'Discovery' and the form of Victorian Periodicals

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The most successful character in episode seven of *Discovery* is the one who has seen it already, many times.

'Don't you see what's happening?', Paul Stamets asks, 'we have been here before – all of us' (Barrett 2017). Alone among the crew, Stamets has been connected to the mycelial network, and in consequence only he can tell that his ship is caught in a temporal loop, the same thirty minutes repeating themselves over and over again. When he puts his emphasis on 'all of us', though, Stamets makes clear that he isn't referring only to the crew of the *Discovery*. *Star Trek* aficionados will immediately recall 'Cause and Effect,' the 1992 episode of *The Next Generation* (*TNG*) in which the *Enterprise*'s Dr Crusher negotiates an almost identical situation, and they may recall, too, *Voyager's* riff on that theme in 'Coda' (1997). Those with broader palates will remember the *Stargate SG-1* episode 'Window of Opportunity' (2000), the *X-Files* episode 'Monday' (1999), or the *Fringe* episode 'White Tulip' (2010). There are so many other examples of this phenomenon that it has been given a name – the 'Groundhog Day episode' after the Bill Murray film which, as Trekkies never tire of mentioning, postdates 'Cause and Effect' by several months – and a lengthy page on *TV Tropes* ('"Groundhog Day" Loop' 2018). 'All of us' have indeed been here before: watching our favorite characters negotiate time loops, over and over again, is a staple component of the experience of SFF television, one beginning to be discernible at the time of writing even in "capital-L" literature outside the genre (see, for instance, Atkinson 2013).

It is suggestive that *Discovery*'s groundhog "day" is a mere 'thirty-odd' minutes in length (Barrett 2017). The loop in 'Cause and Effect' is long enough to include a poker game, the night after it, and a meeting the next morning; in 'Window of Opportunity' it is stated that the loop lasts ten hours. *Discovery*'s shorter interval accelerates the familiar situation to a degree which, if we may use the phrase in such a context, strains credibility: Stamets must work on his solution with a crew who not only forget the problem every half-hour but need to be convinced of its existence from scratch.[1] From a scriptwriter's perspective, though, the

[1] For an exploration of 'Magic to Make the Sanest Man Go Mad' as a time loop episode, see Sarah Böhlau's essay '"Lorca, I'm really gonna miss killing you" – the Fictional Space Created by Time Loop Narratives' in this volume.

acceleration is justifiable, even necessary, because the audience is used to it by now. Stamets is successful not only because of the Starfleet proclivity for trust and teamwork but also because he is, as we are, an experienced reader of the Groundhog Day episode.

Consider Mudd, the villain of the episode and operator of the time loop device, disparagingly calling the minor character Bryce 'random communications officer man' during one of his tirades. When this episode aired, Bryce had not yet been named – he is listed in the end credits as 'Comm Officer #2'. To be outside the time loop is to be in on the joke: Mudd's tone here is not that of *Star Trek* but exactly that of the fan paratexts which surround it (Mudd utters his insult whilst pointing a weapon at Bryce, reminding him of his own "redshirt" status, his narrative dispensability). The more independent a character is of the flow of repeating time, the more their condition approaches that of the primary-world viewer. Stamets, too, evinces this tendency in the scene where he wearily convinces Burnham of their plight by matching her apparently extemporized dialogue word for word, inflection for inflection. It's the action of a frustrated colleague in a desperate and unusual situation, but it's also the action of one fan demonstrating rote proficiency in a show in order to convince another of their ardor: I know the words of the episode off by heart; I, too, am part of your community. From their position above and beyond on-screen deaths, Mudd and Stamets bear not only the show's self-reflexivity but that of its audience.

