

Netflix and Flow

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Netflix has broken TV. Or saved it. Or something else. All that is known right now is that Netflix has fundamentally changed what television *is* but we are early enough in the process that actually articulating what has changed about television post *House of Cards* is difficult. What the binge model of television presents is a model of consumption that encourages watching as much as possible as quickly as possible. This is a fundamental shift. No longer are we locked into a notion of flow that is tied to scheduling or even commercials. It is the ultimate streamlining of viewing moving images. Even the cinema, a medium that has always been uninterrupted, has placed before it a shorts, and trailers, and now even commercials. But on Netflix and its ilk, simply press a button and hours of pure show are presented en masse.

While the notion of watching a batch of episodes of a single show sequentially did not begin with Netflix – strip scheduling and television on DVDs presage this distribution strategy – the sheer volume (there’s that concept again) of what’s available on shifts the viewing context for the entire medium. Put another way: more than simply applying to proprietary shows, the binge model now effects the perception of all television, or at least all television available to binge. Hence the proclamations of change at the beginning. Not only does Netflix engineer an experience where you watch *Insatiable* in large continuous chunks, but also the library catalogues like *The Twilight Zone* and *Frasier* are placed on the same rails. How does this change the way television is processed?

One of the somewhat paradoxical effects of this is the popular notion of “Netflix drift” or “Netflix bloat.” Presented with a larger space to work with (“the season is the new episode”) Netflix shows are perceived to have a saggy middle. It would that when presented with all the creative freedoms that come with Netflix’s money and Netflix’s lack of creative input and Netflix’s temporal real estate, showrunners and their crews have created show after show which pulls story beats out like taffy. I think of how when I tried to watch *Bloodline* and got so angry at the end of the first episode that I swore of the whole series. I had watched an hour of television and knew NOTHING about the show other than the brooding. So much brooding! Perhaps this is television that is meant to be half watched, hence all the dead space within a given episode, giving the viewer the opportunity to drift off themselves and not have missed anything substantial. This is why I find myself watching *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* whenever I open that red N logo on my TV. With *Star Trek*, or any pre-peak TV episodic show, I know the rhythms of the thing and know that there is actual information to be doled out at a reasonable pace, or at least a pace that I find personally more agreeable. Even with the commercials removed, there seems to just be a better conception of flow with older shows.

But perhaps this is simply growing pains. I think of *Twin Peaks: The Return*. Here is a show that worked precisely *because* of the slow drip of information. The around *The Return* even positioned it as an eighteen-hour movie, a not uncommon talking point with television nowadays, but seemed to reach a real head of steam here. Perhaps the slow cinema digital aesthetics of David Lynch's opus is where the future of television is moving. However, that is such an idiosyncratic show to place the hopes of an entire medium upon. Perhaps in an world of omnipresent images, television exists more as a vibe than as something to be directly engaged with.