claims. I focus exclusively on prime time television, operating on the model of weekly episodes aired on networks or cable channels in seasonal units typically ranging between 10 and 24 episodes—certainly there are newer forms of online serials that might be relevant to the programs I explore here, and the older tradition of daytime soap operas is a major site of television seriality that I discuss in chapter 7. However, I am limiting my focus to the prime time serial because I believe its weekly installments constitute a distinctive narrative mode worth considering in depth, and the wide reach of both prime time cable and network programming still makes it the most culturally prominent form of television. I focus almost exclusively on American television, as I believe its unique industrial norms need to be understood on their own terms; additionally, the global circulation of American television has made many of these programs highly popular and influential around the world, even in the form of American remakes of foreign originals such as *The Office*, *Ugly Betty*, *In Treatment*, and *Homeland*. I do consider a range of examples spanning comedies and dramas, but only scripted programming—while the simultaneous rise of reality television alongside this form of complex television is an interesting and probably related phenomenon, the role of storytelling on reality programming is outside my purview here.

In choosing the programs to analyze, I have decided to focus in depth on a few key texts while referencing a broad corpus, rather than trying to cover every series that might be relevant. This is in large part due to the challenges of studying long-form serial texts—a successful series can run for over 100 hours of programming, and such analysis can require multiple viewings, as well as immersing in broader paratextual circulation and reception practices. Thus much of my analytic focus is aimed at the three series I know best, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Lost*, with more compact analyses of other programs including *Veronica Mars*, *The Sopranos*, *Battlestar Galactica*, * Arrested Development*, * Dexter*, *Six Feet
Under, Curb Your Enthusiasm, Mad Men, and Homeland, among many more. To help understand the examples explored throughout the book, readers can access a library of video clips and images at the NYU Press website for the book. There are numerous other series that might be understood as key examples of complex television or that might counter some of my analytic claims. I hope that some readers use this book to launch their own analyses of such examples to strengthen our understanding of the poetics of contemporary television storytelling, as I believe the concepts and claims I develop here are broadly applicable to a wide range of programs and genres.

My narrative analyses consider the storytelling process whereby a storyworld is conveyed by a television text and constituted in the minds of its viewers. A basic definition of television serial storytelling charts out this terrain: a television serial creates a sustained narrative world, populated by a consistent set of characters who experience a chain of events over time. I am most interested in exploring how this fictional world is told via serial television, highlighting the distinction between the fictional story and its telling via narrative discourse, a core difference established by narrative theorists across media. The book considers different storytelling strategies used by serial television to create engaging storyworlds through a range of complex techniques of narrative discourse, including playing with temporality, constructing ongoing characters, and incorporating transmedia. While the use of visual and aural techniques to convey narrative is an essential part of television, with many complex television programs embracing a broader palette of stylistic techniques to help make them distinctive innovators, I only consider such elements in service of other storytelling goals such as atemporality or character development.

What I try to do in this book is tell the story of television’s changing narrative paradigms. In 2011, one of the year’s most popular new network programs, Revenge, opened its pilot with a party scene that climaxes with a murder. It then flashed back five months to chart how the narrative arrived at this climactic point, a major event that would only be reached in the season’s 15th episode, with the rest of the pilot incorporating voice-over narration and multiple flashbacks to various time frames. What was most remarkable about this pilot was how unremark-
able it was—critics and fans found this style of complex storytelling commonplace and undistinguished, generally classifying the series as a decent “prime time soap” or belittling it as a “guilty pleasure.” But prime time soaps of previous decades, such as Melrose Place, were much more conventional in their narrative techniques, and such complex chronology was reserved for more “prestigious” niche programs such as Six Feet Under or Alias. This device of starting a narrative at a moment of climax and flashing back was fairly uncommon a decade ago—as discussed in chapter 2, it features prominently in the pilots for Alias in 2001 and Veronica Mars in 2004. The first instance that I remember seeing was in 2000, when The West Wing opened its episode “What Kind of Day Has It Been” with a hard-to-comprehend scene that concludes with a moment of tension, with the rest of the episode flashing back to lead up to and explain that climactic moment—I remember being struck by how atypical the device was, especially for such a fairly “realistic” series, but today such a device is practically a cliché. Narrative complexity has suffused television to the degree that Revenge’s temporally fractured narrative technique can go unnoticed; the rest of this book aims to explain how and why.

