CONSUMING Pleasures

Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera

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Consuming Pleasures

To Patrick and Nicolas,
Jack Hayward, and Helen Poole

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Introduction

> *You'd think a hospital would know what protein is. I ask for protein and they give me corn flakes. No wonder everybody's sick.*
> —*Palmer Cortlandt,* All My Children

IN THE LINES just quoted, soap patriarch Palmer Cortlandt succinctly argues one side of the continued debate over the function of mass culture. This rather outdated view asserts that the culture industry (like the hospital café) supplies its own choice of "food" to the starving masses, ignoring audience needs and opinions completely. Forced to fill up on empty calories, the viewer consequently suffers (like Palmer's daughter Nina, for whom he seeks the protein) from diabetes. This inability to control blood sugar levels is a suggestive metaphor, one echoing arguments that, beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing through our own, castigate producers of mass culture for force-feeding an empty or even dangerous textual "diet" to a voiceless, passive audience.

In their work on the culture industry, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer anticipate Palmer in arguing that "the culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. . . . the diner must be satisfied with the menu" (139). But it is important to acknowledge the limitations of such metaphors. Serials, like other popular texts, require active participation on the part of consumers. At the very least, a series of choices must be made: which serial to read or view, with whom, where, while doing what. Just as Palmer's legendary impatience leads him to ignore the hospital's complex nutritional regimen as well as the fact that cornflakes were not his only choice, so disdain for mass culture both produces and results from ignorance of the complexity of viewer/text relations.

This study of the serial genre as it has developed across time and technologies is intended to increase understanding of these relations. Since the inception of mass-market culture in the nineteenth century, producers have relied on the serial form to consolidate and hold a mass audience, thus enabling the profits that make new technologies (cheap mass-produced books,

color printing in newspapers, film, radio, television) viable in a market economy. The advantages of the form for producers are obvious: it essentially advertises itself, providing ever-increasing profits. Charles Dickens perhaps captured the unique attributes of the serial best when he assured his readers, in the conclusion to part 10 of the *Pickwick Papers*, that "we shall keep perpetually going on beginning again, regularly." The complex temporal involutions of this sentence parallel serialization's complex author/audience relations. The choice of subject, "we" rather than "I," reflects the intimate relation of serial readers with their texts. "Perpetually," splitting the verb from its double gerund, stresses the time- and loss-denying temporality of serials as do the gerunds themselves—"going on" enforcing continuity, "beginning again" the eternal rebirth of the serial, and their doubling signaling the inexhaustibility of the text, its celebration of excess. Finally, "regularly" appends, as if in afterthought; in fact it is perhaps the most essential signifier in the statement, since it offers a crucial reassurance. Habit, as any serial producer knows, is perhaps the most important factor in holding an audience.

Roger Hagedorn has theorized, in his article "Technology and Economic Exploitation: The Serial as a Form of Narrative Presentation," that "since the nineteenth century the serial has been a dominant mode of narrative presentation in Western culture—if not in fact the dominant mode" (5). The role of the serial in the last two centuries, Hagedorn argues further, has been that as new media appear, they "have consistently turned to the serial form of narrative presentation precisely in order to cultivate a dependable audience of consumers." Each of the texts in this study supports Hagedorn's point: serialized novels, comic strips, and soap operas all appeared at or near the inception of their respective medium, and all were used explicitly to increase its consumption. Using the serial in this way makes excellent economic sense from a capitalist point of view: "testing" a target audience with a few episodes of a new serial allows producers to expend relatively small amounts of capital and raw materials while gaining large profits from mass sales.

On the other hand, such an argument allows little room for the audience. In Hagedorn's model, serial readers become simply a captive audience passively lured to a form suited to a society that "perpetually defers desire in order to promote continued consumption"; the serial thus "emerges as an ideal form of narrative presentation under capitalism" (12). Although this account is entirely accurate as far as it goes, it silences half of the story. There is no space here for the very real pleasures and satisfactions of audiences; the practices surrounding consumption of serial texts; the functions such texts may serve for the individual and for the community. All of these deserve attention, and the central focus of this study is an investigation of the ways serial audiences use their texts and the processes of collaborative interpretation, prediction, metacommentary, and creation that engage them.