It's this self-reflexivity, at least in part, which permits the episode's accelerated pace. In 'Cause and Effect', we can identify the moment where the characters meaningfully come to terms with the problem at around 26 minutes; in 'Magic to Make the Sanest Man Go Mad' the equivalent moment is at around 17 minutes.[2] Two things in particular account for *Discovery*'s acceleration: firstly, the characters do not require the *Enterprise* crew's lengthy process of coming to terms with the idea that they might be in a loop (we see this in Stamets' ability repeatedly to convince and organize them in half-hour intervals), and secondly, neither does the audience, trained in the genre by twenty-five years of Groundhog Day episodes (we see this in the writers' decision to show us only a couple of instances of Stamets convincing or organizing somebody, relying on our ability to infer their continuing and repeated presence). The first of these things is true because the second is true. 'Magic to Make the Sanest Man Go Mad' is a time loop but, unlike 'Cause and Effect,' it is not *about* time loops

[2] Exactly how you define 'meaningfully come to terms' in this context will, of course, move these times around slightly. Fastidious readers will hopefully take my general point that the *Discovery* episode proceeds at a faster pace – especially given that the first few minutes of 'Magic to Make the Sanest Man Go Mad' are not in the loop, which seems to start at around 4', whilst the TNG episode begins at the end of a loop which is already happening.

– it builds character relationships and plotlines from earlier in the season and gently furthers the overall arc of the season. It is able to do this because of the groundwork laid by the *TNG* episode and its successors.

Still, though, it is striking that going into the mid-point of its first season (episode seven of fifteen), *Discovery* offers us its only episode with a reasonably self-contained plot, its only episode which can intelligibly be watched out of sequence ('I think the time loop episode is the only one that kind of works on its own', wrote *io9* (Trendacosta 2018)). This episode is about a group of people who are experiencing time in short chunks they are unable to remember or to relate to each other – more, it is about the power (for good or ill) of the people able to see beyond the immediate moments they are stuck in and order them as part of a bigger story. Even without the constant and temporally complex shadow of 'Cause and Effect' – both the episode's precedent and (in universe) its distant successor – the commentary on the changing experience of watching *Star Trek* is unmissable.

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It is a commonplace throughout this collection that *Discovery* is both like and unlike previous iterations of *Star Trek*. The first TV series in the franchise since *Enterprise* (2001-2005), it also faces the unusual challenge of competing with the alternative visions of the original series (1966-1969) represented by the Kelvin timeline movies (2009-) and *The Orville* (2017-). Combining more than a decade of hindsight with a spread of simultaneous reinterpretations, the current moment provides the most visibly thorough working through of the franchise's history and potential since at least the release of *Galaxy Quest* (1999). Against this background, it is not surprising to find that *Discovery* conducts a discussion with its fans about where the true heart of *Star Trek* is to be found. It does this quite openly – never more so than in the liturgical repetition of the phrase 'We are Starfleet' during the season 1 finale – but its perorations on the subject more often feel like icebreakers than like lectures. In other words, *Discovery* wants its viewers to think actively about what *Star Trek* is for, perhaps even about what SF is for. It has an answer in mind, but it is sincere engagement with the question, rather than blind agreement, which the show is seeking.

Anyway, I'm sorry, but that just happens to be how I feel about it. My approach in this chapter is to try and substantiate this claim solely via a discussion of form – in particular *serial* form – examining the history behind *Discovery*'s episodic structure and suggesting that the show engages with that history very openly and very deliberately. My attention to seriality is informed by my research background in late-Victorian periodicals, and a

secondary aim of this chapter is to convince you that the relationship between nineteenth-century magazines and twenty-first century SF is a little closer than might at first be presumed. Principally, though, my purpose is to articulate the conversation which *Discovery* initiates with its predecessors and with its readers via its form. It's a conversation, I argue, which materially changes the *Star Trek* universe: worldbuilding may be most obviously discernible in plots, settings, and backstories, but the way we are asked to see those details – and particularly here, the *rhythm* in which we are asked to see them – has every bit as great a role.

From here, the chapter proceeds in four more sections. I first discuss the critical conversation around Victorian serials and television, arguing that SF in general and *Star Trek* in particular could profitably be added to these exchanges. I then outline the distinction between the 'serial' and the 'series,' and the possibility for reading twenty-first century television which those terms offer us. After that, I examine the awkward ways in which *Discovery* does and doesn't conform to those terms, suggesting a third analogue in the writings of H. G. Wells. Finally, I focus on the most important aspect of periodical publishing – the gap *between* episodes – in an effort to understand some of the dissatisfied responses to *Discovery* (and the show's own conflicted formal attitude).

