Surviving "Certain Death": Narrational Reliability in American Motion Picture Serial Cliffhangers of the Golden Age

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Published by Michigan Publishing

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2022.a907194

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**ABSTRACT**
American sound serial chapter endings frequently placed the protagonist(s) in mortal peril before the following week’s installment would reveal how they evaded seemingly certain death. Frequently relying on audience memory lapse, these solutions, or “take-outs,” did not always play fair. Drawing on a 20 percent sample of golden age serials (1936–1945), I analyze the narratival methods and reliability of cliffhangers and their take-outs. I propose that there are three key strategies, which I term sequential, augmented, and incompatible. I show how these categories move progressively further from the cliffhanger’s nineteenth-century literary precedents and from conventions of classical Hollywood narration alike.
The men are closely matched, but Mandrake gains the upper hand and, with a mighty punch, knocks his opponent overboard. A panoramic long shot leaves audience members in no doubt about the ineluctable fatality of the scoundrel’s plunge. Mandrake leans over the side to watch him fall before his attention is drawn by something happening above his head. Oh, no! His triumph was short lived, as he looks up just in time to see the hook give way. A cut back to the panoramic camera setup offers a clear view of the gondola plummeting into the ravine. How can Mandrake possibly survive?

Thus ends the cliff hanger in “Gamble for Life,” chapter 7 of Mandrake the Magician (Columbia, 1939). It is unquestionably a tense moment, but, as any self-respecting serial fan should know, with five chapters remaining, there has to be some way out. How will our hero be saved from “certain death”—a phrase favored by Columbia and which occurs five times in the voice-over narration for Mandrake the Magician alone? To find out, contemporary fans had to undergo an excruciating but delicious wait until they could see (as an end card blazoned) “Next week at this theatre—Chapter 8—’Across the Deadline’—another thrilling episode of Mandrake the Magician.”

For audience members, this spine-tingling cliffhanger posed one question: How will Mandrake survive? For scholars, it poses many others, including the one that constitutes the main focus of this article: What are the precise narrational mechanisms used to extract sound serial protagonists from their apparently hopeless predicaments? The process of answering this question unleashes a host of related questions, which I broach in varying levels of detail. How far do these techniques mimic earlier narrative forms? How far are their effects reliant on industrial and aesthetic practices favored by sound serial producers? In what ways do they relate to conventions of the classical Hollywood style? How central are cliffhangers and their solutions, or “take-outs,” as they were known in the trade, to sound serials’ economic strategy, on the one hand, and to audience pleasure, on the other? What assumptions did producers make about serial audiences, how do their assumptions affect take-out structures, and how far are they consistent across different production companies? Why do contemporary and modern audience responses indicate that some take-outs are generally deemed more satisfying than others, and how far are such evaluations aligned with the narrational techniques used to circumvent supposedly certain death?

Books about American motion picture sound serials, also known as chapter plays, appeared regularly from the late 1960s, but only relatively recently have scholars begun to consider in detail the kinds of questions above. The first wave of history and criticism, generated mainly by writers with fond childhood memories of the weekly viewing ritual, was characterized by nostalgia and a fan-oriented focus on actors, directors, producers, stuntmen, story lines, and spectacle. Their research was dominated by empirical rather than analytical approaches, and, whereas their assembly of detailed filmographic data and production histories is an invaluable resource for modern scholars, they almost invariably glossed over, and often belittled, the narrational sophistication typ-
ical of these serials. Symptomatic of this attitude was William K. Everson’s contention that “the serial was never innovational. Everything it had, everything it did, represented a kind of brain-picking from what had gone before.”

In the 2010s, a fresh wave of scholarly interest in sound serials conclusively overturned the erstwhile orthodoxy typified by Everson’s claim. At the forefront of this research has been the work of Guy Barefoot, Ilka Brasch, and Scott Higgins, who have fruitfully employed historical, cultural, and formal modes of analysis to generate valuable insights into some of the questions above, as well as other aspects of this hitherto academically neglected cinematic form. Their arguments inform much of my own analysis of cliffhanger take-outs as well as giving context to the ways my conclusions might be seen to relate to broader patterns of serial production and consumption.