Hagedorn's short article provides compelling though incipient formulations for linking production context and the serial form; however, the only study that treats serials and audiences with the complexity they deserve is Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund's *The Victorian Serial*. No recent full-length study links reincarnations of the serial across time and technology, a strange absence given that the genre's mass appeal has been repeatedly confirmed since Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* mobilized a mass market for fiction in 1836. The lure of stories told part by part has been known since Scheherazade, but serialization took on new importance after industrialization made mass marketing of fiction possible. Proving itself immensely effective as a means of catching and keeping audiences, serialization was adapted for other fictional genres and eventually crossed media boundaries. Just a few examples are the part-issued domestic novels, mysteries, and detective fiction of the nineteenth century; the comic strips, "chapter-plays" or serialized silent films, and radio mysteries of the early twentieth; and the soap operas, movie series, part-issued novels (most recently Stephen King's best-selling six-part *Green Mile*, with its introductory homage to Dickens), television miniseries, MTV "real world" series, interactive on-line soaps, and AT&T and Taster's Choice television ads of the contemporary scene. By turning commercials into serial episodes, producers of the last two examples highlight a crucial connection between economics and serialization. For producers, the advantage of serialization is that it essentially creates the demand it then feeds: the desire to find out "what happens next" can only be satisfied by buying, listening to, or viewing the next installment. And as discussed throughout this study, methods of maximizing serial profits have been progressively refined as industrial capitalism developed.

Even from this brief survey of serial incarnations, it will be clear that in addition to the common cultural practices of audiences there are certain properties peculiar to serials, whether in prose, cartoon, television, or any other medium. A serial is, by definition, an ongoing narrative released in successive parts. In addition to these defining qualities, serial narratives share elements that might be termed, after Wittgenstein, "family resemblances." These include refusal of closure; intertwined subplots; large casts of characters (incorporating a diverse range of age, gender, class, and, increasingly, race representation to attract a similarly diverse audience); interaction with current political, social, or cultural issues; dependence on profit; and acknowledgment of audience response (this has become increasingly explicit, even institutionalized within the form, over time).

The texts treated in this study have been chosen, with great difficulty and to the exclusion of numberless equally important serial subspecies and texts, for two reasons: each is important in the history of serial development, and crucial evidence of audience response to each has been preserved. The

texts are Charles Dickens's novel *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65), Milton Caniff's newspaper comic strip *Terry and the Pirates* (1934-46), and the soap operas *All My Children* (1970—) and *One Life to Live* (1968—). All clearly manifest the formal characteristics and family resemblances outlined above. All, of course, postpone narrative resolution, for increasing numbers of years as the genre develops; the soap opera might be called the apotheosis of the form in that the text predicates itself on the impossibility of closure. All intertwine multiple subplots (often derived from subgenres as different as romance, adventure, mystery, and crime, again to attract wide audiences). All feature large casts of characters, of seventy or more depending on the serial's scope and duration. All incorporate current social issues, for example the Poor Laws, class displacement, and alcoholism for Dickens; the Sino-Japanese conflict and the US entry into World War II for *Terry*; and AIDS, adoption laws, environmentalism, abortion, and so on for the soap operas. All incorporate audience response in ways increasingly institutionalized within the production process.

As we shall see, these formal qualities tend to encourage particular ways of reading. Intertwined subplots work to unite disparate characters, overcoming differences of class, race, and gender and forging communities within the text that echo the reading communities outside it. Dramatic plot reversals retrospectively rewrite months of narrative, forcing audiences to acknowledge that all perspectives are partial, colored by place and context, and that we must seek knowledge of all points of view before making judgments. Serials also share distinctive (and much derided) narrative tropes: sudden returns from the dead, doubles, long-lost relatives, marginal or grotesque characters, fatal illness, dramatic accidents, romantic triangles, grim secrets, dramatic character transformations. But as will be obvious, none of these are unique to serial fiction; they have roots going back to Greek tragedy and the Homeric epic, among other genres, and recur throughout literary history. The genre is not constituted, then, by purely formal and thematic considerations. Rather, these considerations are inseparable from the unique reading practices and interpretative tactics developed by audiences, practices that include collaborative, active reading; interpretation; prediction; occasional rewriting or creation of new subplots; attempts to influence textual production; and, increasingly often, a degree of success in those attempts.

