

Financial Times: Economic and Industrial Temporalities in Netflix's *Arrested Development*

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Julia Leyda¹

Abstract

Arrested Development occupies an important place in twenty-first-century American television culture, both because of its peculiar positioning as a “before” and “after” snapshot of the housing crisis, and because its experimental revival (Netflix’s first) occasioned a similar set of obstacles to those that plagued the original series. As a representation of and an instance of the financialization of domestic space, this series about the failures of a wealthy family itself courts failure as a complex and innovative television narrative.

Keywords

TV series revival, temporality, financialization, Netflix, failure, *Arrested Development*

Timing is everything in comedy, and in the TV business as well. This article argues that temporality provides a useful framework for understanding the relations between the cult comedy series *Arrested Development* (Fox, 2003–2006; Netflix, 2013–) and its shifting economic and industrial contexts. First broadcast on Fox during the years leading up to the U.S. housing crisis, this innovative comedy about a despicable wealthy family and their faltering real-estate company was praised for its narrative complexity: sophisticated writing, running gags, genre parody, and seamless ensemble cast performances (see Mills 2009; Mittell 2006; Thompson 2007). It also came into existence on the cusp of game-changing innovations in television, narrowly preceding the introduction of new distribution models such as online video-on-demand that would enable its revival for a fourth season seven years later. The revival’s home on streaming subscription portal Netflix had an instrumental role in shaping the

¹Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway

Corresponding Author:

Julia Leyda, Department of Art and Media Studies, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Edvard Bulls veg 1, 7491 Trondheim, Norway.

Email: julia.leyda@ntnu.no

substantial changes in narrative structure that met with mixed reception, though I would not go as far as the *New York Times*' Mike Hale (2013), whose review of the revival laments that "the Internet . . . killed *Arrested Development*." Rather, I argue that the 2013 revival provided an occasion for exploiting cultural contexts made visible by its basis in the postfinancial crisis era as well as the new possibilities in storytelling modes and viewing behaviors inherent in the Netflix platform. A closer look at Netflix's first high-profile revival, *Arrested Development*, supplies a crucial context for the television series revivals flooding the market today. This article will briefly theorize the financialization of domestic space before and after the housing market crash, establishing its relevance for my analysis of *Arrested Development* as a television series, including its revival. I then consider the unique temporal concerns of television series revivals in general and in terms of this series in particular, with attention to its temporalities of production and reception.

Financialization of Domestic Space

Arrested Development occupies a unique place in millennial American culture in part thanks to the wider social processes operating at the time of its inception, including financialization. Financialization is a concept that critical finance scholars such as Randy Martin (1999) and Fiona Allon (2010) have elaborated to describe the process by which the discourses and ways of thinking common to the finance industry have spread to formerly "private" domains such as the home and the personal relationships proper to it. Martin points to the increasingly deep penetration of the Internet into daily life starting in the late 1990s, which enabled the rise of the day trader and the plethora of online investment services and financial advice sites—duly supported by expanding offerings on cable television providing news and analysis of financial markets, investing, and business talk shows. Financial discourses have seeped into new areas of daily life in which, as neoliberal subjects, we are continually exhorted to develop ourselves as a brand, to "sell" ourselves via social media, and to find ways to monetize our free time (Banet-Weiser 2012; McGuigan 2016; Wilson 2018).

The process of financialization also includes the monetization of the home itself, which was once believed to consist of a separate domestic sphere of private relationships, spaces, and assets. Increasingly, that allegedly private homespace is also the site of the kinds of discourses and emotions that accompany financial transactions (Aalbers 2008). As Allon (2010, 368) points out, the twenty-first-century homeowner has become a "citizen-speculator required to depend on the home as a site of accumulation and an object of leveraged investment." I am especially interested in the financialization of domestic space that occurs at the intersection between conventional ideologies of homeownership and the intensifying financialization of the home, which in "everyday life is increasingly framed as a space of investment yielding both financial and personal returns" (Allon 2010, 367). This, I argue, pertains to both the representations of the domestic sphere in *Arrested Development*, and the ways in which the medium of television itself has undergone transitions in recent years that demand contextualization within the wider ongoing processes of financialization.

