Lev Grossman, Sharon Marcus,
A. O. Scott, and Julie Snyder

Contemporary Seriality: A Roundtable

The following has been transcribed and edited for clarity by Sean O'Sullivan.

Sharon Marcus (SM): I'm Sharon Marcus—I'm a Professor of English at Columbia University: I'm a Victorianist, and I work on nineteenth-century French literature, so I'm well-acquainted with the history of seriality. I'm also the Dean of Humanities and Editor of publicbooks.org. I would like to thank Lauren Goodlad and Sean O'Sullivan and Eileen Gillooly and everyone at the Heyman Center for putting this on today. I am going to introduce our panelists, although they don't really need an introduction. They say of great actors that you would be happy to listen to them read the phone book. I think we can say of our panelists that we'd be happy to hear them write a review of the phone book, write a novel based on the phone book, or produce the phone book as a radio podcast. [*laughter*] But rituals are important, so here we go: Lev Grossman is the author of five novels, including the #1 *New York Times*-bestselling *Magicians* trilogy, which is now an

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Lev Grossman is the author of five novels, including the bestselling *Magicians* trilogy, which has been adapted into a dramatic series currently running on the Syfy network. *The Bright Sword,* his re-imagining of the King Arthur legend, will be published in 2019. Grossman is also an award-winning journalist who served as *Time* magazine's book critic from 2002 to 2016.

Sharon Marcus is the Orlando Harriman Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. Her forthcoming book, *The Drama of Celebrity,* will appear in 2019. Previous books include *Between Women: Marriage, Desire, and Friendship in Victorian England* (2007), which won the Perkins Prize from the International Society for the Study of Narrative. She is Co-Editor in Chief of publicbooks.org.

A. O. Scott is a chief film critic of *The New York Times* and Distinguished Professor of Film Criticism at Wesleyan University. He is the author of *Better Living Through Criticism: How to Think About Art, Pleasure, Beauty, and Truth* (2016).

Julie Snyder is the co-creator and senior producer of the *Serial* podcast, which premiered in 2014 and has been downloaded more than 300 million times. She is also the co-creator and executive producer of the Peabody Award-winning *S-Town* podcast, which premiered in 2017. Before that, she was the senior producer for the public radio program *This American Life.*

hour-long drama on Syfy; he has also been *Time* magazine's book critic for the past fifteen years. A. O. Scott is a chief film critic of *The New York Times* and Distinguished Professor of Film Criticism at Wesleyan University; he's the author of *Better Living Through Criticism: How to Think About Art, Pleasure, Beauty, and Truth,* published earlier this year by Penguin Press. Julie Snyder has been the guiding force behind two of the most successful ventures in audio broadcasting; she is the co-creator of the podcast *Serial,* which debuted in October 2014 and has been downloaded more than 200 million times, making it the most-listened-to podcast in the history of the form. She has also for many years been the senior producer of the public radio show *This American Life,* which is heard by more than four million listeners each week.

I'm going to start by posing some questions; and then we'll open things up to discussion. I wanted to start with just a very basic question, which is: how has seriality affected you, either in the media you work in, or the media that you focus on as a writer? Lev, for you that would mean, what has it meant to write a one-volume novel that became a trilogy, and a literary work that has been adapted into a TV series? Tony [A. O. Scott], I know you have strong views, you're on record as having views about sequels and franchises—we can come later to TV vs. film, but maybe start with film. Julie, if you could just talk about what it was like to, in some ways, invent the idea of a serial podcast, or popularize the idea of a serial podcast—and working specifically in radio, what makes a radio serial different from a literary one or an audio-visual one? Whoever wants to go first.

Julie Snyder (JS): Work down the aisle?

Lev Grossman (LG): All right—I'll go first. I do have some experience with serial forms—I entered into them slightly backwards, and always in exchange for money. [*laughter*] I wrote a novel called *The Magicians;* I wrote it as a stand-alone, it was published as a stand-alone. I then afterwards changed my mind, and I expanded it into a trilogy; and then that trilogy was turned into an hour-long drama on Syfy. And I guess I would say my reflections are that it was surprisingly traumatic to watch the story, really on its structural level, be transmuted into a TV series; it had a little bit the feel of a really bad transporter accident on *Star Trek.* [*laughter*] Things that I learned right off the bat were, one: there's sort of a maximum size to the kind of narrative unit that you can deploy when you are telling something in a serial form, which is the size of one episode. This is perhaps a glib and obvious thing to say—but, you know, there is no 100-page, 200-page set piece. Everything must be chopped up into these little segments, each of which contains its own miniature narrative arc—which then sort of snap together. What's that cartoon where the individual units snap together, to form a robot warrior? I think it's *Voltron.* Anyway, it's a little bit like that: they all have their own little discrete identities, and then they have to sum together to one whole arc, which then in fact emerges as a sub-arc to a larger, show-long arc. It's a very arcane, Russian-dolls

kind of storytelling, which is very different from the kind of thing you would do in a novel. I think an example of that difference would be the way you disperse information. It becomes very much about suspense. In *The Magicians,* there is a plot twist that occurs two-thirds of the way through the book, after approximately four hours of reading. And I husbanded that plot twist so carefully—I was so careful to conceal any traces of it, until it was then sprung upon the reader. When you're doing a TV series, that's not on. They blew that spoiler in the first episode. [*laughter*] It's because the coin of the realm is suspense. It's not that a twist won't come out of nowhere and shock you—it happens. But far more commonly, it's about suspense, which requires that you indicate that something is going to happen, so that the viewer knows that the surprise is on its way—a subtle difference, but it changes the feel of the show. And the danger of it, I think, is for suspense to dominate. It becomes so important to bring people back, from a business point of view, apart from everything else, from a not-getting-cancelled point of view, that suspense tends to become primary, and a little bit bleach out the kind of emotional or affective landscape of the story. Writers for TV, in my experience, are very afraid to let you think about the moment that you're in, to let it sit there and resonate. You must always be thinking about the next moment, what's coming next; to let that suspense slacken for even a moment is dangerous. I don't want to give the idea that it was a terrible experience—it's been a great experience watching it; apart from everything else, the kind of attention span you can command with a serial story is unlike anything in storytelling anywhere. You could never present the public with a thirteen-hour movie about magicians; but you have ready access to a thirteen-hour attention span, if you chop it up in that way. There is this wonderful way in which the time elapsed in the story, the pace at which the characters live their lives—because there are these enforced gaps between the episodes—comes to match up with the time span over which the show is consumed. When you read a book—unless it's *Mrs. Dalloway*—people's lives tend to happen really fast, and everything is super-compressed. In serial storytelling, everything gets stretched out, and you almost fall into step with the people that you're reading about. And the last thing I'll say is, it opens up this wonderful kind of participatory element. Because there are these long gaps between the shows—which are much longer than the shows themselves—once a show ends, it doesn't really stop. What starts are these kinds of communication that barely existed before—not only from fans back to the creators, but between fans. Huge volumes of discourse are exchanged between fans in those empty periods—[empty periods] which people fill in, in this dyadic relationship between the viewer and the thing they're viewing; and it expands into something much more complex and multifarious which, in my experience of watching people watch *The Magicians,* becomes part of the show itself.