Because I focus on the (generally neglected) issue of audience and on the serial genre across a wide span of time and space, I am forced to give short shrift to other, equally important issues of serialization: the mechanics of writing against time and to fill a fixed amount of space, the additions and deletions made in consequence of this constraint, the creative and economic pressures on serial authors, the complex negotiations between serial authors

and their publishers, and the ways texts are shaped as a result of the serial mode of production. Unlike the questions addressed in the present study, however, these issues have already received considerable attention from scholars of nineteenth-century literature in particular. Readers interested in questions of form and authorship as influenced by serial production will do well to consult the numerous excellent studies of serial composition already available; these include the classic general investigations such as John Sutherland's *Victorian Novelists and Publishers*, J. Don Vann's *Victorian Novels in Serial*, and Norman N. Feltes's *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels*, as well as single-author investigations such as Kathleen Tillotson and John Butt's *Dickens at Work*, Robert Patten's *Charles Dickens and his Publishers*, Edgar Harden's *The Emergence of Thackeray's Serial Fiction*, and Mary Hamer's *Writing by Numbers: Trollope's Serial Fiction*.

Throughout this study, I will emphasize the continuity, across immense differences of cultural context and media, of audience interaction with serial fictions. In their otherwise invaluable contextualization of the reading of Victorian serials, Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund comment that "we no longer live in the age of the literary serial" (14). This is true only if we feel compelled to emphasize the adjective here. True, the function of literature for nineteenth-century society—as social cement, as focus of discourse—is no longer fulfilled by printed texts. But literature has been replaced by television and to some extent film. In their final section on the value of teaching nineteenth-century texts serially (which, they point out, helps forge reading communities in the classroom, among many other advantages), Hughes and Lund do briefly acknowledge that the "literary serial" has been replaced in the twentieth century by soap operas, movie sequels, and so on, but then virtually dismiss these forms by noting, "Although we would not want to champion all the movie and radio serials in the first half of this century, or the television soap operas, series, miniseries and sequels of the second half, such popular entertainment has prepared students to engage more significant works of literature as serials" (277). Although reimagining the twentieth-century popular serial as mere preparation for reading "real" (literary) serials is an interesting approach, it is not a particularly useful one. Like many academics, Hughes and Lund seem to have allowed their relative ignorance of such popular texts to blind them to any "significance" that may exist. In this they echo only too closely the one-hundred-and-sixty-odd-year history of critical denigration of serial fiction—a history they elucidate brilliantly in their defense of the Victorian serial, making this critical myopia more than usually surprising.

Before turning to investigate serial audiences, a brief history of this critical response will be useful. Although Frankfurt School theorists such as

Adorno and Horkheimer are perhaps the most notorious critics of the culture industry, they are hardly unique in their anxiety over the potentially coercive or mind-numbing effects of mass culture on its audience. Since its inception in the nineteenth century, serialized fiction—like most mass culture—has been assumed to control its audience in insidious and dangerous ways, and has therefore been viewed with suspicion, disdain, and even fear; such reactions become common threads linking denunciations impelled by very different historical, cultural, and political motivations. An early example is this sermon delivered at Rugby chapel in November 1837 (during the run of the wildly popular *The Pickwick Papers*), in which Thomas Arnold warns his boys against the evil influence of their new obsession:

> The works of amusement published only a very few years since were comparatively few in number; they were less exciting, and therefore less attractive; they were dearer, and therefore less accessible; and, not being published periodically, they did not occupy the mind for so long a time, nor keep alive so constant an expectation; nor, by this dwelling upon the mind, and distilling themselves into it, as it were, drop by drop, did they possess it so largely, colouring in many instances, its very language and affording frequent matter for conversation. . . . Great and grievous as is the evil, it is peculiarly hard to find the remedy for it. . . . they are not wicked books for the most part; they are of that class which cannot actually be prohibited; nor can it be pretended that there is sin in reading them. They are not the more wicked for being published so cheap, and at regular intervals; but yet these two circumstances make them so peculiarly injurious.[1]