The privacy of the home has never been truly inviolate, and television only ensures its permeability to the outside. Indeed, David Morley (2004, 304) argues that “[t]he modern home can itself be said to be a phantasmagoric place to the extent that electronic media of various kinds allow the radical intrusion of distant events into the space of domesticity.” Moreover, American television has been advertising-driven since its inception, and thus always already commercial, but the proliferation of the online subscription service Netflix (along with other Internet-based entertainment portals such as Hulu and Amazon Prime) adds an additional layer of monetization to the already commercial enterprise of watching TV in your own home. In addition to paying subscription fees that guarantee access to the Netflix content library, every action a user takes while logged into her account provides data Netflix can feed into its ecosystem algorithms: not only the ratings the viewer doles out and the titles she selects to watch or save but also other details about her viewing such as days of the week, times of day, choice of device, and location (Meinrath et al. 2011; Jarrett 2015; Morozov 2016). This information contributes to the picture the corporation builds of each individual user, to be compared with the behavior of other users and to generate patterns and predictions, and to inform business decisions, including the development of original programming such as revival series (Vanderbilt 2013; see also Masnick 2013). The Netflix subscriber thus contributes to the company’s own profitability, as the mining of her data is used to feed back to her the kind of content and recommendations Netflix has learned she likes—a process that makes possible what Amanda Lotz (2017, chapter 1) dubs the “conglomerate niche strategy.” In this way, the Netflix customer not only conducts monthly financial transactions to maintain her subscription, but she also performs the free labor that fuels the Netflix algorithm with each mouse click, touchscreen tap, or remote control zap.

As Netflix and its ilk find newer and more efficient ways to monetize viewer lifestyle choices and behavior, private spaces and the leisure activities within them are more deeply imbued with the logics of the market, serving as spaces of commerce in which the corporation reaps the profits. The multiply financialized home thus figures into my analysis of the *Arrested Development* revival, both because of its origins in the streaming platform Netflix, as well as its thematics. The series itself, in the original three seasons and the revived fourth season, portrays the ways in which the Bluth family’s instability and callousness echoes and enables that of its company, effectively collapsing their continual personal failures into their business failures. Moreover, the series itself, both the original run and the Netflix revival, replicates the theme of Bluth failures in its own commercial failures: the broadcast series came up a loser in the Fox ratings game, while the Netflix iteration baffled even diehard fans with its convoluted aesthetic choices.

Situating *Arrested Development* in Pre- and Post-crisis Contexts

The original run of *Arrested Development* was produced and distributed during a stage of financialization in which the home was conceptually and representationally reconfigured into a site of economic risk and anxiety, culminating in the collapse of the

housing bubble and ensuing financial crisis shortly after the Fox series ended. The revival emerged into a post-financial-crisis, post-housing-crash environment in which audiences could view the content of the series—the Bluth family’s fraudulent real estate practices—with newly jaundiced eyes. With its feet firmly planted in both the pre- and post-crisis milieus, *Arrested Development* portrays the Bluth Company’s questionable business ethics and the Bluth family’s character flaws, laying bare in quite different ways these earlier and later moments of recent history. Both the company’s flimsy McMansions¹ and the tempestuous relationships they shelter, implicitly (in the original seasons 1–3) and explicitly (in the revived fourth season) condemn the way in which, Joshua Hanan maintains, the bubble years “intensified . . . neoliberal housing policies and brought to completion the immanent link between homeownership, subjectivity, and exploitation” (Hanan 2010, 186–87; see also Béland 2007). As I have argued elsewhere, by looking into the homes of the people who sell homes, the original *Arrested Development* satirizes the financialized subjectivities on display in the dysfunctional lives of the Bluths and their real-estate company: “The Bluths’ model home metonymically echoes the unhealthy housing market: both the Bluth home and the housing bubble were deceptively constructed for maximum profit and both proved to be dangerously unsound” (Leyda 2016, 165). In this article, I extend this argument into a consideration of the platform-inspired formal experimentation of the revived series, which ups the ante on the complex narrative structure of the original series—perhaps pushing it to the point of collapse.