A. O. Scott (AOS): I think, for me, as someone whose job is to evaluate and make sense of pieces of narrative as they occur in real time—or at least in real cultural

time, not retrospectively—I have a lot of ambivalence about seriality and how it works in Hollywood films. And part of that ambivalence comes from my own experience as a young fan, as someone who is exactly of the generation for whom *Star Wars* was a huge event, and was kind of the defining pop cultural event of my life, and of my generational cohort's life. I was eleven when the first movie came out, so just in exactly the right spot to be excited by it, and to feel in fact liberated by it, and to feel liberated by the open-endedness of the story, by the sense that it was kind of sketching out this huge territory that it was going to then fill in. And even if we didn't know when we saw the first one what the subsequent episodes were going to be, or if there were going to be any, you kind of knew that there was a lot of new ground that was going to be populated, and a lot of stories that were going to be happening in different corners of this universe. And that was followed by, in the 1980s, the age of the blockbuster, and a great wave of serial movies—and the first strong voicing of critical complaints about sequels and franchises ruining everything about movies. So I've now grown up into the person who's complaining about how sequels and franchises are ruining everything about movies, and I'm sometimes aware of the bad faith or the slight falsity of that position. I guess I come at superhero movies and other kinds of franchised, highly leveraged, highly capitalized entertainment with very mixed feelings. Because I'm aware of the pleasures that that kind of open-ended and recursive and re-inventing narrative can offer, and the pleasures of rediscovering familiar characters in new skin, and in new situations, and seeing new generations of artists kind of re-invent or re-interpret that work. And certainly I can think of examples where that potential has been realized in beautiful and still imaginatively liberating or nourishing ways. But I'm also very aware of the franchise and the sequel model not as a force of liberation but as a kind of force of coercion and standardization and uniformity—of creating identical experiences again and again and again, and of often constraining the work of creative people. And also, I think, of appealing not to an audience's sense of pleasure and delight but a kind of feeling of obedience and duty. And so I think that in a way, my nightmare is that the franchised universe of motion picture entertainment represents almost a proletarianization of the audience; your job is to go to these movies, and to see these movies, and to pay enough attention so that you'll go see the next one, but not necessarily to have a good time. [*laughter*]

JS: When we initially created the *Serial* podcast, it didn't start with the idea of making the *Serial* podcast. We initially had thought of making an entirely different radio show. I created it with my colleague, who became the host of *Serial,* Sarah Koenig, and she and I have worked together for about twelve years as producers for the radio show *This American Life.* "Producer" can mean a lot of different things in radio—and largely in my relationship with Sarah, it means I'm the editor to her being the reporter. And so we had been talking about, "Let's try and do something

new," and coming up with various different ideas. *This American Life* had a surplus on its budget, and so we knew that there was a little bit of money to mess around with. We had initially come up with an entirely different idea; we were going to do a show called *This Week.* The conceit of the show would be that every story in the show was something that had happened in the previous seven days. We had tested it; we did two versions of it as themes for *This American Life.* It was fun to do—they were crazy weeks, with a lot of adrenaline. We felt it forced us to come up with creative approaches to stories; in a lot of ways it was challenging all the things that we really like about making radio. That said, I didn't want to do it the next week, and Sarah felt the same way. We kept on saying, "Is there any way to do the *This Week* show, but only do it once a month?" [*laughter*] So we were really spinning our wheels on it; but finally we thought, "I guess we'll just do it, because it feels like we need to do something." Luckily, right before we were about to start in earnest on it, Ira Glass, who's the executive producer and host of *This American Life,* said to us, "If you guys really want to do the *This Week* idea, that's fine, I'm with you; I believe in you guys, and you guys can do it. But, just right before we start: do you have any other ideas?" [*laughter*] And Sarah said, "Well, there is this one thing I've been thinking of." *This American Life* is a different theme every week, different stories on that theme; and she was saying, "What about if we did a show where instead of different stories every week, every week we come back to the same story?" Right away that made a lot of sense to all of us—it seemed that then we get to do all the things that we're really limited by doing sometimes in other stories. A lot of times there's a really arbitrary nature to when a story starts and when a story ends; and I think it felt to us that we would be able to expand and contract that a little bit more, and have a little more flexibility. And so that was really the idea behind *Serial*—it just sounded like a different way to tell a story. You've got different rules, but it's also another way to start playing around. There's a big tradition of fiction serial storytelling in radio—not so much that I know of in terms of nonfiction serialized storytelling. You haven't seen it, really, in the last fifty years—and largely that's because it's complicated and difficult to do from a logistics point of view. If you're going to have serialized storytelling on a public radio station—well, that's a real pain in the ass for the public radio stations to program. "Now I gotta make sure that everybody tunes in Sunday night at six, and you can't miss last week at Sunday night at six, because then you're not going to understand the next episode. And then on top of it, well, how many episodes are you doing? You're doing a limited run, you're doing twelve episodes? Well, what the hell am I supposed to put in the other forty weeks of the year, if you guys are only taking up twelve weeks of the year?" So in all of those ways, it's a very difficult thing to do, at least in the public radio system; in commercial radio, I'm not really quite sure what you would do for talk programming. For public radio, in the last few years, they're trying to be a little more flexible in the way people tell stories,