Particularly relevant to my analysis is these scholars’ argumentation about how sound serial structures and rhetoric relate to classical conventions. All observe notable divergences. For Brasch, serials “exist outside the margins of classicality. . . . [T]he frequent coincidences and the conventionalized disruption of temporal continuity in the cliffhanger sequences shatter the set of norms that make up the classical paradigm.” Higgins, who allots more space to cliffhangers than Brasch, argues that “sound serials challenge some principles of classicism, like unity of time and comprehensibility, while obeying others, like goal orientation and continuity editing.” Barefoot rarely alludes to classicism but at one point proposes that “The Whispering Shadow [Mascot, 1933] cannot be called ‘classical’ in any meaningful sense of the word. It has better claim to be an incoherent text in that its efforts to build up suspicion and intrigue overstep the resolution it finally provides.” To the extent to which sound serials invoke alternative cinematic models, Higgins argues that “the resources of early, preclassical cinema found continued relevance,” whereas Brasch locates serials (both silent and sound) more precisely “at the conceptual threshold of a ‘cinema of attractions’ and ‘classical Hollywood.’”

Evaluating the classicality or otherwise of sound serials in general exceeds the scope of this article, but, as I will show, narrational manipulations that undercut a presumed audience familiarity with classical convention are crucial to the affect of certain classes of cliffhangers and their take-outs.

The nucleus of this article is a spoiler-riddled formal analysis of my survey of 272 cliffhanger take-outs in twenty-two American sound serials: a 20 percent sample of the 109 titles released from 1936 to 1945 (inclusive)—a decade that enthusiasts would later dub the golden age. In order to cast

5 Barefoot, Lost Jungle, 157.
6 Higgins, Matinee Melodrama, 4.
8 Higgins, Matinee Melodrama, 54; and Brasch, Film Serials, 185.
light on the intimate connection between the narrational techniques serial-makers used to extract protagonists from seemingly insurmountable perils and the sound serials’ particular mode of distribution and consumption, this analysis is prefaced by two contextual capsules. The first looks briefly at literary antecedents, thereby opening a space in which to consider how sound serials mimicked or diverged from the models they provided, and the reasons underlying their principal variance. The second maps the broader landscape of golden age serial production, contextualizing the patterns of stylistic similarity and variation I identify within the take-outs surveyed.10 But first, let us look at how Mandrake escaped his death plunge.

Chapter 8 of *Mandrake the Magician* begins, as sound serial installments almost always do, with a recap of the previous episode’s climactic events. Once again, we see the fight in the swaying gondola; again we see the hook begin to bend and the blackguard take his terminal dive. This time, however, the footage is not quite the same as before. Previously, the shot of Mandrake looking upward was immediately succeeded by a shot of the gondola harness sliding off its hook, which was followed by the panoramic shot of the gondola hurtling into the abyss. The second time around, we see things differently.

Mandrake looks up. Then, once again, we see a shot of the hook, but this time it continues to support its load until the editor cuts away. The next shots introduce entirely new material. First, some supplementary footage is inserted. Two consecutive shots show Mandrake frantically climbing the gondola’s supporting ropes, grabbing the cable that spans the chasm, and dangling precariously from it. The next shot returns us to the panoramic camera placement as we watch the gondola plunge. This time, there is a very significant difference. Whereas the final shot of the cliffhanger offered a clear view of the naked cable, in the take-out, Mandrake’s pendent figure hangs in plain sight. Thus spared a dreadful death, he is able to haul himself along the cable to safety, race to the assistance of his imperiled confederates, and leap into a high-speed car chase in pursuit of the Wasp.