In its first three seasons, immediately preceding the housing crisis, *Arrested Development* presciently spoofed the irresponsible financial practices that characterized the bubble just before it burst. Of course, the announcement of a revival always stimulates interest in re-viewing the original (see the introduction to this issue; see also McNutt, forthcoming), but with *Arrested Development* that was intensified because of the timing of the housing crisis. Indeed, for fans revisiting the original series after the crisis and during the interval between its cancellation and its revival, it was already possible to revel in the show’s uncanny timing, which produces a knowing sense of dramatic irony whereby they can retrospectively recognize how the series’ satire of the “wild west” real-estate market of the early millennium set the stage for the crash of 2007.² For example, the show features running gags turning on the shoddiness of the Bluth Company’s home construction, evidenced in the model home for a Bluth development called Sudden Valley where Michael Bluth (Jason Bateman) and his siblings live intermittently throughout the four seasons. In the first three seasons, the fake-looking house sits on a bare patch of dirt in the never-completed suburb, with a plastic turkey dinner on the dining table, plumbing that is not connected to any sewer system, and flimsy furnishings that constantly fall apart. Watching *Arrested Development* in reruns or on DVD after the crisis already provided ample opportunity to savor the dramatic ironies inherent in its complex cultural context, created as it was from 2003 to 2006, just prior to the housing collapse.

The fourth season, which critics and fans have found less entertaining than the original run (Graves 2012; Hale 2013), was released seven years after the cancellation of the original, and well after the crash and ensuing financial crisis. However, unlike



Figure 1. The buzzards are moving in.

most revivals that find ways to account for the passage of time since their cancellation (examples in this issue include *Twin Peaks*, *The X-Files*, *Fuller House*, and *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life*), *Arrested Development*'s revival picks up in the same time period where it left off—namely, immediately before the housing crash in 2007—and presents itself as a (much-belated) fourth season. Predictably, then, given its post-crisis context, the revival frequently and directly addresses the impact of the financial crisis on the Bluth family. Several episodes in the revival season satirize the runaway inflation that characterized the housing market and the unscrupulous lending that contributed to its collapse. For example, Michael forms his own company and completes construction of the subdivision, assuming that the city would soon build a road to the isolated development, whereupon buyers would flock to purchase homes there. For 2013 audiences watching the revival's portrayal of events set in 2006, knowing that the housing crisis will unfold just as the Bluth-built homes are being finished, the sight gag in the first episode of season 4 encapsulates the whole story: Michael stands in front of a "for sale" sign as a buzzard lands on it (Figure 1). Ironically named "Flight of the Phoenix," this episode depicts Michael's spectacular business failure resulting from the bad timing of his real estate development—which he hoped would rise like a phoenix from the ashes of the Bluth Company but instead is so moribund that it literally attracts carrion-feeding birds instead.

The revival, thus enabled by its now-retrospective view of the crisis, succumbs to some of the most obvious jokes, doling out poetic justice in its portrayal of the hapless Lindsay Bluth (Portia de Rossi) and her husband Tobias (David Cross), who have survived primarily on family money rather than earning any independent income of their own. In what feels like an inevitable plot development in episode 3, "Indian Takers," they fall prey to an unprincipled real-estate agent with offices in a strip mall,



Figure 2. Lindsay and Tobias purchase a McMansion at the height of the housing bubble.

and buy an enormous mansion (Figure 2). During their conversation about financing the house purchase, they explain that they are unemployed with no income, upon which the realtor tells them, “We have to be realistic. I’m in the real-estate business. It’s 2006. That’s all good enough for me!” and offers them a (fictitious) NINJA loan, which he explains is for borrowers with “no income, no jobs, no assets.” This scene also provided the basis for one of the most widely shared graphics interchange format (GIFs) from this season: a short loop of the almost always inappropriate Tobias exclaiming, “Oh, NINJA, please!” in the cadence of the popular African American catchphrase “Oh, n****, please!” The voiceover narrator, Ron Howard, tells us that at this point in pre-crash America, “banks were eager to create as much debt as possible,” as we watch Lindsay and Tobias quickly escalate their purchase from a cozy one-bedroom to a sprawling mansion with two master bathrooms, a butler’s kitchen, a wine cellar, a gatehouse, and more. They move into their new, unfurnished, cavernous home and the resulting gags—family members calling out for one another and not being heard, missing one another while walking from room to massive room—fall a bit flat in their predictability.