and trying to make their schedules a little more flexible to support different types of storytelling. But that's going to take a while, and there are a lot of moving parts. So for us we knew all along that we were going to do it as a podcast—only because it's so much cheaper to do it as a podcast, because you don't have to deal with the public radio system as a mode of distribution. And we didn't really care; the audience we thought we would get would be the grad school crowd. "We'll get those guys, and we'll be fine." Basically, people who know how to use their phones, we kind of figured. [*laughter*] That would be fine, and we're kind of a shoestring operation, and we don't need a huge listening audience. So that was the idea of starting *Serial.* It was kind of only once we started making it that I realized, "God, podcasting is really suited to serialized storytelling." Every episode can be however long you want; it's listening on demand; you can have as many episodes as you want, or as few as you want; you're not servicing any larger system. It was so many levels of, "It just doesn't matter, nobody cares, you can do whatever you want." So it was handy in the way that it all went together. And now, we'll see how long this podcast gravy train keeps going; [*laughter*] as long as we can make some money off of it, we'll continue. I think, for the most part, a lot of the new shows that I'm working on and that we're developing are serialized, and they're for podcast. For the first time, we're actually starting to think: what does it mean to be a serialized show? Because there was no intentionality on the serial nature of *Serial,* going into it. It was just one story we come back to every week. Also, in the first season of *Serial,* the story that we launched with was basically a story about a murder; there were a lot of different things that we wanted to explore, but there was one overarching question of trying to figure out who did it. It's a really easy structure in that way. It's leading you when you're doing it, and things are starting to fall in line. We didn't really quite realize that at the time—you're kind of falling backwards into all of that stuff. So as we're looking at other stories, and choosing different stories to do, we're finding that we're having to define seriality a little bit more—not as rules, but just more like what works and what doesn't work. Suspense is actually a really big question. Do you need suspense? Because that can also be this yoke on you; I don't want to have to do these mechanics all the time, to have to try and draw people through. Is there a different way that we can approach this, where we don't have to feel that we're in a suspense world the whole time? And I think we're doing it. Actually, my colleague Brian Reed is here—he is now the current senior producer of *This American Life,* but he is also the host of the new podcast that he and I are making right now, that will also be serialized, maybe. [Ed.: The podcast was *S-Town,* released six months after this event, on March 28, 2017.] It all gets released at once, so we were asking: does that define it as serialized or not? You can decide. [*laughter*] I think that's one of the questions that we've had: "How do we break out of having to use suspense as some sort of MacGuffin of serialized storytelling? Is there a different way that we can approach

it?" And I don't know—we're messing around with it right now, and we're seeing. So that's kind of the world that I'm in now.

SM: I'm going to throw out a bunch of questions, and then let you guys answer whichever one you want to answer. One is to actually have you break down more this idea of *suspense.* Because in listening to all of you talk, especially Lev and Julie, it seems there's the suspense of the *conflict*—which is, what's going to happen next? We have characters who want to get something or do something; will they be able to do it? In *Serial,* I think that's actually applied to the narrator herself: will she find out what happened? There is also the suspense created by *mystery,* which is applied to the past: what happened? There's something that's moving forward in the future, and something referring to the past. Suspense is actually quite a complex concept, and worth, I think, teasing out more. To the extent that you don't want to be shackled to suspense: do you want to let go of mystery, do you want to go with conflict? If yes, then what comes in its place?

A second question: I'd love to hear all of you talk about the nuts and bolts of the *unit.* I've always been struck by how most comedies are half an hour, and most dramas are an hour. But most comedies have at least four characters; it's not as though they're just focused on one person. Is there something inherently funnier about compression, and inherently dramatic about the slightly longer one-hour format? Julie just said that one of the appeals of podcasts is that you don't have to have a very fixed episode time. How did you decide whether some episodes should be shorter or longer? In film, the unit is two hours, or ninety-five minutes; how does that affect seriality, when the minimum unit that you would be presumed to watch in one sitting is so much longer?

Third, I would like to hear anyone who cares to speculate more on the interplay between the recent and the long history of seriality in the forms you work in. What does the sort of renaissance of seriality, especially but not exclusively in young adult fiction, have to do with the long history of seriality? Let's date it back to the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, but I'm sure that we could date it before that. Is this a *Harry Potter* effect? Was *Harry Potter* actually coming out of something else? It was interesting to hear Tony talk about *Star Wars;* there's the temporality of our recent past, and then there's a much longer one. Similarly with film, we have *Thin Man* films in the '30s, and we have *The Perils of Pauline*—lots of silent film was serial. There have been different moments of seriality in film. I was also struck by something you said, Tony, about the populism of seriality, in contrast, say, to the avant-garde. There actually are thirteen-hour movies that people—a *few* people—will sit through that Godard made, or Jacques Rivette made. Jacques Rivette made a serial called *Out 1*—

AOS: —for television, though. In almost every case, originally for television—like *Berlin Alexanderplatz.* But *Out 1* was never broadcast on television. It disappeared for a long time, and he re-cut it into a feature. I don't know how many of you have

seen it; it is in ninety-minute episodes. And the first one is two avant-garde acting troupes basically doing exercises, lying on the floor and grunting, for ninety minutes. So you could see why French television would say, well, okay . . . [*laughter*] we might not be able to get people to episode 2.

SM: In episode 2, they get up off the floor! [*laughter*]

AOS: And then a plot develops, a very crazy and increasingly complicated plot.

SM: It's based, loosely, on a Balzac novel in three related parts that can be read autonomously. I find it interesting that we can't imagine anyone sitting through a thirteen-hour movie and yet we have all now become—for better or for worse—completely accustomed to watching thirteen hours of a show, as though that is not giving over a significant chunk of our lives.

