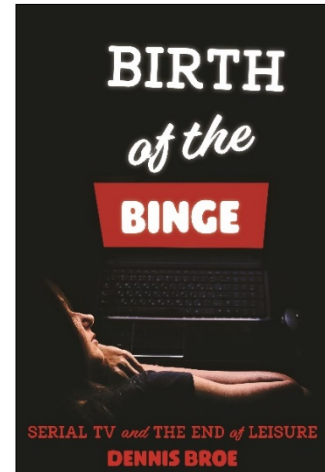


Dennis Broe, **Birth of the Binge: Serial TV and the End of Leisure**, Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2019, 297 pp., \$34.99 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Frederick Wasser
Brooklyn College – CUNY, USA

Dennis Broe has written a book that television studies has been waiting for. Other important books have recently described and analyzed the various sea changes in the current century regarding television usage. These TV studies parallel a separate literature about the stresses of everyday life as the dominant marketplace ideology becomes ever more ruthless and powerful. The combination of the two literatures has been elusive. Broe has the ambition to combine the two by linking TV usage with the deterioration of the work-leisure balance as is signified in his subtitle. He has written a provocative and useful book and has renewed an approach to the sociology of media.



He begins by describing increasing stresses on our leisure hours, referring to Ursula Huws (2014) and other social theorists about the demise of predictable free time and how work has invaded all parts of day (and night). Gaming and various social media activities are now extensions of and further exercises for work skills. Seventy years ago, the Frankfurt school and other writers analyzed the reflection of repetitious rhythms of manufacturing labor in the factory formulas of Hollywood movies. Today, the relation is even more insidious as television, and other screen activities, determine a time flow that blurs the distinction between commercial pursuits and free play. Broe relies on the French social philosopher Bernard Stiegler to argue that this “media time flow” monetizes the entire cycle of everyday life. In chapter two Broe goes on to illustrate this insidious monetization with scenes from TV shows. There are real estate shenanigans in *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009–present) and the partially autistic obsessions of Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007–2019). Sheldon’s obsessions inappropriately focus on his career throughout the day and night. Both shows tend to normalize commercial and career addictions in what are otherwise progressive celebrations of sexual inclusion and intellectual achievement. Other shows such as *Silicon Valley* (HBO, 2014–present) more directly depict the commercial assault on free time and play.

TV, cable, and streaming video on demand have all been moving toward telling narratives that span the entire season (or several seasons) in a series of episodes. To prepare the groundwork for the investigation of “serial TV” and media time flow, Broe reviews the emergence of seriality in older preelectronic forms such as 19th-century literature and even painting. Charles Dickens’ novels are the literary example, and Claude Monet’s series of paintings of wheat stacks are the visual example. Broe reminds us that Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of eternal return and Jean-Paul Sartre’s condemnation of seriality as a performance of capitalist mundanity are also relevant. After this review of an earlier period, Broe distills the various formal tendencies of telling a continuous story in a series of episodes. These include increased audience interaction and the willingness to combine different genres and to support

multiple plots and changing timeframes, which in turn enables a greater reflexivity and an overarching metanarrative.

It is at this point that I anticipated Broe returning to and amplifying his thesis about the resonance between changes in the work-leisure balance in the global digitized economy and the rise in binge watching TV series. But Broe takes a different tack and uses the rest of the book to assess the liberating potential of serial television narratives.

The final two chapters concentrate on TV series that were produced by writers resisting the omnipresence of marketplace values and the ideology of the hyperindustrial moment. Broe suggests that seriality has increased the power of the "show runner" (typically a person who has both producing and creative responsibilities for the show) as opposed to the network or corporate sponsor. The book does point to show runners who have already earned prestige in the film world ranging from David Lynch to Martin Scorsese as well as Joss Whedon and J. J. Abrams, who have accumulated prestige in their career switchbacks between producing TV and directing feature films. He also mentions the sheer economic power of successful show runners such as Shonda Rhimes. He also hints that the intense demands of producing so many hours of programming may dissuade network executives from micromanaging the creative personnel. These observations do not fully explain how serial show runners resist network pressure better than classic TV-era producers.

Indeed, his detailed description of Whedon and Abrams' experiences leaves the question of successful resistance in doubt. He labels Whedon as a feminist, noting his creation of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as the screenwriter of the 1992 movie and as the producer/writer of the TV series (WB, 1997–2001). Whedon continued these themes by breaking down gender roles in *Firefly* (Fox, 2002) and showing the dysfunctional nature of patriarchy in *Dollhouse* (Fox, 2009–2010). Broe feels that *Dollhouse* especially was responding to an increasingly deteriorating situation as American culture became more militaristic and as Internet pornography expanded globally. Although these shows attracted loyal viewers, Fox pressured Whedon and canceled both shows before the contracted run was fulfilled. Broe notes that Fox's decision to show episodes in a different order than Whedon intended undermined his societal critique. Abrams' resistance in television was directed at militarization. He created *Revolution* (NBC, 2012–2014), and *Believe* (NBC, 2014). The book also mentions *11.22.63* (Hulu, 2016) although Abrams' only credit there was as executive producer. Again there is a pattern of Abrams moving toward a deeper social critique only to have NBC cancel the two series before their contracted ends.

Broe's ambition reminds me of Dallas Smythe's (1994) "audience as commodity" argument. Formulated during the classic period of commercial broadcasting, Smythe wrote that because audience power is produced and sold to advertisers, the audience is a commodity and therefore time used to produce audience power (i.e., the time watching commercial broadcasting) is work time (pp. 268–269). Smythe used the word "blindspot" in the essay's title since his major goal was to convince scholars that the primary function was this commodification of the audience and not the ideological messages that were embedded in various TV show storylines. Scholars who engaged in isolating and analyzing narrative messages were turning a blind eye to TV's social function. Is this the blindspot of Broe's chapters on Whedon and Abrams?

Broe's book prompts us to ask how the serialization of television and the rise of binge watching have amplified the monetization of audience time and its linkage to the increasing stress of gig work. Smythe's (1994) thesis warns us not to spend analytical energy on whether the stories themselves endorse or resist the dominant ideology. Of course Smythe did not get the chance to extend his argument to today's Internet, but some of the literature on the attention economy acknowledge his thesis and work directly from his premises (see for example, Fuchs [2012] as well as Lee [2011]). It is plausible that binge watching is a coping mechanism by people facing steady pressure on their schedules. Binge watching becomes an important part of the attention economy but depends less on commercial advertising breaks than terrestrial broadcasting. Subscription video-on-demand services, such as Netflix, omit commercial advertising. Nonetheless, even in commercial-free zones audience power is being commodified. Facebook, Google, et al. actively capture data on their subscribers and sell that data, primarily to marketers. Netflix and others already use such data internally in their production decision making and distribution operations. It is not difficult to imagine they will soon turn such data into a revenue stream as the field becomes more competitive. In addition Disney's systematic hoarding of narrative universes such as its own, Marvel superheroes, Lucas's *Star Wars*, and more also is a bid to maximize revenue returns from binge watching. Broe's book is an important beginning for an analysis of binge watching as part of the new pattern of work and leisure. But binge watching is still evolving as is our understanding of its role in the digital world.

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