Made several years after the housing crash, and taking a retrospective view of it to show how it unfolds for the Bluths, these episodes lack the uncanny prescience of the earlier seasons, when the jokes about slapdash homebuilding and dodgy real-estate deals were just beginning to hit home. In the original series, these running gags frequently featured news media reports relaying disturbing allegations about the Bluth Company and its business practices. For example, “Key Decisions” (S1 E4) features a scene in which Michael watches the news in the model home. Fox correspondent Trisha Thoon (Stacey Grenrock Woods) appears in a suburban exterior shot, reporting on-camera about an environmentalist protesting the recent proliferation of “high-cost, low-quality mini-mansions,” raps her knuckles on the windowpane of a house that exemplifies her description; the camera cuts to Michael as he sees the pane of glass slide out of its frame and shatter on his living room floor. “You gotta be kidding

me,” he says wearily. The humor in this scene is predicated on the audience’s familiarity with the cheap housing made by the fictional Bluth Company that spoofs the real-world real estate that was proliferating across the booming housing markets in the years leading up to the crash; it can be intensified in postcrash viewings of the series whereby the viewer also knows the outcome of such unscrupulous business practices. Thus, unlike the more obvious and predictable postcrash jokes in the revival series, the humor in the original series attains more complexity retrospectively given the passage of time.

Temporalities of the TV Series Revival: Production

Temporality is always a delicate issue in TV series revivals. As Kathleen Lookock argues in the introduction to this special issue, “the main challenge lies in creating a comeback that is consistent with the show’s past but also manages to meaningfully ground the series revival in the present (ideally for an extended period of time).” The timing of the *Arrested Development* revival—several years after the housing crash—only underscores the foresight of the original series, and sets a high bar for the revival to not only meet the usual sets of expectations (to retain fidelity to the original series) but also to successfully exploit its retrospective view on the housing bubble and collapse. Myles McNutt points out that revivals bear “distinct narrative burdens shaped by public discourse and fan reception” that can “result in mixed reactions that highlight the double-edged sword of returning to these worlds in a contemporary context” (McNutt, forthcoming, n.p.). The *Arrested Development* revival does continue in the spirit of the original by taking aesthetic risks, namely, experimenting with new forms of complexity that ultimately limit its audience appeal, in ways that are influenced, and perhaps also ultimately undermined, by the move from broadcast network television to the streaming platform Netflix.

The temporalities of *Arrested Development*’s revival thus also signify at another level: that of the television and media industries. Scholars frequently cite the initial series as a casualty of bad timing: Fox canceled it due to poor ratings shortly before the advent of narrowcasting via on-demand subscription streaming services, which spurred major alterations in viewing habits that could have sustained the show despite its smaller viewership (Lotz 2014; Tryon 2013). Indeed, one critic points out that “[t]he terrible ratings that *Arrested Development* got back then would be moderately respectable today, now that the media universe has splintered into thousands of different little TLC-size pieces” (Leitch 2013). Despite the vociferous objections of its small fan base and frequently recurring rumors, the series was neither picked up by another network nor concluded with a feature film.³ Instead, *Arrested Development* circulated via reruns (IFC [the Independent Film Channel], aired all three seasons starting in 2009, two years before the debut of its own quirky hit comedy *Portlandia*), as well as illegal downloads and DVDs, and thus achieved a loyal following. According to Will Leitch (2013), its “resurrection is the direct result of the . . . advocacy of a small but rabid group of superfans who have become, over the seven years since the show went off the air, a kind of cult.”

The original series was ahead of its time in several crucial (and fatal) ways. As Jason Mittell (2006) has argued, *Arrested Development* was one of a vanguard of programs (most of them dramas) that radically altered the conventions of American television. The show's narrative complexity, self-reflexivity, and unapologetic seriality placed high demands on its audiences, as did the sophistication of its deadpan humor, delivered without a laugh track, in mockumentary style complete with voiceover (Mills 2009, 130–31). That complexity was widely praised as the show's primary appeal, obviating any need for thick characterizations or believable plots (Hale 2013), and inspiring dedicated fans over the years to create a vast Wikia site, numerous Reddit threads, assorted GIFs, memes, and infographics, as well as intriguingly sophisticated interactive online apps such as NPR's "Previously, on *Arrested Development*," which spatially and thematically organizes the running gags of the four seasons by character and episode, with links to snippets of dialogue and mouseover-generated cross-references (Bowers et al. 2013; see also Beutler Ink 2013). The density of the first three seasons of the series amply rewards attentive repeat viewings, even though when it was first broadcast on Fox, most "viewers didn't have the tools to play along" in such collective online activities (Stelter 2013).