Fourth, I'm curious to hear you speculate, with the emphasis on speculate, about the historical explanations we might give for serialization's renaissance, explanations that are not internal to the history of radio, film, and TV as media forms. I'll give you my conspiracy theory. I've always been struck by how this turn toward watching long TV shows coincided with the aftermath of 9/11. There was the immediate response to September 11th—we're all nesting again, no one wants to go out, everyone just wants to sit inside, maybe redo their cabinets, hunker down. TV is a very intimate medium; and I think everybody in the US was seeking new ways to self-medicate. Rather than protest in the streets every week, many of the people who opposed George W. Bush's policies started watching season after season of *The Wire*.

That said, I have a less pessimistic view of self-medicating than Tony does of proletarianization; my take is somewhere between "Oh, we're all having so much fun now, TV is great again" and "We're all being conscripted into just keeping these different cultural industry machines going."

What thoughts do you three have about "why now?" Obviously, some of it has to do with changes in media and technology—but those changes took off for bigger reasons.

To recap the four questions: 1) conflict and suspense; 2) the unit—half-hour, hour, two-hour; 3) the formal history of serialization in your chosen genre; and 4) wild, crazy speculations about social and political reasons why in the last decade many have embraced extended viewing and listening.

JS: When I think of serialization, I think it's interesting to think of how people are consuming it. There's the serialization that is, you gotta wait for the next episode. And then there's the bingeing. "Bingeing" to me feels like, are we starting to parse? Because what's the difference between that and a novel having chapters? Or just stopping whenever you want, and then picking up again? I have learned a lot from my own consumption about how we can make stuff. In terms of suspense, one of the things that was instructive for me, is that I'm very late coming to *Game of Thrones*. I didn't want to do *Game of Thrones*—it was described to me as "titty

dragons." I just thought, I don't think I'm doing either of those. I'm not a dragon person; "titty dragons," no, that's not for me. So I sat it out, because I thought, that's for sci-fi nerds. And then I also thought, I don't know if this is any good. I kind of just kept on waiting. It was only in the last year that I felt that there were enough people who I really trust, who said, "*Game of Thrones* is *awesome!*" And largely I was really jealous of America this spring, when there was the season finale of the sixth season. I was just aware of it—in the world, on the Internet. I'd been aware when they'd had the Red Wedding and everyone was doing these videos of themselves responding to the episode. I just thought, "Aargh—I'm one of you! I am a consumer, and I want to be with you guys!"—but I missed it. So, finally, after seeing people saying, "No, no, no, it's really good," I started watching *Game of Thrones* in the spring, and bingeing it. So I'm not watching it on the weekly thing, I'm totally behind everybody else. I'm four seasons in now, so I'm movin.' The thing is: I don't have this anxiety watching it, of, do these guys know where they're going? Do they have an end, is there a story, does this have a pur-pose? Is this going to be *Lost* all over again at the end, where I'm just like "[sound of frustration], you had no plan!" I have a comfort in it, because people have told me, "No, it's a totally enjoyable experience, and it's good." And *that* for me was really instructive—the notion of knowing that there is a confidence and a comfort that they know where they're going, that they have a story to tell, that it's a good story, that they're taking you through. That's one of the things that I'm interested now with serialized storytelling, of thinking, is there a way for us to approach it, where we're showing the same level of competence, and the same confidence, presenting the story, where we're essentially saying, "Trust me, don't freak out, don't think about, 'Do these guys know where they're going'"? Much of the first season of *Serial,* because the protagonist really was the host of the show, we went by the seat of our pants, and we were just flowing our way through. I think that's where a lot of the suspense came from, and it was fun to listen to; is Sarah going to even be able to figure out how to land this thing? Whereas, if we're not building off that, maybe we go into it in a way where you're really storytelling, and they're almost like parable kinds of things, or where you're saying, "I have a story to tell you, I already know the beginning, I know the middle, and I know the end, and trust me, you're going to enjoy it, let's go." And that to me feels like I then would stick with somebody through that. But it kind of depends on how you're going to experience the story—I mean, I don't know what the intentions of the *Game of Thrones* creators were when they first started making it.

SM: When watching a mainstream Hollywood movie, I can tell in the first minute if the people who made it knew what they were doing. Whereas TV critics often write, "Well, the first two episodes take a while to get going, but then it gets bet-ter"—there's more room in TV. If you don't want to do that work yourself, you can wait until other people have test-driven the show for you. Tony and Lev, pick your

poison on these questions.

AOS: I was going to attempt a two-minute grand synthesis of questions 2, 3, and 4. I'll do it very quickly, like Monty Python summarizing Proust. It seems to me that the unit is a really interesting question, and the unit is often partly an artifact of technology and of economics. So a feature film is ninety minutes to two hours. That has to do with how many showings a theater can get in, so that the exhibitors can get their cut and make money and stay in business. It also has to do with the capacity of the human bladder. [*laughter*] No, really. And similarly the half-hour-/hour-long, or 22- and 48-minute, units of comedy and drama on television have to do with blocks of programming, with the grid, with selling advertising. What's interesting about the rise of digital platforms is that they start to dissolve these units, and to break them down. I think we're just really at the beginning of a reorganization of the boundaries that we had assumed were kind of fixed and formal, say between cinema and television. Now if we're increasingly watching these things on the same apparatus: is a 90-minute-long thing a feature film, or is it connected to something else? And if you're talking about television—and this is a question that critics face a lot now, in the era of the binge-watch or the simultaneous drop of a whole season—what *is* the unit? Is the unit an episode? Is the unit an arc? Is the unit a season? Is the unit seven seasons—the whole thing? And you can watch the whole thing as if it were one thing. My son and I this summer re-watched *The Sopranos,* and it was kind of like we were watching a whatever, seventy-hour movie—

SM: As if Jacques Rivette had remade *The Godfather.*

AOS: Nicely put. And so I think that the question of the unit and the question of the history are kind of the same, and have to do, getting to question 4, with the organization of time, which I think is part of what the new rise of serialization is about: how we organize the different tasks, how we even are maybe experiencing the breaking down of boundaries between work time and leisure time, between domestic space and public space, between our own private imagination and the world of commerce and culture. I think that if you think about how television used to happen, the units were distributed over time in a certain predictable way. So if it was Thursday night, you had to be on the couch at 8:30 if you wanted to see *Welcome Back, Kotter,* for example. And, you know, the movie would play at a certain time at the theater, and you'd have to go to the theater. And certain forms—there were sitcoms until ten, and there was serious drama after ten. There were cartoons on Saturday morning so that Mom and Dad could sleep in and have sex; and all of those ways of organizing time—

LG: Is that what that was for?