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In the twelve-year lacuna which separated the end of *Enterprise* from the beginning of *Discovery*, the organization of the television industry underwent considerable disruption – the emergence of 'prestige TV,' the rise of Netflix, and the transformation of YouTube from 'video-sharing site' into 'network TV alternative' are only the headlines.[3] Interlaced changes in everything from casting to advertising and distribution have left their mark on the way stories are told on TV, although the shift has not been total and numerous older practices continue undiminished. One of the more obscure consequences of this shift in TV's topography has been a heightened awareness among academic Victorianists to what Caroline Levine calls 'the new serial television' and Michael Z. Newman calls the 'Prime Time Serial (PTS)' (Levine 2013: para. 3; Newman 2006: 17). The notion is that placing these shows – the most frequently-cited examples are *The Wire* (2002-2008) and *Mad Men* (2007-2015) – alongside Victorian novels such as *Bleak House* (1852-1853) and *Middlemarch* (1871-1872) allows us to think about previously unnoticed similarities between the two historical periods, the ahistorical continuities of literary form, or both. In the case of *The Wire*, Levine's favorite

[3] These changes are discussed at book length in Lotz 2014.

example, the large cast of interconnected yet socially divergent characters, the embedded pleas for social and judicial reform, and the journalistic background of the creator, David Simon (to say nothing of an actual mention of Dickens in an episode title), do indeed render a comparison with *Bleak House* persuasive.[4]

Levine makes it clear that the goal is not simply to understand contemporary TV as the "descendent" of the Victorian serial but rather to view both texts 'as responding to comparable social environments' (Levine 2013: para. 4). All the same, the discussion runs the risk of appearing to be an exercise in canon formation, an attempt, in Jason Mittell's words, to 'legitimize and validate the demeaned television medium by linking it to the highbrow cultural sphere of literature' (Mittell 2011). Levine has herself acknowledged this difficulty,[5] but it does not help that her examples are universally drawn from the realm of capital-L literature – Dickens, Eliot, Charlotte Brontë. Most of the TV shows involved in this analysis, too, as the moniker 'prestige TV' implies, are 'paradigmatic of a critical darling,' pulling in rapturous reviews but not necessarily achieving high Nielsen ratings (Mittell 2011). The scholarly conversation has legitimized its unorthodox comparison of Victorian seriality and contemporary television by applying a marked small-c conservatism in its choice of examples.

It is not my intention to criticize this tendency: an article can only fight so many battles at once, arguments work best and travel farthest when readers are familiar with the primary texts, and *The Wire* and *Bleak House* are superb terrain on which to conduct exactly this kind of discussion (as the existence of this chapter hopefully suggests, I am also enthusiastic about any efforts made towards transhistorical analysis in the currently over-periodized world of literary criticism).[6] At the same time, and with the exception of *Lost* (2004-2010), SF's almost total absence from Levine's conversation seems to be worth pausing over. *The Wire* is an almost exact contemporary of Ronald D. Moore's reboot of *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009), a show which, despite its considerable differences from Simon's *magnum opus*, is every bit as amenable to a discussion about character networks, social reform, and the frustrations of the serial format. Something similar might be said of

[4] Levine's full treatment of *The Wire* is in Levine 2015: chap. 5.

[5] '[Mittell] worries that what is motivating the comparison between television and fiction is a matter of status: we want the new work to acquire the cachet of the older, more respected one. In a shameful bid for social distinction, we push for *The Wire* to be ranked among high-class works of art. […] Thus it is my hypothesis that on political and social grounds it is more important to set two particular examples side by side than to invite broad genre and media comparisons.' (Levine 2011)

[6] A superb example of the kind of transhistorical analysis I mean here, which has absolutely nothing to do with the subject under discussion, is Burge 2016.

Fringe (2008-2013), *Heroes* (2006-2010), *The 4400* (2004-2007), or *Orphan Black* (2013-2017), for example.[7] It is hardly fair to blame Levine for the omission of the more recent shows which, since her work was published, have moved SF even closer to the heart of prestige TV – *Westworld* (2016-), *Stranger Things* (2016), *The O.A.* (2016-), *The Man in the High Castle* (2015-), and the numerous shows associated with the Marvel Cinematic Universe, for instance – but a discussion about the televised renewal of the Victorian 'serial' over the 'series' format which fails to mention *The X Files* (1993-2002), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (*DS9*; 1993-1999) – shows which paved the way for the storytelling format in which the PTS thrives – is certainly missing an important part of the picture.