Despite its small, devoted following, the show was canceled, one could argue, *because* of "the insane, futile genius of *Arrested Development*—a show that demanded the kind of giddy Internet dissections we do regularly now, but before there was any real forum in which to conduct them" (Leitch 2013). Now that television spectatorship has incorporated so many other forms of consumption and communication, there are myriad additional pleasures available to those who seek them out: online conversations, hashtags, memes, GIFs, and so forth. The active online fandoms of *Arrested Development* sprang up in the wake of its cancellation, providing the environment for minute analysis of the original series, shared rumors about revival, and, before and after the fourth season dropped on Netflix, careful negotiations of alternating senses of excitement, anticipation, confusion, and disappointment.

Temporalities of the TV Series Revival: Narrative Form and Reception

Media continuations of all kinds—television revivals as well as film sequels—share certain common dynamics, particularly regarding the management of expectations. Building on Andreas Jahn-Sudmann and Frank Kelleter's theory of the serial dynamic of one-upmanship in quality television series, Kathleen Loock argues in her study of Hollywood film sequels that audience expectations typically exert pressure on the newest iteration to both equal the original in quality (repetition), and to offer more than the original did through innovation and intensification (one-upmanship) (Jahn-Sudmann and Kelleter 2012, 207; Loock forthcoming 2018, n.p.; see also Kelleter 2017). The *Arrested Development* revival capitalizes on the cult popularity of the original series—keeping the same performers and picking up where the finale of the original series ended—and at the same time engages in the intensification and one-upmanship characteristic of seriality through two key innovations: (1) instead of drawing on the

widely praised onscreen chemistry of the original's ensemble cast, the revival series dedicates each episode to a single character (also a result of shooting schedule difficulties), and (2) instead of the more-or-less straightforward chronology of the original, it creates a synchronic recursive narrative structure that starts each episode from the beginning again.

Unfortunately, however, neither of these innovations proved to be an unqualified success. Thus, in this way also true to the original, the 2013 revival was bedeviled by its formal complexities—this time, its intricate chronology and a revamped single-character episodic structure. Many fans missed chaotic interactions among the full cast of characters in most episodes, as Reddit user *sik_dik* (2015) observes: “my reason for feeling this way [i.e., disappointed] was the lack of character interaction. That’s what made the original seasons so good.” But perhaps more problematic for fans (and critics) was the difficulty of consuming the revived series quickly despite its full-drop release.

While the original broadcast series failed to garner high ratings in part due to its clever, complex, self-reflexive humor that only paid off for loyal, regular viewers, the revival pioneered a whole new variety of complexity with which to baffle audiences, pushing serial one-upmanship to a new and barely sustainable threshold. In a sense, the show in its experimental new narrative structure managed to yet again challenge viewers by pushing them beyond their comfort zone. Showrunner Mitchell Hurwitz explains that he tailored season 4 to the new platform: “This is a new media [*sic*] where you get to see all the episodes at once. Maybe they should all happen at the same time” (quoted in Hale 2013).⁴ Although Hurwitz and the writers were inspired by the Netflix distribution model and its inducements to new viewing behaviors to experiment with *Arrested Development's* narrative structure, they produced a revival series that works against its platform and thus frustrates its viewers. Each episode follows its focal character through a series of flashbacks, and repeats scenes from previous episodes, but with added insight from the new point of view, all leading up to a final denouement taking place at a festival attended by all the characters, the details of which are only revealed in snippets scattered across the fifteen episodes. Essentially, the altered temporalities of the new synchronic recursive narrative created a stop-and-go pacing that is the antithesis of the compulsive binge-watching style that made Netflix (in)famous in some quarters and spawned headlines asking, “Is Binge-Watching Bad for Your Mental Health?” (Karmarkar and Kruger 2016).