AOS: It took me a long time to figure that out—and the fact that there aren't any more is a problem [*laughter*]—

SM: And yet we keep having children.

AOS: Now we just give them iPads to play with. This is an incomplete hypothesis; but my speculation is that this is related to the organization of time, to the blurring of the boundary between work and leisure, to maybe the rise of the gig economy, the precarious economy—however you talk about it—this work that we're always supposed to be doing, that we're theoretically free to do on our own time, as much or as little as we want, but that creates enormous obligations and anxieties of its own around us.

LG: You've reminded me of something that I find very interesting, when you describe the way in which we consume these units of entertainment, and how it's changing. What I feel is happening is, the way we consume these episodes and movies is increasingly book-like. The hallmark of reading, especially reading in a codex format, is the massive amount of control you have over it. You take it everywhere; if you want to go back through, you can review a chapter, you can jump back and forth, you read at your own pace, you can control the speed. That didn't used to be the case with video entertainment at all; you had to be in a particular place, you had sit through huge volumes of advertising. And when it was done, you had to remember it really carefully, because you couldn't go back over it; and it was not on YouTube, because there was no YouTube. All that's changed, and in a way it's very new but in a way it's very old—because that's simply how we consume literature. And one of the great things it allows people to do, when they're making episodes, I think, is to almost max out the kind of interpretive density of them; they become very crammed with incident and very crammed with visual information. And they can do that because there are these long pauses, and there are these huge communities, and there is that control which allows you to go back over these episodes and wring meaning out of them, which has been encoded in this increasingly dense, compressed way, which wouldn't have made sense twenty years ago. But now we have the resources to get that stuff out.

SM: I love the idea that, instead of digital media having killed the book, digital media represents the extension of the book's empire. One final question before we open things up to the audience: Would each of you talk about *fandom*—how serialization has a specific relationship to fandom that promotes some of its addiction, investment, and passion—and how fans affect the production of subsequent episodes? That's something that you hear a lot about, even in Victorian times: people writing and saying, "Don't kill off this character," or "I want to see more of that character." Certainly one of the characteristics of digital media is the speed with which fans can communicate to various kinds of makers, and hear one another; fans' voices are really amplified. As creators, do you try to ignore fans' voices, and as a critic, what do you think about franchises and fandom, and their mutual relationship?

LG: I find this hugely interesting, because there is this massive amount of information, as a creator, that's coming in over the transom that never existed before—

that huge, huge volume of feedback that comes at you as you are extending the story. There's a term for doing what the fans want, which is fan service—you know, making two characters kiss, killing off somebody that everybody hates. You *know* what they want. And what it really highlights is the strange perversity of storytelling—because fan service is generally not very good. When you give fans what they believe that they want, or what they are able to articulate that they want, they are generally medium-happy to get it. What you realize is how perverse the consumption of narrative is, because so much of it is about having your desires frustrated.

SM: It comes back to suspense. If you keep doing what people expect to happen, people don't feel there is suspense. Suspense involves guessing what's going to happen, and being wrong at least half the time.

LG: Again, talking about perversity: writing a novel, you're at least to some extent pre-occupied with closure. You don't want to over-close because, you know, life goes on, and if it stops resembling reality, it becomes pat. But with the massive focus on suspense and cliffhangers, it's like a lack of closure has become substituted for closure. The goal of a narrative is not to get to the—I'm trying to avoid a sexual metaphor here—the goal at the end is not to attain completion but to increase titillation to the maximum moment of frustration . . . I failed to avoid it [*laughter*]—

JS: There's no way you're avoiding it! [*laughter*]

LS: And then, just to leave you there. That becomes the goal of storytelling. It's not about closure; it's sort of about its opposite.

SM: Well, that's what critics have always said about TV, especially about genres such as soap opera—it's always about endlessness, endlessness, endlessness. Fake closure.

AOS: I think the fan question is an interesting one, and it's one that especially as a critic, it's hard to work with. You're very aware, as a critic, of the fans who are out there and of what they think of you, and of your constant treachery, in a way. Because fandom is about loyalty, I think. There is a lot of very advanced and sophisticated critical discourse that comes out of fan culture; but what ultimately separates critics from fans is that allegiance or loyalty, the sense of being a partisan of these stories, of these characters, and also of these corporate brands. I went to Comic-Con last year and was really struck again by my own confusion or ambivalence—because on the one hand, it seems like a remarkably vibrant, democratic space in which fans are interacting with and appropriating and remaking these things that they love; on the other, it seems like an entirely branded commercial space. Maybe those things only seem contradictory to a kind of broken-down old graduate school Marxist like me. But nonetheless, it's an interesting kind of tension or contradiction.

JS: The fan interaction with *Serial* . . . [pause] It's very confusing for me and complicated, and honestly I don't have anything smart to say about it, because I think I'm still sort of processing it. It wasn't comfortable-feeling.

SM: Can you give some examples?

JS: We're doing journalism. So we're trying to report a story; it was about sticking to the truth. We're trying to represent people in three-dimensional ways, we're trying to get everything across. It just feels like we got hit a bit by an onslaught of fandom that you see in fiction realms, and that was simultaneous with when we were still creating the story. And it was really confusing, and it was very difficult to do, and I still haven't—I don't know, I don't know.

AOS: Because you had people who seemed to be rooting for a particular outcome.

JS: No kidding.

SM: But that's interesting. You were doing journalism, but you were also, consciously or not, echoing the format of a trial, where we have evidence from multiple sides, and we're asked to adjudicate, and the ultimate adjudication in this country is done by a jury of ordinary people. Another way to think about the fans is not just that they were rooting for a particular outcome, but that they were acting like a jury.

JS: There was one point, while we were in the middle of the first season of *Serial*—it was some coffee shop right up here by Columbia—and Sarah Koenig told me, she had gone in, and there was a tip jar next to the cash register, and one said, "Adnan did it" and one said, "Jay did it"—who are the two characters, two of the people in the story—and you were supposed to tip on it. And it makes you want to puke.