In other words, this discussion is owed some SF. Structurally, *Discovery* seems very much part of the new generation of high-budget 'prestige' content – but it is not entirely or comfortably so. To understand why, we first need to understand the formal point which distinguishes the shows mentioned in the above paragraph from their predecessors; we need to understand the difference between a 'serial' and a 'series.'

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Another name surprisingly absent from the academic discussions around Victorian television has been that of Sherlock Holmes. Holmes is a Victorian indelibly present in today's television culture – Netflix has just, at the time of writing, announced yet another new adaptation (Carr 2018) – but the *form* of Arthur Conan Doyle's original stories reverberates far more widely than even their famous protagonist. The crucial innovation was the 'series' format, which Conan Doyle explained this way in his autobiography:

> …it had struck me that a single character running through a series, if it only engaged the attention of the reader, would bind that reader to that particular magazine. On the other hand, it had long seemed to me that the ordinary serial might be an impediment rather than a help to a magazine, since, sooner or later, one missed one number and afterwards it had lost all interest. Clearly the ideal compromise was a character which carried through, and yet instalments which were each complete in themselves, so that the purchaser was always sure that he could relish the whole contents of the magazine. I

[7] I have kept my focus on North American SF TV here, but it needs saying that *Doctor Who* (1963-1989; 2005-) cries out for comparison with Victorian fiction – not least during its numerous episodes set in the Victorian period (eg. 'The Snowmen', 2012; 'The Talons of Weng-Chiang', 1977).

> believe that I was the first to realize this and "The Strand Magazine" the first to put it into practice. (Conan Doyle 2012: 95-96)

In fact, Conan Doyle's idea was not wholly unprecedented ('there is nothing new under the sun,' as Holmes remarks, himself quoting Ecclesiastes 1:9 (Conan Doyle 1974: 40)), with Edgar Allan Poe's 1830s tales of C. Auguste Dupin often cited as an influence (including by Conan Doyle himself). Poe, though, wrote only three Dupin stories, published at uneven intervals in different periodicals.[8] The key to Holmes's formal (and therefore commercial) success was the alliance with the *Strand*, which assured readers of a different yet unrelated case in every issue and promised the return of familiar characters with none of the commitment of a Dickens-style serial.[9]

Keeping old readers in a periodical rhythm whilst also welcoming in new ones with no knowledge of prior happenings, the 'series' is vitally distinct from the Dickens model in not requiring the reader to hunt down back issues or the writer to incorporate recaps of long-ago plot points into later instalments. It also has the important effect, as Conan Doyle himself implies in the above quotation, of elevating character and situation over plot as the principle source of attraction for viewers; the formal shift in emphasis meaningfully alters the world of the story (a point to which I shall return). Though Conan Doyle developed it for print, the series model became central to twentieth-century television: *TV Tropes* calls it 'Monster of the Week' ('[it] can be seen as the complete antithesis of a Story Arc'), and by the debut of *Star Trek* in 1966 it was one of the default modes of franchise storytelling, amenable not only to casual viewing but also to syndication, the environment for which *TNG* was produced in 1987 and in which it flourished ('Monster of the Week' 2018).[10] The stand-alone, watch-in-any-order episode, in other words, is what allowed *Star Trek* to build a fanbase and profitability which far exceeded its original four-year run and eventually permitted the creation of sequels.

By 1993, the year after *TNG* aired its time loop episode, Tudor Oltean felt able to write that '[a] series requires a different story which is concluded in each episode, while the serial is provided with continuous storylines – normally more than one – that continue each episode' (Oltean 1993, 14). By adding that '[s]eries and serial are thus two different types of

[8] 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' appeared in the April 1841 edition of *Graham's Magazine*, 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt' in the *Ladies' Companion* between November 1842 and February 1843, and 'The Purloined Letter' in the *Gift* annual for 1845.

[9] For more on the form of the *Strand*, see Ashley 2006: 196–97.