Arrested Development's revival series literally arrests its own narrative development in every episode, restarting afresh in each subsequent one; it is in fact anti-serial, or at least “anti-chronological, occurring completely outside the forward moving timeline that has been one of the defining features of serial form” (Warhol 2014, 156). One Reddit user wittily observed how discomfiting the revival was to binge: “Watching this was like restarting the movie *Memento* every 30 minutes” (Zairex 2014). Thus instead of adapting its form to the Netflix platform's innovations that encourage bingeing, most notably its default postplay setting that automatically begins the next episode in a matter of seconds after its predecessor ends, *Arrested Development's* recursive synchronic structure produces a *disincentive* to binge-watch, in the form of the disorienting effect the Reddit user likens to Christopher Nolan's puzzle film *Memento*

(2000). Where most Netflix original series incorporate strategies to enhance the compulsion to serial viewing, such as cliffhangers and gradual building of suspense, this revival, like *Memento*, tests the audience's powers of recall and ability to assemble the jumbled pieces of the puzzle across the duration of the viewing time and construct a coherent narrative out of the individual pieces (Ghislotti 2009).

While it may provide a tantalizing challenge for viewers of a self-contained feature film, such disorientation is not necessarily conducive to serial televisual pleasure, as many fans and critics reluctantly acknowledged. In fact, some fans even tried to remedy the problem by producing alternate edits of the revived series. Theorizing about reports that fans had recut season 4 to approximate chronological order, and rumors that showrunner Hurwitz had also made a new, chronological cut, Warhol (2014, 155) observes that

[t]his desire to straighten the story out, to experience it chronologically, suggests that the writers' experiment with temporality might not have been entirely successful, but it also underlines how profoundly different this *Arrested Development* is from anything else on television.

Formal experimentation and risk-taking defined the series in its original run, and it went even further in its intensifications as a revival.

The result of these less-than-successful temporal innovations combined with their distribution through Netflix led fans on Twitter and Reddit to debate the relative merits and flaws of the revived series as well as the viewing strategies fostered by its mode of distribution as a full-season drop. Some fans (and critics) expressed dissatisfaction with their experience of binging several episodes at once, yet felt pressured to do so because of the immediate availability and the years-long build-up of anticipation for the revival (Graves 2012). As Warhol points out, Netflix employs specific business strategies to intensify pressure on viewers to binge-watch its series, a practice earlier enabled by the purchase of DVD box sets: "the Netflix interface reinforces it [i.e., binge-watching] with a mechanically produced forward motion" (Warhol 2014, 145). By offering subscribers access to all three seasons of the original run in anticipation of the revival, Netflix tried to ensure that it was both "cultivat[ing] enthusiasm and manag[ing] expectations in equal measure" (McNutt, forthcoming). Such nostalgic binging seemed like a perfect way to cycle through the old episodes and get psyched up for the new revival series, and the original series certainly offers rewards to those repeat viewers in allowing more opportunities to appreciate running gags and more subtle ironies that might have eluded them at first sight.

Yet the original series also provided a modicum of satisfaction in following the (zany) story arcs of each season in more or less chronological order; viewers with access to the full series via streaming (or the DVDs) could easily progress to the next episode and be rewarded by seeing what happened to that last hair-brained Bluth scheme, as long as they disregarded the "fake teasers" at the end of each episode in which narrator Ron Howard described something that would happen "next, on *Arrested Development*" that would in fact never happen. After seeing a few of those teasers and realizing there would be no

follow-through in the next episode, audiences could catch on and laugh at the show's gibe at existing TV series conventions. On the other hand, the Netflix revival's innovations may have been too edgy for all but the most dedicated fans.

Hurwitz's remark about designing the episodes to "all happen at the same time" means that viewers have a new and different kind of complexity to reckon with, as there was talk of a modular design in which the episodes could be watched in any order (later refuted by Hurwitz, in a self-deprecating admission of failure) (Lizardi 2014, 79; Warhol 2014, 154–55). However new and innovative the revival's constructions of temporality, though, it still requires multiple viewings. Actor Michael Cera (George Michael) commented that, as fans already knew from the first three seasons, "watching [season 4] a second time will be a completely different experience" (quoted in Stelter 2013). Indeed, in a seamless segue from the digital seriality of gaming to that of Netflix's entreaty to "Watch it Again!" one Reddit user resorts to gamer discourse to explain that "character interactions are 'unlocked' after multiple viewings" (oldkaii 2016). Of course, repeat viewing is much easier for today's subscribers than it was for those watching the first three seasons broadcast on Fox—yet the new season's temporal complexities in combination with its new distribution platform appear to have hindered its popularity, despite enthusiastic anticipation of the revival and evident nostalgia for the original series.