SM: That's why they sequester juries.

JS: It just felt like—"This isn't what we intended, this isn't what we wanted. This feels gross to us." As I said, we thought we were going to get the grad school crowd; we didn't think of "fans." We'd been doing public radio, I've been at *This American Life* for eighteen years—it's one of the largest public radio shows. We've weathered storms, we've been in the news—for public radio world, admittedly a rather small world. But still, I'd seen blowups before, we'd been through a kind of controversy, we'd been through things; and I'd never ever seen anything like what happened with *Serial* and the audience reaction to it.

SM: Do you have speculation about why it took off the way it did?

JS: Yeah. I feel like it's a bunch of different things, that probably would be kind of boring to go into. I do have speculation about that. But I think that for me, the fan stuff was trying to figure out what we did wrong, what we were taking responsibility for, where my guilt should lie. It was complicated and kind of stressful, and something that I don't think I'll ever shake.

SM: I'd love to open things up to you guys now.

Audience member: I have a question for A. O. I really enjoyed the piece that you did with your colleague around Hollywood's challenges representing black humanity. [Ed.: Manohla Dargis and A. O. Scott, "Hollywood, Separate and Unequal"; *The New York Times,* 9/16/16.] My question is about the intersection between seriality and race. If you look at the contemporary moment, what we're seeing now is,

Hollywood has made a slight turn—they're still exceptional narratives, but they are movies based on the history of transatlantic slavery. It looks like there will be a few more of these coming. But I wonder if, in terms of countering the effects that you're writing about in that piece, in terms of how Hollywood flattens out the humanity of black folks: is there a way in which serial narratives can maybe counter some of that? I'm thinking about the *Underground* TV show, which gives a little more space and complexity to some of these things; I'm also thinking about the relationship between the latest iteration of *Roots* versus the earlier one. Do you think that we can draw some distinctions between some of these stand-alone films about exceptional black figures, versus what we're seeing a little bit more around some of the more serialized ones, that are a little bit grainier and a little bit more substantive?

AOS: I do think—and other writers have written about this too—that it is one of the notable differences or divergences between television and film right now; although it's weird to talk about them sometimes as if they're different things, because obviously they're corporate siblings. But the serial format on television now is, in general, much more welcoming of and nurturing of diverse narratives of all different kinds—whether it's *Transparent,* or *Orange Is the New Black,* or *Black-ish.* These are from digital services, and cable; but it's also network. *Black-ish* and *Jane the Virgin* and *Fresh off the Boat*—those are network shows. I think that some of that has to do with the different economics, I think, of television and Hollywood—and just the fact that television is right now, for whatever reason, more open and more experimental. Hollywood, both at the studio level and the indie level, is in a phase of conservatism and retrenchment and caution, because they're freaked out about the loss of their business model, and so they're not as willing to take chances; that's part of it. So I do think that there's just more room on television, and in a way there's more room in serial narratives, for the development of all different kinds of characters, who can be shown in a finer human grain. Whereas somehow for feature filmmaking—and this is true, unfortunately in spite of some of the exceptions that we're going to see coming out into theaters this year—like *Birth of a Nation* and *Moonlight* and *Fences* and some others—still, the default narrative is a white guy's troubles. And part of why we wrote that piece is just that—we have nothing against white men and their troubles. But if we're going to see one hundred movies, do ninety-eight of them have to be about that? It's possible to overstate this; you talk to people who work in television—women and people of color and queer creators—and it's not like easy street, it's not a picnic. But nonetheless there is a sort of an appetite and an openness there to take some chances on these things.

Audience member: My question relates the idea of unit to the discussion of time. I'm thinking about the example of *24,* which really kicked off the whole binge-watching idea. Fans who had missed it, who had missed the appointment television of

watching it, began over the summer to watch it in a 24-hour unit—in other words, taking the creators at their word, and saying this was a 24-hour experience. And that gave the creators a sense that they didn't have to do the cliffhanger each and every episode, if they knew that half of their audience was going to be watching in a different way. I wonder to what extent the original time frame of certain works resists binge-watching. When is a work destroyed by binge-watching, and when is it enhanced by it?

JS: I don't have an answer. For me, for what I've created, experiencing it episode by episode or bingeing it—I didn't think about it before we started making it. We were a weekly radio program; and so when we made a podcast, we didn't even talk about it. It'll just be weekly—basically because that's the rhythm that we knew, and we need a deadline. If we're going to say we're going to release it all at once, we knew, for God's sake, we'll never get that done. So I thought people would listen to it weekly. I didn't know, I wasn't really sure. I didn't think about it. And then since then, it's very clear, two-thirds of our audience—probably even more, honestly—listens to it all at once. I don't know what that different experience is, is to hear [*Serial*] all at once, as opposed to hearing it week by week. I think if you're going to do week by week—it's fun to delay the gratification to the following week, and it's fun experiencing it with other people, too. Probably if I were making something and I really thought, "I want to encourage people to do the week by week," I'd pay a lot more attention to trying to make sure that final kicker was enjoyable.

LG: As somebody who has many small children, binge-watching is something that I have never experienced—it's simply impossible. [*laughter*] I'm aware though, just watching them make *The Magicians,* of how densely they make it. I feel as though they are anticipating that people will re-watch it before the next episode, that it will sort of be allowed to sit there and resonate for a week before they watch the next one. People will be able to discuss online, to try to figure out with their friends—"Wow, what actually happened? Because that was really complicated." I feel as though, because people do binge, you're having to make entertainment for two very different watching experiences. My sense is that they privilege the week by week; they don't think about the bingers. They probably put in stuff that the bingers miss, just because there is this weight of interpretation that has to be done.

Audience member: I have a question for Julie. One of the big pitfalls of serialization is just the audience's memory—and historically serials like Dickens has written have put in certain factors to kind of counteract that effect, like overt characterization, or some kind of construction of the plot. How did *Serial* as a podcast kind of counteract the effects of the form, in the content?