**LITERARY PRECEDENTS**

In his affectionate account of American sound serials, William C. Cline argues that cliffhangers were a “unique and provocative suspense technique” that constituted “the truly distinctive ingredient that positively identified the

10 My survey is based on a stratified random sample of the full corpus, in which I sought to achieve a proportionate share of titles by studio and production year. Within those strata, I made some manual selections to achieve a good genre spread. Availability necessitated a few reselctions. All sampled titles were viewed on DVD or online. The sample comprises *Adventures of Captain Marvel* (Republic, 1941), *Adventures of the Flying Cadets* (Universal, 1943), *Brenda Starr, Reporter* (Columbia, 1945), *Captain Midnight* (Columbia, 1942), *Drums of Fu Manchu* (Republic, 1940), *Flash Gordon’s Trip to Mars* (Universal, 1938), *Gang Busters* (Universal, 1942), *The Green Archer* (Columbia, 1940), *The Green Hornet* (Universal, 1940), *Jungle Girl* (Republic, 1941), *Jungle Jim* (Universal, 1937), *Mandrake the Magician* (Columbia, 1939), *Manhunt of Mystery Island* (Republic, 1945), *The Mystery of the Riverboat* (Universal, 1944), *The Phantom* (Columbia, 1943), *The Phantom Creeps* (Universal, 1939), *Riders of Death Valley* (Universal, 1941), *The Spider’s Web* (Columbia, 1938), *Spy Smasher* (Republic, 1942), *The Tiger Woman* (Republic, 1944), *Undersea Kingdom* (Republic, 1936), and *Zorro Rides Again* (Republic, 1937). As extant footage of *Brenda Starr, Reporter* is incomplete, the chapter 3 and 4 cliffhangers and their subsequent take-outs are excluded from the sample.
serial as a separate storytelling form.” Stated in such sweeping terms, I must disagree—although, as I will discuss, the formal mechanics of many take-outs, such as the Mandrake miracle described above, were indeed intrinsically linked to industrial and aesthetic practices that differentiated them from their antecedents.

Cliffhangers were not an invention of the electric age; Luke Terlaak Poot discusses nascent examples as far back as The Iliad and The Thousand and One Nights. Yet, while there are significant gaps between the structures and rhetoric of such interrupted narratives and those of sound serials, the influence of more recent progenitors is harder to dismiss. Modern scholarship has identified a wide range of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century narrative and entertainment forms that have bearing on the structures and pleasures of sound serials in general and cliffhangers in particular. Whereas some accounts, including Higgins’s, follow silent serial scholarship in prioritizing precedents set by nineteenth-century theater and by one-reel action melodramas, Barefoot rightly reproves, and takes steps to redress, a relative disregard of serialized print media. I propose that comparing and contrasting sound serial cliffhangers with their literary forerunners is a particularly useful tool when seeking to isolate narrational techniques and effects peculiar to sound serial convention. This clarification facilitates my subsequent shift of focus to the ways such structures follow or diverge from governing Hollywood norms as expressed through the fiction feature’s widespread adherence to the set of formal conventions commonly known as the classical style.

By the mid-nineteenth century, newspapers and periodicals were chockablock with narratives sold to readers on the installment plan—not to mention the roughly contemporaneous proliferation of Britain’s penny dreadful serial pamphlets. From Alexandre Dumas to Charles Dickens, these “large, loose, baggy monsters,” as Henry James famously dubbed them, “with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary,” were designed to foster addiction. Lengthy, and often episodic, narratives strung out through multiple print issues encouraged readers to expend further cash to discover what would happen next. Moreover, while penny dreadful installments commonly broke off at whatever point in the story the page happened to end (be that even in mid-sentence), the more carefully crafted and edited of these popular page-turners often ended chapters at moments of nail-biting suspense. A serialized episode of Thomas Hardy’s relatively modestly proportioned A Pair of Blue Eyes (1872–1873), which leaves the hero dangling by his fingertips from a cliff for several pages, has inspired the myth that it was the source of the term cliffhanger. Somewhat disappointingly, this is untrue; the term

13 Higgins, Matinee Melodrama, 75; and Barefoot, Lost Jungle, 12–19.
14 Henry James, The Tragic Muse (1890; repr., London: Macmillan, 1921), xi.
16 Steven Mollmann, “Is Thomas Hardy Responsible for the Word ‘Cliffhanger’?,” Science’s Less Accurate Grandmother (blog), March 16, 2018,
emerged only in the 1930s, when first used by the trade press to describe film and radio serials of a certain kind.\textsuperscript{17} Nevertheless, this terminological lag in no way undermines the practice’s historical popularity.