Conclusion: "Be Careful What You Wish For"

Whereas the original series failed to garner its needed audience share in part due to its innovative complex seriality, the revival of *Arrested Development* also seems to have missed the mark, this time by overdoing the complexity of its labyrinthine synchronic storytelling in such a way that it goes against the grain of the new binge-viewing protocols of its new platform. Moreover, Netflix's distribution of the revival series as a streaming, on-demand full-drop season—as part of its corporate strategy to monetize domestic digital video consumption and encourage binge-watching—may have contributed to the disappointment voiced by critics, though the surge in new subscribers leading up to the revival's airing likely benefited the company's bottom line. Netflix does not release data about subscriber viewing choices, but it did signal confidence shortly before the release of season 4, evident in chief executive Reed Hastings's prediction that it would be "an absolutely spectacular phenomenon" (quoted in Stelter 2013). Based on reviews and fan discussions online, however, the revival—Netflix's first original comedy series—met notably mixed responses. In the highly compressed temporalities of Netflix's industrial practice, *Arrested Development's* experimental revival served as an early risk that ended in (at least partial) failure.⁵

However, I propose that season 4's stumble inspired a change in strategy, leading Netflix to develop far more conventional (and more successful) revivals such as 2016's *Fuller House* and *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* (see articles by Kathleen Look and Ryan Lizardi in this issue). Both these cases brought back television series that were less complex than *Arrested Development's* original series; the Netflix revivals made some changes, but on the whole, they maintained the tone and style of the

original series. Perhaps the most successful revival of the three—*Fuller House*—was also the most successful series in its original run, and took the fewest risks in its continuation. *Arrested Development*'s experimental season 4 and its upcoming season 5 constitute an ongoing negotiation on the part of Netflix as it seeks to perpetuate the show's brand through innovation and complexity, always risking the disappointment of returning and new audiences. Following on the "classic 'be careful what you wish for' scenario" of season 4, a *Vanity Fair* article bluntly asks in its title, "Can *Arrested Development* Season 5 Erase the Memory of Season 4?" (Buis 2017). Speculating on the "mixture of enthusiasm and trepidation" that the news of the fifth season will inspire in fans, Hillary Buis implies that season 4 was the shaky trial balloon in Netflix's quickly proliferating string of series revivals: "though the original series was clever and sharp and unfairly cut down in its prime, its revival—the first such series Netflix ever attempted, which means you can thank it for *Fuller House*—was a decidedly mixed bag" (Buis 2017). The next effort will have its challenges cut out for it, as all revivals do: it must continue to outdo the previous seasons following the serial logic of one-upmanship while remaining faithful to the original premise and, additionally, winning back those who were less than delighted with season 4.

Television and film scholars have referred to the almost inevitable disappointment that accompanies continuations (spinoffs, sequels, and revivals in particular) of popular and beloved originals, but not all have produced durable theories of the phenomenon that extend beyond their case studies. These analyses frequently reveal patterns of self-reflexivity, in which the very idea of a continuation is tied into an important thematic element of the story at hand. Writing about an unusual case among film sequels in which the second is more popular than the original, Todd Berliner contends that Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather, Part II* (1974) succeeds despite the risk of disappointment inherent in movie sequels in part because it addresses the concept of decline as a theme in its portrayal of nostalgia for the Corleone family's past and dissatisfaction in its present: "[o]ur own feelings of disappointment and deprivation as we watch the movie reflect those very elements within the story itself" (Berliner 2001, 116). Thus, he posits the success of the film as partially indebted to its thematics of disappointment, in some way defying the tendency of sequels to let down audiences by doubling down on it.