How to Read This Book

This book was written and published serially. We normally think of a scholarly manuscript as emerging as a singular, bound statement all at once, but most humanities research is a long-term, ongoing process in which pieces emerge first in conversations, classrooms, conference presentations, blog postings, and stand-alone articles or book chapters. Seeds of this project were planted in my first book, especially in discussing how Soap reworked narrative form as an innovative serial sitcom of the 1970s. Some core ideas of Complex TV first got public airing in 2004 at a small colloquium presentation at Middlebury College, where feedback from colleagues transformed it significantly. Since that time, I have presented and published versions of these ideas numerous times, each time gathering feedback to (hopefully) strengthen and nuance my arguments; additionally, a few of my terms and analyses have been picked up by other scholars, making “narrative complexity” and...
“forensic fandom” seem like less novel concepts (at least to me) than on their first appearances. I have built on other scholars’ work on such issues, using them to bolster my ideas and to provide additional wrinkles, and in some cases I leave topics to others who have covered similar ground better than I could have. On top of this more typical model of serial release and revision, I published a draft online in serialized installments over a 15-month period in 2012–2013 via MediaCommons Press; the online version serves as the penultimate draft of the final book, which was significantly improved in reaction to readers’ commentary and criticisms. Making the serial facets of the book’s own writing and publication process visible calls attention to the ways that all scholarship is written in dialogic installments over time, through multiple versions and iterations, less like an episodic lecture than a serialized conversation. Much like serial television itself, such ongoing scholarship is written for a variety of readers—those who are casually dropping in on the topic, those who have been actively participating in the conversation for years, and a range in between. I hope there is something interesting to discover here for every type of reader, no matter where you fall on that spectrum.

Although the print version of this book proceeds in a linear fashion, page after page, it is not essential to read it that way. Chapter 1 should be read next, as it outlines key ideas and terms running throughout the book by explaining what narrative complexity is and how it fits into the contemporary television context. However, the rest of the chapters can be read in any order; while I have provided a sequence that can be followed, none of the chapters depend on having read the previous chapters beyond the first two. The final chapter on “ends” is in some ways just another topic but also is the most reflexive discussion of the book itself, making an appropriately meta-conclusion. Although together the chapters do tell the story of complex television, they are more episodic and self-contained than the cumulative sequential storyworlds they analyze—so feel free to chart your own path through chapters, eschewing chronology for topicality. Each chapter is far from a definitive and comprehensive take on its topic, as each could easily serve as the launching point for its own entire book; instead, treat each chapter as a probe that opens up avenues for future exploration. The following brief recaps preview each installment so you can jump ahead if you are so inclined, or feel free to explore on your own unspoiled by what is to come.
Beginnings

Although long-form television serials are notably marked by their potentially eternal narrative middles, they all must start somewhere; this chapter explores how serials are launched with television pilots, considering the core functions of pilots as setting up the direction of a serial’s narrative thrust, teaching viewers how to watch the ongoing narrative, and inspiring them to commit to ongoing serialized consumption. The chapter uses a detailed case study of the Veronica Mars pilot to demonstrate how serials establish intrinsic norms for ongoing narratives, with references to strategies found in pilots of Twin Peaks, Arrested Development, Alias, Awake, How I Met Your Mother, Pushing Daisies, and Terriers.

Authorship

Contemporary television has fostered a unique form of creative authorship, establishing the role of “showrunner” within its production contexts. This chapter discusses the technologically enabled paratexts of podcasts, making-of documentaries, DVD commentaries, Twitter feeds, and blogs that have enabled television creators to speak directly to viewers, and it discusses how such paratexts have helped constitute star showrunners such as Buffy’s Joss Whedon, Community’s Dan Harmon, and Lost’s team of Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse. In exploring the textual and paratextual presence of showrunners, I discuss theories of authorship and posit that viewers rely on an inferred author function to make sense of contemporary television serials.

Characters

This chapter considers how serial characters work within the constraints of the television medium and the limits of presenting character change over time, considering how The Sopranos, Angel, Lost, Game of Thrones, and Dexter create compelling, complex characters. Many complex serials have embraced antiheroes as lead characters, using the long-form narrative structure to layer psychological traits and key elements of backstory. This chapter uses the case study of Breaking Bad and its
antihero protagonist to explore how serial dramas construct changing characters with different approaches to relationships, flashbacks, memory, narration, and performance.