[10] *TNG* was produced on the basis of the original series' success in syndication (it had not done well on its first run) and was released straight into syndication rather than being broadcast on a network first (Teitelbaum 1991).

series', though, Oltean tacitly indicates that the situation was already more complicated than this implied (14). Like many other shows, *TNG* had begun introducing two-part adventures and allowing character growth to take place across episodes and seasons. Even in Conan Doyle the 'pure' notion of the genuinely independent episode was doomed: Holmes's 'death' in 'The Final Problem' (Dec 1893) and return in 'The Empty House' (Oct 1903), for instance, necessarily created a metanarrative, and it's hard to get much out of the latter story if you haven't already read the former.[11] As the 1990s went on, *Star Trek* and other SF TV became less and less comfortable with the monster of the week: *Buffy*'s model of the 'Big Bad' allowed discrete adventures to be linked together by a common adversary – a kind of compromise between series and serial – but by the end of its run in 2001 even *Buffy* was telling multi-part, complex stories hard to decipher at the level of the episode. The last half-season of *DS9* (aired in 1999) is effectively a nine-part serial. This tendency across SF TV became one of the hallmarks of the streaming revolution: 'if there is one thing within the media that is metamorphosing right before our eyes,' Veronica Innocenti and Guglielmo Pescatore noted by 2014, 'it is surely televized [*sic*] seriality.' '[M]any TV series,' they wrote, 'have moved increasingly closer to the structure of the serial:' the changes in viewing habits wrought by Netflix and others have removed the original impetus which drove Conan Doyle's innovation, since previous episodes which may be necessary for understanding the story are all available for streaming at any moment by anyone with the appropriate subscriptions (Innocenti and Pescatore 2014, 1). Dickens, we might say, has won the battle: like *The Wire*, the majority of SF TV today is now told in novel-style serials.

Is it this change which drives the interest in today's TV from Victorianists? Levine, certainly, mentions the importance of distribution format for her comparison, albeit somewhat incidentally.[12] The point which I hope I have made here, though, is that if it really is the case that TV has switched to a nineteenth-century model of serialized storytelling, the model it switched *from* also has its roots in the pages of Victorian periodicals.

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[11] Other examples of not-quite-independent Holmes stories: 'His Last Bow' (Sept 1917) contains almost no action and lacks nearly all of its affective punch without some knowledge of its precursors; 'The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge' (1908) was originally published as a two-part 'Reminiscence of Mr. Sherlock Holmes' separated by a month and the words '*To be concluded*' (Conan Doyle 1908: 250). For considerably more on the metanarrative of Holmes in relation to its series format, see Saler 2012: 95.

[12] 'Just as *The Wire* appeared first in regular installments [*sic*] on television and then became available on DVDs for purchase or rental, *Bleak House* first appeared in nineteen monthly periodical parts, later to be available in bound volumes that could be bought or borrowed from circulating libraries.' (Levine 2011: n.p.).

Although its episodes are difficult (or impossible) to understand out of sequence, there is an important way in which the serialized *Discovery* is not formally akin to Dickens. *Bleak House* depicts the intersection of numerous spheres of life and points of view, even alternating between third and first person in its enunciations of the complex social web that is London; *Discovery*, meanwhile, is pared back even by the standards of *Star Trek*, largely restricted to the point of view of a single character rather than maintaining, like its predecessors, focus on an ensemble cast. Although the temptation to read the show's idolization of the mycelial network as a quest for Dickensian interconnectedness is real, *Discovery* is ultimately too focused (and its attention to the spore drive too superficial) for the analogy to be convincing. In terms of pure length, *Discovery* is also far less of a "sprawl" either than Dickens or earlier *Trek*: *Bleak House* is 67 chapters in 20 instalments (Miriam Margolyes's audiobook is 43 hours 12 minutes) whilst the fifteen episodes of *Discovery*'s first season (roughly 11.5 hours) are dwarfed by the first season of *TNG* (roughly 19.5 hours; typical for a 1980s US TV series). Since it is still running, *Discovery* always has the potential to get bigger in both senses, but season two is roughly the same length as season one and, if anything, even more single-minded in its focus on Burnham. At the time of writing, it seems fair to describe *Discovery* as less formally expansive than either the Holmes or Dickens models, so a third point of comparison with Victorian periodicity is therefore warranted.