JS: That's definitely true—especially if you're dealing with something that's very dense, and you're really in the details, and you're wanting somebody to recall something that you had talked about two episodes earlier. In that way it was trying, when going through the details, to be very clear about what this detail means to *me*. So

first, Sarah Koenig is the protagonist in the story—because she's the one who asks the question, and she's the only one who's doing anything. Everybody else—we're talking about a story that happened fifteen years in the past, we're talking about a guy who's in prison, he's not doing anything. So she's the one who's doing something, she's living in the details. And what we realized as we were going forward was that she wanted the listener to catch up and be where she was, and understand the story the way she understood it—but then you had to really know the details. I think this even happened on our second episode, which was about the breakup. And I was like, "Oh my God, this is so boring, I feel like you're just telling me about the breakup of two seventeen-year-olds who dated for like eight months fifteen years ago—who cares?" And more, it was: "Well, wait, so why are you telling me this?" And it's saying, "Because I don't think the details of this add up to somebody having enough of a motive to kill somebody—I think this is too mundane, I think this is too much like every other relationship that you would ever see in high school, and I just don't see that this is enough." And so then [the listener would think]: "Okay, then I need you to tell me." Even if the listener doesn't agree, that's fine; but they need to understand why it's significant to you, and what you're making of it. That's why a thread that we kept all the way through with that kind of storytelling was, "Here's what I make of it, here's what I think; you can think something else, but here's what I'm making of it"—just so that you understand the significance of what those details are. So that was essentially the plan we had going through, exactly for that—the fact that you're thinking, "Oh my God, I'm asking you to remember a cell phone tower that I pointed out two episodes ago."

AUDIENCE MEMBER: My question is for everybody, but it's based in the loyalty of fandoms that you were talking about. When you talked about how there's this consumer patron that sustains these franchises, I thought about how we consume these serials, and how there's always that kid who waited for their Hogwarts admission letter in the mail, and this obsessive desire to be a part of these universes that are kind of being fed to you. So, in light of that, do you think that this renaissance of new seriality has bred a new kind of escapism in media or in literature? Like the binge-watching, and the need to integrate yourself into the universe—because it's so well established through these Comic-Cons and all these conventions and these gimmicks.

LG: I definitely think the answer is yes; but I'm not sure how to talk about it. One of those things that comes with the emphasis on suspense that we talked about before is this sense that there's a promise that there will be another episode. Even leaving aside, or stripping out any sense of narrative, [the promise] that you will simply be able to remain in this universe, and it will abide in a way that fictional universes don't ordinarily. I think it's a huge part of the way people experience fiction—it generates vast volumes of fan fiction. It also results in a huge amount of re-reading; I feel like the re-readness of the *Harry Potter* books is a little bit

unprecedented—and it's hard to say what people are doing when they re-read them. But I feel it has much more to do with world-building, and the sense of immersion; that has come to the fore in a way that I don't know that it has before.

AOS: And also companionship. I think actually that one of the reasons that you go back to the worlds, or want those worlds to keep going, is to spend more time with the people in them. One of the clichés about television—but I think that does explain it—is that it's character-driven, more than it's plot-driven. And it's about the complicated ways that people identify with, or like, or hate, or root for, or just want to be with these people who become a circle of friends and intimates and familiars—across all of the different genres. So, people binge-watch and re-watch sitcoms; people will go back and watch *Friends,* for example. Why? That was one of the big questions when *Friends* came back up on Netflix. Why are all these millennials, who were not born when that show was on, suddenly binge-watching all of that maybe-not-very-good (I'll go out on a limb) show? It's summed up in the title; these are people you can hang out with. And I think that goes a little bit to what Sharon was saying before about the post-9/11 desire for comfort and for familiarity. It's not just an escape; whatever else is going on in your world, there's Ron and Hermione and Harry, or there's Dunder Mifflin, or Sterling Cooper, or whatever. Wherever you want to be, you can go there and find those people, and spend some more time with them.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: My question is related to something Julie Snyder said about *Game of Thrones,* and having that comforting feeling of knowing someone is going to take you to a certain place, or that there was that competence. And I relate to that a lot. But I'm wondering how aware of that impulse and feeling we should be, and how trusting of it. Some of the best movies, or whatever forms of art, in the beginning challenge perceptions of how that specific piece of art is going to tell its story. I know that doesn't maybe apply as much to television and movies, where we're kind of used to the forms of storytelling. But I'm curious about how long we should give something before we say, "They have no idea what they're doing"—and how much room we should allow for people to be experimental and improvisational in storytelling.

JS: I know—it's a personal choice, of when you're going to put that book down. You just kind of keep on experimenting and seeing what works and what doesn't work. I think for me—going back to talking about fans—coming through the public radio world, we're not focus-grouping audiences. There's not a lot of thought that goes into fan service, in that way. It's more of a golden rule: "I like this, and I would like this if this were out in the world, so I'm going to assume that other people are going to like this, too." But we all like experimenting, and doing new things, and trying different forms. In podcasting, there's this new medium where people can be more experimental—and the stakes are really low, because it's not that expensive. I don't know if you could ever see that in film; maybe with the

digital [changes]. But that's what's nice, right? Usually when those bars are a little low, you start seeing a lot more creativity.

Audience member: I keep coming back to this question of "Why seriality now?"— and this phenomenon that I still feel is a Netflix plot of talking about "bingeing," as something that is separate from the previous forms of seriality. I'm very attracted to Lev's notion of the full drop being a kind of a book-ification of the serial unit, as opposed to necessarily a "binge." That implies almost an out-of-body state—atomized and isolated. Maybe you're not really getting to digest; you're just going to eat this and vomit it forth—or you're so drunk that you're binge-drinking, or that sort of thing. Myself, I have never opted to listen or watch or read anything quite that way; although I will say that the one thing that I have quote-unquote binged is the *Serial* podcast—for the simple reason that, both times, I listened to them on cross-country trips with my family. And this has been an incredible opportunity to find out what my thirteen-year-old son versus my twenty-two-year-old son versus my husband and me think about the terrific topics that you have looked at in that way. So it didn't feel like a binge; it felt like the enrichment of a drive that otherwise would have been really boring. This brings me to a question about the many, many different kinds of serial genres and temporalities, and the need to ask, "What's similar, what's different?" A lot of really good serials, including the *Serial* podcast, are multi-plotted, in ways that most films are not—they don't really have the time to be—and often single novels are not. I think that that multi-plottedness, that level of asking the viewer/listener to cognize and compare and make patterns, is part of what drives the interest to look at something over time. I guess maybe I'm too optimistic about it. But, as against the "binge" discourse, I actually see these media as slowing things down, even if we do listen to it in one car trip. So that we can get to hear about a murder case from multiple angles, or get to hear a story from different kinds of modes and plots that map onto each other. Film hasn't quite figured out a way to mobilize that, simply because it hasn't yet found a way to get people to look at the same thing in the same format in the overlapping way that people will now consider some recent serial, which is out there over an extended enough period of time to get more and more people talking about it.