**Comprehension**

One of the challenges of a long-form serial narrative is maintaining viewer comprehension throughout a variety of viewing practices, whether it is weekly and seasonal installments through broadcast schedules or the more variable patterns afforded by DVDs, online viewing, and DVRs. This chapter builds on cognitive theories of narrative comprehension to consider how television serials have created methods to both maximize understanding and play with knowledge differentials between characters and viewers in programs including *Dexter* and *Veronica Mars*. I focus on issues of viewer memory as addressed both within the core narrative text and in associated paratexts, considering the varying ways programs trigger memories and exploit viewers’ fading memories to create unusual surprises in programs such as *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost*. The chapter also analyzes different approaches to suspense, surprise, anticipation, and curiosity that have emerged for long-form serial television and how viewers thwart such narrative pleasures through spoilers. Finally, it concludes with a detailed account of the serial viewer’s activity in watching an episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

**Evaluation**

Television studies, as forged by the influence of cultural studies, has been loath to include critical evaluation in its toolbox, as television’s own spot on the receiving end of numerous aesthetic condemnations has pushed evaluative criticism off the field’s agenda. In this chapter, I explore a model of contextualized evaluation that does not re-create universal aesthetic values but rather looks at how a series can define its own terms and parameters of evaluation and how television scholars might productively engage with questions of value. Using the examples of *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Mad Men*, all of which have been hailed by critics as among the greatest television series in the medium’s history, I discuss how we can enter into medium-specific debates over value.
without re-creating a canon or exclusionary critical practices, considering how complexity can function as an aesthetic asset in multiple ways.

**Serial Melodrama**

This chapter explores the role of melodrama within contemporary serial narratives, starting with the soap opera’s debatable connection to this mode of storytelling. By separating out the narrative norms of soap operas from the emotional appeals of melodrama, I argue that soaps’ textual form is less vital to prime time serials than is the discursive history linking seriality to the soap genre for decades. Instead, I consider how the emotional responses triggered by serial melodrama help forge the mixed-gender appeal of narratively complex series, with programs such as *Veronica Mars, Friday Night Lights, Lost, The Good Wife*, and *The Wire* playing with such conventions to complicate well-established assumptions about genre categories and their gendered appeals.

**Orienting Paratexts**

Along with shifts in the television industry and technologies, viewer practices have adapted to the digital era with new developments in how people consume narrative television. This chapter explores the range of paratexts that have emerged to help viewers make sense of complex television’s temporality, characters, plot, and spatial orientation, spanning a wide range of programs from *St. Elsewhere* to *Game of Thrones*. Through a detailed account of the fan wiki Lostpedia, I explore the complexity of how people watch television and foreground notions of forensic fandom and drillability as modes of television spectatorship.

**Transmedia Storytelling**

As television series have become more complex in their narrative strategies, television itself has expanded its scope across a number of screens and platforms, complicating notions of medium specificity at the very same time that television seems to have established a clearer sense of distinct narrative form. This chapter explores how television narratives are expanded and complicated through transmedia extensions,
including videogames, novelizations, websites, online video, and alternate reality games. With specific analyses of transmedia strategies for *Lost* and *Breaking Bad*, I consider how television’s transmedia storytelling is grappling with issues of canonicity and audience segmentation, how transmedia reframes viewer expectations for the core television serial, and what transmedia possibilities might look like going forward.

*Ends*

American commercial television differs from much of the world in how it privileges a narrative model in which a successful series never ends, with a final episode typically regarded as a sign of commercial failure and/or creative exhaustion, and often programs end by abrupt cancellation more than planned conclusion. In the past decade, more series have planned their conclusions, creating a set of precedents for serial endings that variously embrace ambiguity, circularity, reflexivity, and finality. This chapter looks at the concluding seasons and episodes of *Lost*, *The Wire*, and *The Sopranos* as exemplars of both narrative strategies and the divergent viewer and critic reactions triggered by various finales. The book concludes by discussing notions of “ends” in terms of the goals of serial criticism using case studies from *Homeland* and *Breaking Bad*, infusing some questions of politics back into the book’s poetic approach. Finally, it reflects on the book’s own seriality in its online prepublication.

While these chapters offer a broad span of topics and examples of the complex television phenomenon, I make no claims toward comprehensiveness—there are many more series, historical connections, viewer practices, and analytic angles to be explored. I hope this book offers a solid understanding of how we might think about contemporary television storytelling on its own terms, rather than in the language of literature or film, and provides a critical vocabulary for both television scholars and viewers to understand the ongoing shifts in what remains our most influential and popular storytelling medium.