For Arnold, reading in its serial manifestation is explicitly compared to a laudanum-like drug, one distilled drop by drop into the brain. It is this slow, steady, addictive process of textual progression, not the reading itself, which is perceived as particularly insidious. Clearly, the doctor would indeed ban these books if he could.[2]

In spite of the disdain with which novels were initially greeted, the nineteenth century has been retrospectively mythologized as a time of near-idyllic union of high and low culture. Dickens, among other popular artists, has been perceived as both epitomizing and shattering this perfect moment. Q.D. Leavis, in her *Fiction and the Reading Public*, takes the latter view, attributing the genesis of a cultural falling off to the fact that "the new kind of fiction flourished because it was written for a new, naive public, not that of the old circulating libraries or that could afford to buy Scott but for the shopkeeper and the working man. . . .It is being catered for by a new kind of novelist. The peculiarity of Dickens, as any one who runs a critical eye over a novel or two of his can see, is that his originality is confined to recapturing a child's outlook on the grown-up world, emotionally he is not only uneducated but

also immature" (156). Here the mass audience becomes equated not with women as it does so often (as Andreas Huyssens, among many others, has demonstrated) but with the undereducated and immature. This argument is particularly difficult to challenge since Leavis has set it up in such a way that anyone who disagrees becomes one without a "critical eye"—and uneducated and immature to boot.

Arnold's terror of the addictive effects of serial fiction reasserts itself, only slightly transformed, among intellectuals and cultural critics of the twentieth century, most notably with the Frankfurt School's reaction to mass fiction but also with the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who saw peril in serial novels' sheer proliferation as well as in their possible effects on readers. Ironically Gramsci, whose focus on lived cultural practices and the hegemonic process is a crucial forerunner of contemporary cultural studies, was strongly critical of the serial novel. Gramsci admits that early nineteenth-century serializers such as Eugene Sue, Alexandre Dumas, and George Sand still produced "literature"; presumably Dickens also would have been included in this select group. But he sees serial quality as declining over the course of the century, until by the 1900s, when the "modern serial novel begins," it "nearly always has a most banal form and a stupid content. . . .Now it is a lachrymose literature only suitable for stupefying the women, girls and youngsters who feed on it. It is also often a source of corruption. . . .It may perhaps have influenced the increase in crime among adolescent loafers. . . .In short, the serial novel has become a rather nauseating commodity (36)." [3]

Again we see the serial audience equated with both femininity and immaturity, and the texts themselves with pernicious social influences. But Gramsci implicitly attributes the decline in serial standards to the novels' mode of production, rather than to the mode of consumption that seemed to terrify Arnold, claiming (though without references or examples) that "the great majority of its suppliers no longer write their own works. They distribute 'plots' to the poor devils who have to extract an infinite number of chapters from them." This process, resembling production-line manufacture of fiction, seems especially suspect to Gramsci because it manifests the absence of the creative *individual*, the modernist artist working in isolation. And he goes on to assign responsibility for this decline across the entire cultural apparatus: to the audience, "which often has abominable tastes"; to "the authors, who for speculation open shops for novels as one would open a haberdasher's"; and to "the newspaper editors, full of prejudices and eager to sell their papers at any cost." Gramsci's solution to this shift in fiction production is a fascinating one. He proposes to convince talented young authors, presumably writing "mediocre and self-styled literary novels" in garrets like caricatures of alienated modernists, to produce popular novels

instead. And to enable this result, Gramsci (having just thoroughly panned the form) urges that the prejudice against serials be done away with since "this prejudice has consigned the people, who are not always in a position to control the situation, into the hands of speculators whose activity corrupts" (36).