One particularly lengthy and repetitive example of nineteenth-century serial publication is the 220-chapter \textit{Varney the Vampire} (1845–1847), usually attributed to James Malcolm Rymer. Its “only light relief,” penny dreadful historian E. S. Turner opined, “was that provided by fire, shipwreck, cliff falls, collapse of great buildings and fantastic thunderstorms.”\textsuperscript{18} Do any such incidents sound familiar to film serial fans? Yet whatever shortcomings \textit{Varney the Vampire} may have had, Turner observed, “from the length of the story it is obvious that it had an insatiable following.”\textsuperscript{19} As the century progressed, the growing popularity on both sides of the Atlantic of boys’ story papers, filled with fast-paced and incident-packed adventure narratives, drew the serialized format ever closer to the subjects and forms adopted by American sound serials.

When motion picture serials first emerged in the 1910s, a cliffhanger precedent already existed, both as a compelling tool for intensifying narrative engagement and as an effective economic strategy. Nevertheless, the shapes taken by film serial cliffhangers soon came to occupy a far more limited purview than had those of their forebears. Whereas nineteenth-century cliffhangers encompassed a wide range of suspenseful situations (such as the arrival of a mysterious figure, receipt of an enigmatic letter, or interruption of a character’s exegetic narration), movie cliffhangers upped the ante as they came to rely on variants of a single situation of the utmost emergency. According to this increasingly formularized structure, chapters usually ended in one way: with the protagonist(s) in the grip of mortal peril.

With the courageous heroes left staring death in the face as the film cut to a teaser for the following week’s sensational sequel, the construction of some kind of take-out became mandatory. Although the forms of their delivery were, in many cases, almost as mechanized as the cliffhangers themselves, the range of narrational techniques serial-makers adopted featured significant variety and intrigue nonetheless. Some of their methods were, moreover, less established by prior literary convention than the death-dealing crises that necessitated them.

Whereas some take-outs mimicked techniques familiar from print media, others exploited what were already, by then, characteristically cinematic narrational devices. The emergence of this broader range of take-out strategies was underpinned by a crucial difference in patterns of consumption. Printed serials could be owned and retained, allowing readers to return to previous installments. Many were reissued in book format, bringing episodes together in one-to-three handy volumes that could be binge-read without the suspenseful delays embedded in the schedule of their first publication. Contemporary consumers of motion picture serials, by contrast, had to wait a week to discover how events would unfold. Serial-makers often relied

\textsuperscript{17} Barefoot, \textit{Lost Jungle}, 23.
\textsuperscript{18} Turner, \textit{Boys Will Be Boys}, 5.
\textsuperscript{19} Turner, 5.

on there being, within this intermission, a decline in viewers’ recall of what they had previously witnessed.

On the printed page, the precise mechanics of daring escapes were not always convincingly explained—a quality shared by many sound serials, as we shall see. Even so, the finer details of the hero’s or heroine’s predicament did not conflict irreconcilably with what readers had been told in the previous chapter. Despite the revisionist impulses common to many penny dreadful and so-called sensation fiction narratives, which leaned heavily on a process of misdirection followed by new plot twists that modified the reader’s interpretation of earlier events (the delayed revelation of shipwreck survival, for instance), authors and publishers had no opportunity to replace the ending of the previous installment with entirely different text in the hope that nobody would notice. Serial screenwriters enjoyed far more leeway. In the DVD and streaming era, we can easily pinpoint the inconsistencies between Columbia’s contrasting versions of Mandrake’s cable car perils, but these are not modes of consumption its makers could possibly have foreseen. With serial-makers banking on a collective deterioration of audience memory, some degree of cheating became almost de rigueur.20

I argue that sound serial cliff hanger take-outs can be grouped into three distinct categories, which I call sequential, augmented, and incompatible and which are differentiated by their reliance on discrete narrational techniques.21 The three categories move, in their turn, progressively further from escape methods employed by their literary forebears. They also shift progressively further from reliable (albeit often implausible) narration toward the blatantly unreliable, departing in the process from some of the narrational conventions normally thought of as inherent principles of the classical style.