Fortunately, a perfect candidate is available in one of SF's foundational texts. H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* appeared in *Pearson's Magazine* between April and December 1897 and has exerted a consistently powerful influence on SF writing ever since. As a serial, it resembles *Bleak House* in being difficult to read out of sequence, but is unlike it in following a strictly linear progression – the progression, in fact, of the Martians from Horsell Common into the center of London, which can be (and has been) drawn as a dotted line on a map (see Wells 2017: xxxvii). Though the narration is handed between brothers at some points, the text is very far from a Dickensian "network", relying for its affect on the unitary force of its plot and the subjective experiences of a very small number of characters. This is reflected not only in a shorter total length (around 60,000 words; *Bleak House* is around 350,000) but, more crucially, in a difference of composition: Wells wrote the entire novel in advance, paying scrupulous attention to geographical details, whilst Dickens composed his instalments as he went along (Parrinder 1972: 6).

Wells did dabble in the Holmes-style series model (his *Stories of the Stone Age*, for example, appeared in *The Idler* between May and November 1897), but the preponderance of his short stories were stand-alone and all but one of his famous scientific romances of the

1890s were serialized in a similarly predetermined fashion to *War of the Worlds*.[13] Although *Pearson's* published small summaries of the previous action at the beginning of each instalment (analogous to 'previously, on…' montages common in TV, including on *Discovery*), *War of the Worlds* was a text which knew where it was going and which made few concessions to any reader who couldn't keep up. *Pearson's* clearly saw this fact as a potential selling point, with one editorial from the middle of the run reminding audiences that '[t]his wonderful serial is becoming more and more exciting month by month' (Pearson 1897: 344A). This is precisely the feature, however, which is at the root of Katharine Trendacosta's difficulty with *Discovery*:

> I watched last week's episode with a friend who hadn't seen any others. And the look on her face when I tried to explain everything she needed to know was unreal. There are very few episodes which wouldn't run into that problem. (Trendacosta 2018)

Trendacosta's observation – that *Discovery* asks to be watched completely, attentively, and in order – presents as a 'problem' because it stands against the kind of casual viewing enabled by the monster of the week. What *Pearson's* saw as a virtue – repaying sustained audience attention – has, for Trendacosta, become a liability: casual attention is impossible.

There is another difficulty, though: *Discovery*'s episodes are indecipherable if watched out of order, but they are also sometimes abrasive if watched too closely together. For example, the first words of 'New Eden' ('As a child, I had what my mother called nightmares…') are a personal log of Spock's previously heard in the climactic scene of the previous episode – a quick recap for a viewer returning after a week, but a jarringly obvious moment of repetition for anybody moving directly from episode to episode (Frakes 2019). The clumsiness of this transition, which is invisibly smooth if the episodes are not watched in immediate succession, introduces us to the final element in my argument. Having discussed the series and serial in terms of their differences, it is also important to consider the thing which unites them: the gap between instalments.

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[13] *The Time Machine* first appeared in the *New Review* (Jan-May 1895), *The Invisible Man* in *Pearson's Weekly* (12 June – 7 Aug 1897), and *The First Men in the Moon* in the *Strand* (Dec 1900 – Aug 1901). *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) was never serialized. These, of course, are only the highlights: Wells's relationship with the periodical culture of his day was profound in scale and is documented at book length in Smith 2012.

However discrete or connected, TV episodes – up until recently – have shared one defining feature: the interval. In Oltean's words, TV series:

> …make it irresistibly clear that the specific feature of television experience is not exactly 'flow' but 'flow and regularity', and should be regarded in terms of movement and stasis . . . . The relationship between movement (direct presentation of events, or enactment) and stasis (what happens in-between the episodes, interval of narrative non-belligerance [*sic*]) forms the fundamental dialectics of the serial paradigm… (Oltean 1993: 13)

This is every bit as true for print serials of the nineteenth century as it is for twentieth-century TV, as Sean O'Sullivan notes when comparing the two – he calls this same phenomenon 'the gap', or 'the between, . . . the animating energy, the time and space separating publications that distinguishes serial fiction from every other form' (O'Sullivan 2013: para. 14). It is in the gaps, and not the parts, that Dickens corresponds with readers about the construction of future numbers; it's between instalments that Holmes readers start having dinner parties and original-series *Star Trek* fans begin writing fanfiction.[14] The suspense generated by these gaps is, as Levine has herself helped to point out (Levine 2003), one of the cornerstones of Victorian fiction.[15] Summing up the whole phenomenon, Innocenti and Pescatore write that:

> [w]hile the idea of trekkies once seemed like a folklore phenomenon, ultimately a little I and marginal, today we are well aware that serial products are projected as inhabitable environments, in which spectators/users can circulate, gather information, play and develop affective bonds. (Innocenti and Pescatore 2014: 12)

Crucially, the gap is the aspect of seriality which the Netflix revolution truly dispenses with, and what *Discovery* strives to preserve.