To turn to another example, discussions of the canceled television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB/UPN, 1997–2003) frequently employ puns about its being "undead," riffing on the immortal characters in the show and the enduring impact it has had on American television. In *Undead TV*, Elana Levine and Lisa Parks point to how this word play can apply not only to *Buffy* but also more broadly to other continuations. Their argument, perhaps more so than Berliner's, can be extended, in that canceled "television series . . . take on new manifestations and new meanings as they are repositioned in different cultural contexts and historical periods" (Levine and Parks 2007, 4). They refer here to *Buffy*'s "afterlife" in reruns, DVDs, film follow-ups, spinoff series, and merchandise, as well as fan activities and activism, but their argument may also provide us with a way to theorize the revivals that are the subject of this special issue.

In his analysis of *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–), Stephen Shapiro (2015, 153) argues that contemporary quality television can be a

means through which its audiences formulate a tactical response to crisis as they gain knowledge both about the singular *events* of financial catastrophe (like the 2008 housing market crash) and about the repeating systemic features of long-wave accumulation cycles (like the overproduction of commodities, including credit ones) in which crises continually occur.

While the first three seasons of *Arrested Development* predate the housing crash, the revival was produced and aired after a significant interval, allowing the series and its audience to process the ways in which the earlier seasons portrayed what we can now recognize as conditions ripe for the crash, as well as the signs of what Shapiro calls an “investigation of periodicity” inherent in the proliferation of twenty-first-century serial narratives (Shapiro 2015, 173). Situated in a precarious temporality straddling the “before” and “after” moments of the housing market collapse, the original series of *Arrested Development* and its revival satirize and—as streaming content on Netflix—exemplify the increasing financialization of domestic space in twenty-first-century American culture. The series showcases televisual complexity, at times at the expense of its popular appeal. Furthermore, it lampoons the Bluths’ insatiable greed and corrupt business practices that inevitably led them to disaster. The Netflix revival, like the original series, ups the ante on both these tendencies in its innovative narrative structure and its relentless repertoire of Bluth schemes gone wrong. For a show that always took aesthetic chances, and that was always about failure, could this signify an ironic kind of success?

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Notes

1. According to the top definition at Urban Dictionary, a McMansion is “a large and pretentious house, typically of shoddy construction, typical of ‘upscale’ suburban developments in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Such houses are characterized by steep roofs of complex design, theatrical entrances, lack of stylistic integrity and backsides which are notably less fussy than their fronts. They are often placed closely together to maximize the developer’s profits and appeal to people who value perceived social status over actual, physical, economic or historic value” (Wittsberg 2004).
2. For cogent analysis of the economic conditions leading up to the crash, see Bivens 2011; Calomiris and Haber 2014.

3. Frequently cited examples of beloved canceled series with energetic fan activism include *Firefly* (Fox, 2002) and *Veronica Mars* (UPN, 2004–2006, The CW 2006–2007). Although neither was revived as a television series, the latter's fan campaign succeeded in garnering support for a film continuation titled *Serenity* (Joss Whedon, 2005) and a fan-produced and fan-funded sequel film *Browncoats: Redemption* (Michael C. Dougherty, 2010); the former's resulted in a successful Kickstarter-funded film continuation with the same title (Rob Thomas, 2014) (see Espenson and Yeffeth 2005; Wilcox and Cochran 2008; Wilcox and Turnbull 2011).
4. Hurwitz's designation of Netflix as a medium begs for clarification. I would concur with most television scholars that Netflix is in fact still operating within the medium of television, although it makes use of a different form of distribution and, in its original programming, production. For more nuanced explorations of these and related terms, see Lotz 2017, Newman and Levine 2012, and Tryon 2013.
5. Given the status of the series revival as already boasting a presold audience, the relative failure of the revived fourth season of *Arrested Development* is a fascinating case study. Fans struggled to like it, turning online conversations and comments threads into at times anguished expressions of disappointment. Yet Netflix has announced a fifth season with the entire original cast slated to reappear, this time (it is implied) together (Wagmeister 2017).

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Author Biography

Julia Leyda is an associate professor of film studies in the Department of Art and Media Studies at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim. Her latest book is *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness* (co-edited with Joshua Paul Dale, Joyce Goggin, Anthony P. McIntyre, and Diane Negra, 2017). Her present research centers on the financialization of domestic space in twenty-first-century U.S. screen culture and climate-change narratives (cli-fi).