GOLDEN AGE SERIALS

The inauguration of the so-called golden age of film serials in 1936 was marked by two key events. First, Universal Pictures struck a deal with King Features to adapt a substantial portfolio of prominent newspaper strips; Flash Gordon arrived on screens that same year and was swiftly followed by a string of other crowd-pleasing action strip heroes.22 Second, a merger between Mascot Pictures and several smaller serial producers saw the formation of Republic Pictures, which quickly secured a reputation for fast-paced action and top-notch stunts.23 Columbia Pictures embarked on serial production the following year, although few of its serials achieved such popular acclaim as those of its rivals. Independents produced just five titles in 1936 to 1937, after which the format was monopolized by these three studios.24 The era’s end was

20 William Witney, In a Door, into a Fight, Out a Door, into a Chase (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1996), 101.
21 Ron Backer classifies cliffhangers by the peril involved (such as railroads and elevators) as well as five kinds of “cheats,” which he labels “survived through it,” “time expansion,” “re-shot footage,” “too close for comfort,” and “absurd resolutions.” Despite overlaps with these “cheats,” I have opted for a classification that facilitates greater formal precision. See Ron Backer, Gripping Chapters: The Sound Movie Serial (Albany, NY: BearManor, 2010).
22 Barbour, Days of Thrills, 27.
23 Witney, In a Door, 35.
24 Barbour, Days of Thrills, 163–168.
marked by Universal’s withdrawal from serial production, which coincided with Republic’s reduction of its chapter lengths. Although Columbia and Republic continued serial production into the mid-1950s, by which time television series had displaced their popularity, the format’s declining economic fortunes saw this final decade marked by increased use of stock footage and ideas pillaged from previous hits.

Sound serial production catered largely to audiences of young and adolescent boys. Nevertheless, as Barefoot has demonstrated, adults comprised an important secondary audience, especially for serials based on newspaper action strip heroes that already enjoyed a cross-generation fan base.25 “They came to be identified as appealing to children,” he observes, “but ‘children’ may stand in here for those lacking cultural capital, whether because of age, race, or because they didn’t live in a big city.”26

Studio assumptions about the entertainment requirements of the core target audience undoubtedly had significant bearing on serial content and style. Cline has argued that “[b]eginning with the knowledge that its main appeal was to be children and unsophisticated adults, the creators of the continued pictures had no delusions of having to produce their films with artistic integrity or dramatic authority.”27 Nonetheless, archival evidence indicates that they often underestimated the perspicacity of child audiences; the discrete but interconnected concepts of plausibility and cheating are, as I will discuss, writ large in audience assessments of satisfaction levels offered by different cliffhanger take-out strategies. Even more crucially, in the context of this article’s main focus, narrational techniques are often considerably more sophisticated than Cline’s observation suggests. Dramatic authority frequently rested on a rhetoric that was highly unusual, if not unique, in American cinema of this era.

Columbia, Republic, and Universal each developed distinct styles and specialities within their serial production, but all three promised audiences a munificent smorgasbord of sensation and thrills—a pledge reiterated weekly in post-cliffhanger advertisements for the next electrifying episode. Although cliffhangers were not the only ritualistic pleasures sound serials offered—as the title of prolific Republic serial director William Witney’s 1996 memoir, In a Door, into a Fight, Out a Door, into a Chase, attests—they occupied a privileged position. Episodes were structured around them so that, as Higgins describes, “the story of each chapter was conceived as a way of getting from one cliffhanger to another.”28 This preeminence was often signaled by hyperbolic chapter titles. Given the ubiquity of mortal jeopardy, it is unsurprising that within the 296 titles in my sample, the word death occurs

27 Cline, In the Nick, 4.
twenty-five times, placing its popularity far ahead of its closest rivals: *doom, terror, fatal*, and *trap.*