Since at least the American version of *House of Cards* (2013-2018), it has become increasingly normal for new shows to emerge onto streaming services an entire season at a time, allowing viewers to choose the pace at which they consume the serial instalments. Some binge watch, a technique inherited from the DVD box set (although still with an analogue in Victorian print culture: buying the book edition after the serial ends). Others retain a kind of routine – an episode a day, say – or choose a more irregular pattern of

[14] Respectively (and for instance) on these topics, see Dawson 2016: 761–78 and Saler 2012: 116–17.
[15] For my application of Levine's ideas around suspense to periodicals, see Tattersdill 2016: 86–88.

consumption to fit their lifestyle (as you can with a book edition). *Discovery*, released on the new CBS All Access service in the USA and on Netflix in most other territories, has defied this trend by airing a new episode every week just as Roddenberry's original series had in the 1960s. This is important: though it feels the epitome of the current mood in terms of its serial structure and narrative arc, *Discovery* is actually a little old-fashioned in cleaving to the 'movement and stasis' model shared by all of its *Trek* forebears. This exaggerates the independence of the episode as a unit of storytelling even while other aspects of the new television environment (not least Neflix's 'Skip Credits' button) conspire to make it less visible. For people watching the show as it aired, the episode re-emerges in another important way: group conversations about what was going to happen next were rife online, since everybody was on (or rather, *off*) the same page.

The cultural consequences of this decision are evident in the existence of episode-by-episode reviews of *Discovery* on *Den of Geek*, or the more honestly-titled weekly 'recaps' on *Vulture* – the sense in these pieces is of having to keep up with (and lead) fan speculation around where the show might be going.[16] Such writings, though, represent only the most visible form of 'water-cooler' discussions which were happening amongst fans for the entirety of the run – discussions which on Netflix-model shows are now limited to developments between seasons. When you think about it, it is *Discovery*'s form, simultaneously restricting both the viewpoint and velocity of its audience, which allows it to have its major plot twists, just as it is its form which encourages viewers to discuss those twists both before and after they take place. One particularly good example of this is the show's creation of 'Javid Iqbal,' the actor credited with playing Voq in the episodes before it was revealed that Ash Tyler (Shazad Latif) had been Voq all along. On one level, this shows the real-life deceptions which the show was willing to perpetuate on its fans in order to keep them surprised; on another, Latif's selection of 'Javid Iqbal' – his father's name – for the alias resulted in a furor of fan theorizing and speculation and suggests, more than a little, a code meant to be cracked (see Ling 2017, Britt 2018). What the show wanted was the conversation.

This returns us to my earlier insistence that episodic structure meaningfully alters the world of the story. The Voq twist is impossible in *TNG*'s format: there's a hint of it in, say, 'Conundrum' (1992), but such things have to stay contained within individual episodes and our trust in the status quo can never waver. By *DS9*, this balance began to shift, as evidenced

[16] See, for example, Hunt 2018; Ortberg 2018..

by the frighteningly uncertain number of fifth season (1996-1997) episodes during which Julian Bashir was, we later learn, replaced by an alien impostor. The kind of slow-building tension which ends in Georgiou's return or Lorca's treason, though, goes further by leading the audience into the *expectation* of such reversals: the structure creates not only a more focused space but a more paranoid one, in which viewers watch every moment for clues and develop a critical eye for discrepancies (intentional or otherwise) in the narrative, then amplify their affect by poring over them with other fans in the gaps between episodes. If *Discovery* has a 'darker, more serious tone', then, this is one of the reasons (Liptak 2018). Its Federation feels bleaker than *TNG*'s not only because of superficial details of tone, plot, and characterization, but because of the relationship with the viewer which its serial structure creates. Form is itself a worldbuilding technique, and changing the form of this franchise has changed the world every bit as much as the transformations in tone, continuity, costume, writing, effects, makeup, music, and so on.