JS to AOS: Did you like *Boyhood*?

AO: Yeah, quite a lot.

JS: And don't you feel like that's almost like a serial film, inside one thing?

AOS: Completely, yeah. One thing I would say, because I think it is true that the kind of narrative density that Lev is talking about, and the multiplicity of incidents and plots and threads, is something that film has not done: it's partly because film is not, I would say, a narrative genre in quite the same way. Plot is almost never the most interesting thing about a film; it's a much more image-driven and emotion-driven medium. It's more, in some ways, like opera. You wouldn't complain that, "Well, this opera, it only has one plot, it's only about one person, she's only

doing one thing. Where are all the other people—what about them?" Because I think that cinema, classically or conventionally understood, has that singularity of focus. That's one of the things that makes it different from television. Whenever the "is TV better than movies, why aren't movies as good as TV?" thing comes around, I always want to say, "Well, because there are some differences in what each of these forms are trying to do, and how good they are at doing." I think that one of the problems with the franchise—with serialization as it exists now in film—is that it's trying to do something that's not really within the highest competence of the medium. You're going to sit there, it's going to be 150 minutes, or whatever the hell it is, and it has to have all these action sequences which are completely boring because they're exactly the same as all the other ones, and which are just showcases for whatever the FX labs are coming up with—and then you have to wait three years for the next episode. I mean, that's a terrible way to experience the joys of seriality, whether you're bingeing or going once a week or whatever. And is anyone ever going to sit down and binge-watch all of the Marvel Universe feature films? You would die; [*laughter*] of boredom, if nothing else. So I think that what you're touching on is still important, in spite of the fact that I was saying before that the boundaries are blurring, and the distinctions are not what they used to be.

Audience member: I just wanted to remind everyone that the consumption of serial narratives hasn't changed as much—we might think that we are in a moment where everything's changing completely, but I think these things have been there before. They're in different forms now. Serial narratives, especially soap operas, structured the everyday rhythms, weekly rhythms of people's lives—even film series, and film serials especially in early cinema. I think what we're seeing now is that our lives are more fragmented than they used to be. The way we use or watch these or consume these—be it podcasts or television series—is still structuring our everyday lives; it does it in a different way. It provides some kind of stability still. I think that's what we also get, when we look at cinema, and have those old action heroes come back—that happened all in 2008, 2006. You have Rocky and Rambo and Indiana Jones and John McClane coming back to the big screen. And I think that actually might have to do something also with 9/11, where you have those action heroes coming back, and they're still there, so that you have this kind of stability that maybe our everyday lives can't give us any more. I think that's something that is still structuring our everyday lives. The question I have then is for Tony, about the movies that we saw this year and also last year—Episode VII [of *Star Wars*] and also *Ghostbusters*. Okay, they play with nostalgia obviously; but it felt like a different kind of moviemaking. It seemed that there is something different happening now than you find in earlier films—maybe because we have of course so many intertextual references.

AOS: And a kind of self-consciousness about the story that you're working in. I think

the makers of these movies and the people involved in them want to be careful not to be too overtly ironic, or to parody or depart too much from what the fans call canon—but also not just simply to remake or recapture or revisit these things. There have been a lot of examples—yes, *Star Wars* and *Ghostbusters,* but also the continuing *Star Trek* franchise, the return of the *Mad Max* movies after a long hiatus—unusually, the same director who had directed them before—*Jurassic Park,* the last *Rocky* movie as well. A lot of these were reaching back to some earlier pop cultural moment—and trying to figure out how to update and re-engineer, and bring these stories in line with current tastes and sensibilities and the state of the genre, without losing the essential DNA of the thing. It's interesting to see how fans reacted differently—and what was embraced, and what was rejected; and it's interesting because some of those movies actually turned out to be pretty good, finding something new, as well as something comforting and reassuring and familiar.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: This question is about adaptation and seriality, and mostly how it relates to material or media, or changes in format, in the adaptation process. Obviously there are stories that are really popular, and are adapted into other media, in different time periods or in contemporary atmospheres. But I'm wondering what happens when a particular iteration of a story asks of its readers to cross multiple types or formats or vehicles of storytelling. I'm thinking in particular about the new Harry Potter play, which posits that it is a continuation of the Harry Potter story; it's not part of J. K. Rowling's own tradition, but it is sort of part of the Harry Potter tradition. So it's asking to be considered alongside those original novels. Or, the Marvel films that have TV-show counterparts—like *Jessica Jones,* or *Daredevil.* My question more directly is: what are your thoughts on what happens to seriality when its audience members are asked to interact with different vehicles or formats or types?

LG: It makes me think of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*—which is the earliest example I can think of, where it was at least a radio play, a TV show, a book, and a movie, and maybe it was something else. I'm not sure exactly how to answer that extremely provocative question. It *is* an ask. And what often I see happening is a fracturing of the canon, where what was once a comfortingly coherent universe fractures into book canon and TV canon—which seem to lessen the authenticity of both at the same time. Yes, something is hazarded; and I feel like it could break either way. With *Cursed Child,* people seem to have embraced it pretty vigorously as part of canon. But I can certainly think of examples where it hasn't paid off, and it somehow seems to detract from the sense of the force or permanence or meaning of the entire fictional universe—including retroactively, whatever it was based on.

SM: I want to ask you to join me in thanking our panelists, and the conference organizers. [*applause*] Thank you.