Oblique references to upcoming cliffhangers, such as “Crashing Towers,” “Thundering Rails,” and “The Iron Monster”—all chapter titles of *The Phantom Creeps* (Universal, 1939)—sat alongside literal descriptions of the crisis, such as the same serial’s “Trapped in the Flames.” Yet, whereas the first group of titles left the nature of the cliffhanger in suspense and the second left its outcome open, there was another group in which the calamitous fallout of the impending peril was, to put it gently, somewhat overstated. Its unreliable rhetoric might be seen as consonant with the category of take-outs I term *incompatible.*

The ballyhoo of this third category went beyond the guarantee of menace, peril, or terror to imply a more lethal outcome for the protagonist than the one subsequently delivered. Yet widespread acceptance of the serial format’s customary proprieties ensured that seasoned devotees were unlikely to be surprised or disappointed by the lack of fatalities in “The Fatal Blast” of *Riders of Death Valley* (Universal, 1941), “The Fatal Crash” of *Mandrake the Magician,* or “The Fatal Shot” of *Zorro Rides Again* (Republic, 1937). Nor were they likely to be fazed by death’s absence from “The Death Plunge” of *Gang Busters* (Universal, 1942), “Flaming Death” of *Undersea Kingdom* (Republic, 1936), or “Death in the Cockpit” of *Captain Midnight* (Columbia, 1942). Indeed, most would have been far more surprised when the penultimate chapter of *Spy Smasher* (Republic, 1942) actually delivered on its promise of a “Hero’s Death” and killed off one of the good guys (even though the victim turned out to be the eponymous protagonist’s brother dressed in Spy Smasher’s costume and not the masked vigilante himself). This rare break with convention notwithstanding, audiences were generally safe to count upon a fundamental duplicity; assurances that the protagonist(s) faced certain death ran alongside an almost equally ironclad guarantee that this apparent inevitability would not be fulfilled.

Despite the expectation among all but the most naive of audience members that the hero or heroine would survive, cliffhangers were almost invariably the locus of the sound serial’s most heightened moments of dramatic tension. Many also featured breathtaking spectacle or pyrotechnics far exceeding anything found elsewhere in serials, rendering them a site of non-narrative and narrative pleasure alike. It was the cliffhanger itself, and not its take-out, that carried the weight of persuading audiences to return the following week. As Universal serial writer and producer Morgan Cox explained, there were instances in which “it is good showmanship to sacrifice a modicum of reality for the thrill,” with a “sensational pictorial climax” sometimes serving the serial’s purposes better than a convincing explanation of how protagonists withstood it.

Nevertheless, evidence suggests that take-outs also played an important

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29 After excluding functors, the frequency of occurrence of the top fifteen words in the sample of chapter titles is: *death* (25), *doom* (15), *killer* (15), *terror* (12), *fatal* (9), *trap* (7), *flaming* (6), *murder* (6), *peril* (6), *secret* (6), *strikes* (6), *treachery* (6), *devil* (5), *menacing* (5), and *trapped* (5).

30 Barefoot, *Lost Jungle,* 78.
role in audience pleasure. Higgins persuasively argues that sound serials functioned simultaneously as “a mode of storytelling and a kind of a game” whereby “viewers might feel something like the game player’s sense of agency, tracing out potential outcomes, or playing through the puzzle in the intervening week.”

This view is supported by trade press suggestions that exhibitors offer prizes for the best theories about what would happen next. Thus, while the fraudulence of chapter titles such as “Crashed in a Crater,” an episode of *Adventures of the Flying Cadets* (Universal, 1943) in which nothing and nobody crashed in a crater, does not appear to have prompted audience backlash, cliffhanger take-outs attracted greater scrutiny.

Misleading chapter titles constituted far more minor fibs than did some of the narrational mechanisms used to deliver protagonists from impending doom. Aware of this, serial-makers tended to race swiftly onward to the next exciting situation and so discourage audiences from dwelling on the finer details of escapes that were, in many cases, literally incredible. In take-outs I class as *sequential* and *augmented*, they held back pertinent information during the cliffhanger before laying their cards on the table the following week. Those I class as *incompatible*, by contrast, proved their makers every bit as double-dealing as all the serials’ unscrupulous arch-villains rolled into one.