As well as pointing out the relationship with worldbuilding, my discussion of form also explains some of the dissatisfaction with which *Discovery* was received. It's not just that the new tone is off-putting: it's also the case that, as O'Sullivan points out regarding *Bleak House* and *Lost*, satisfaction itself is 'antithetical to the structure and attractions of seriality as a practice' (O'Sullivan 2013: para. 2). In a complete and isolated novel, like *War of the Worlds*, the plot travels smoothly towards an ending: the end of the narrative, the end of the Martian invasion. In a serial of indefinite length, though, we have 'flow and regularity' – we exist as readers in the rhythm of the publication, with conclusions continuously deferred into the future and resolution experienced as a kind of threat. The deliberate positioning of *Discovery* between these two stools – pre-planned enough for time-travel plotlines but open enough to leave each season on a cliffhanger; hemmed into time and continuity by its status as a prequel but potentially able to escape them with the right retconning and plot devices – is understandably frustrating for the viewer who just wants to watch 'an episode of something.' That *Discovery* itself feels this frustration is demonstrated, I think, by the existence of the 'Short Treks,' interstitial stories defined precisely by (i) their independence from the periodical rhythm of the main series, and (ii) their independence from each other at the level of plot – like *TOS* and *TNG* episodes, they can be watched in any order. No previous *Star Trek* series has felt the need to re-insert this older kind of storytelling between its seasons. By the end of *Discovery*'s second year, though, half of the 'Short Treks' have already been retrospectively incorporated into the main plot (as have the characters and settings of a few early season 2 episodes, like 'New Eden' and 'The Sound of Thunder', which appeared

relatively independent at first glance). ‘Runaway’, in particular, is now all-but required viewing if the season two finale is to make sense. *Discovery* cannot stop looking at the series format, but is always too interested in a serial relationship with its reader to seriously commit to it.

Nothing demonstrates this better than watching *Discovery*’s first season for the second time: with the gaps between episodes eliminated and the big twists already known, it is in this moment that we reconcile all the various hopes and worries which accompanied the drip-feed of episodes with the complete object created by the finale. Despite some jarring moments of superfluous recap, the show’s hope and optimism comes through more strongly when it is experienced in this way – the removal of suspense is also a removal of the paranoia which is naturally a product of the show’s hybrid format. In other words: despite the effort which it puts into surprises and twists, *Discovery* is a show which desperately wants *re*watching. Its weekly release encourages active discussion and speculation, an explosion of possibilities; its serial format requires us to return from these discussions to a unified, organized text, and then to learn to see it as such.

Formats are not chosen at random, and every show (and the world it offers) is shaped by the way it asks to be watched. *Discovery*, I have suggested here, wants us *aware* of that process, which is why it narrativizes it in ‘Magic to Make the Sanest Man Go Mad’. The tension between the arc and the episode becomes the tension between Stamets and the rest of crew: unlike *TNG*’s characters in ‘Cause and Effect,’ who are all caught together in the episodic time loop and must realize the severity of their continually resetting status quo entirely from the inside, *Discovery* includes a character who is able to transcend the individual, half-hour episodes the rest of his crew is trapped in and commend to them a larger, more worked-through ‘serial’ universe. ‘Don’t you see what’s happening?’, he shouts. ‘We have been here before . . . . I cannot be the only person who recognizes this’ (Barrett 2017).

*

An incidental second in the same episode has become one of my favorite moments in *Discovery*. It happens just under nineteen minutes in: Lorca gets summoned from the bridge, apparently by Culber, and steps into the turbolift. The instant before his journey is interrupted is one of the very few in which we see the captain by himself in the Prime Universe, without the need to dissemble. He doesn’t moustache-twirl or cackle into the camera – that would ruin the coming surprise for first-time viewers. Rather, his actions resemble those of a

somewhat beleaguered actor: he draws in his breath, adjusts his stance, gets ready for the next scene. It's a wonderful glimpse into the private life of somebody who has been acting every waking minute for the longest time. If you know what's coming, you can almost hear him bucking himself up, getting himself ready to spin the next lie, to carry out the next stage in his Byzantine plan. If you don't know, though, it's completely invisible, denuded of any of the cues of lighting, camera angle or music we are habituated to: just a tired guy standing in an elevator. For some, perhaps, the pause in *Discovery*'s relentless pace was long enough to constitute a clue, another in a series of little hints that would eventually grow into certainties. For the majority of viewers, though, it's only good the second time you see it. It's only good if you've been here before.

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