The goals here are essential: Gramsci intends to map popular taste, relate mode of production to content produced, and explore relations between dominant and subaltern cultural forms in dynamic terms as they act upon each other historically, thereby shedding light on new possibilities for the manufacture and function of culture. His understanding of the complex and reciprocal influences of author, audience and producer accords well with his development of hegemony as shaped by both subordinant and dominant groups. However, the ultimate directive is disturbing. Rather than find out directly from readers of this "nauseating commodity" what pleasures or uses they derive from it, Gramsci draws on his own disgust to assume that an undifferentiated "people" simply have "abominable tastes." His solution to the problem he has himself created is in some senses a progressive but in others a reactionary one: he seeks to synthesize cultural dichotomies by proposing that those who still hold to modernism's neoromantic ideal of the struggling, misunderstood, and unpopular artist should be trained to produce a (presumably transformative?) new type of serial for the masses. Although this solution might get authors out of their garrets, it leaves audiences right where they started: as passive victims, forced by the invisible process of hegemonic "secured consent" to consume products developed for them by a dominant culture. But as Raymond Williams (1977) points out in discussing Gramsci's theory of hegemony, however thoroughly a dominant system of "lived identities and relationships" (110) may work itself into our lives, it can never be all encompassing. He stresses that "*no mode of production and therefore no dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention*" (125, author's emphasis). Therefore, "the full range of human practice" finds expression in other forms of culture outside the dominant: what Williams has described as residual and emergent forms. This book will explore one aspect of emergent culture: the resistant readings of audiences of mass culture, and the effect of these readings on producers of texts.

Gramsci's fears are echoed by a very different kind of critic in 1950s America—this time without any desire to transform the mode of production of mass culture but rather with the goal of censoring it out of existence. Comic censorship was, of course, only one aspect of the wider Cold War policing of the culture industry. In fact, comics scholar Thomas Inge has dubbed its leading crusader, Dr. Fredric Wertham (whose *Seduction of the Innocent* was published in 1953), "the 'Joe McCarthy' of the comic book

purge" (117-18). In the second chapter of this book, I discuss the crusade against comics led by Wertham but espoused by parents, educators, psychologists, and other "authorities" newly concerned about the effects of mass media on audiences. Morality campaigns insisting on the evil effects of comics lobbied publishers as well as local and national governments; in Britain, anticomic activism eventually led to an act of Parliament making publication or distribution of (often U.S. produced and distributed) "horror comics" illegal. In the United States, the movement spearheaded by Wertham sought similar legislation. Having already succeeded in forcing newspaper strips to stifle experimentation lest they be censored, the movement next turned to comic books and was successful to the extent that twenty-four of the twenty-nine extant crime-comic publishers folded, while ethnic images simply disappeared from the strips (Hardy and Stern, 9).

More recently, soap operas have been derided as a mindless and archetypal "female" narrative form; and disturbingly, even feminist studies of soaps and other "women's genres" have contributed to this disdain. Tania Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* provides perhaps the clearest example of the extent to which our desire, as academic feminists, to move beyond isolating theorization to achieve real social change can produce a paradoxical inability to respect the "objects" of our efforts, in this case female consumers of mass culture. After acknowledging that soap operas address real social needs (for community, among other things), Modleski closes her third chapter, "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas," with a call for action: "As feminists, we have a responsibility to devise ways of meeting these needs that are more creative, honest, and interesting than the ones mass culture has supplied. Otherwise, the search for tomorrow threatens to go on, endlessly" (108). And similar directives are articulated in Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, in other ways an enormously valuable text that spearheaded the movement toward ethnographies of mass-cultural consumers. Toward the end of the book, Radway sounds *her* call for action, but in so doing she distances academic feminists from romance readers, stating, for example, that "I think we as feminists might help this change [in patriarchal power relations] along by first learning to recognize that romance reading originates in very real dissatisfaction and embodies a valid, if limited, protest" (220). The major difficulty in otherwise exemplary early studies such as Modleski's or Radway's is their assumption of greater insight than can be justified into the reasons underlying consumption of mass texts. Before drawing conclusions, we must learn from audiences themselves how they use their texts—what contexts they read or watch in; how they themselves perceive the connection of content, subject matter, characters, or visual techniques to