In delineating the three take-out categories’ narrational techniques, I seek to demonstrate how often serial-makers mobilized presumed audience familiarity with classical convention to encourage misinterpretation of the severity of the cliffhanger peril. As I will show, their subsequent rectification of audience understanding regularly features, and thus to some degree normalizes, a level of revisionism that exceeds that which classicism is usually thought to accommodate. Within this context, I address contemporary audience perceptions of plausibility and cheating and their relationship to satisfaction levels experienced—an issue to which I return when summarizing notable patterns in the distribution of take-out types.

**SEQUENTIAL TAKE-OUTS**

In his 1948 chronicle of penny dreadfuls and boys’ adventure serials, E. S. Turner relates a once-famous anecdote:

> There is a delightful story, attributed to more than one publishing house, of the serial writer who disappears in the middle of a story. As he shows no sign of turning up, it is decided to carry on without him. Unfortunately he has left his hero bound to a stake, with lions circling him, and an avalanche about to fall for good measure (or some such situation). Relays of writers try to think of a way out, and give it up. Then at the eleventh hour the missing author returns. He takes the briefest look at the previous installment and then, without a moment’s hesitation, writes: “With one bound Jack was free.”

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Sequential take-outs follow this literary tradition closely. Like all but one of the serial chapters surveyed, their action begins with an _overlap_—a replay of the previous episode’s final minutes.\(^3\) (For the benefit of any viewers that missed earlier installments, in Republic and Universal serials, this usually followed a written recap; Columbia preferred to overlay replays with a hyperbolic voice-over.) This repetition was a profitable money-saver that also rekindled audience excitement about the protagonist’s precarious fate. Unlike the _Mandrake the Magician_ example above, in sequential take-outs, the replay usually featured exactly the same footage as the previous week’s climax; any minor variations, such as removal of some shots to truncate runtime, did nothing to alter audience understanding of events. Once the replay ended, narrative action continued sequentially, showing what happened next without, in many cases, making real effort to explain how purportedly certain death was so easily avoided.

Two of the most common cliff hanger situations using this category of take-out (and serial-makers had some tried-and-trusted favorites) were the plane crash and the collapsing building, which adequately illustrate the general strategy. In _Captain Midnight_, “Shells of Evil” ends with the eponymous aviator (Dave O’Brien) trapped in the cockpit of a burning plane that nose-dives to oblivion, smashing down in a monumental fireball. The next episode replays this dramatic footage, complete with fireball, after which Midnight simply opens the door and walks away from the smoldering wreckage, dazed but otherwise unhurt. Meanwhile, the multitude of death rays circulating in these serials make toppling buildings a persistent hazard. In _Mandrake the Magician_, the Wasp’s favorite toy is his radium machine, but, while radio stations, power plants, warehouses, and well-appointed parlors fall in droves, there is no human toll to his dastardly actions. After Mandrake and his loyal assistant Lothar (Al Kikume) are caught in one such collapsing edifice in “The Devil’s Playmate,” they just walk out, having suffered no consequence more devastating than the need for a clothes brush. “With one bound Jack was free.”

In both examples, escape occurs within off-screen space and in time elided from the narrator’s account. We never see how Midnight extricates himself from the ravaged cockpit. The result is a rock-bottom level of plausibility. Identical scenarios led Michigan-based exhibitor J. E. Stocker to complain that, when watching _The Phantom of the Air_ (Universal, 1933), “the kids laugh at the easy way in which the hero escapes from sure death” and that _The Phantom Creeps_ “gets the razzberry from patrons.”\(^3\)

A slightly more satisfactory subcategory of sequential take-out relies on delayed revelation of a more detailed geography of formerly unseen spaces. Thus, in _Brenda Starr, Reporter_ (Columbia, 1945), after Brenda (Joan Woodbury) is trapped by a mine cave-in at the end of “Hideout of Terror,” she is

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34 Chapter 9 of _The Phantom Creeps_, “Speeding Doom,” ends with a speedboat smashing into a buoy with such force that it is reduced to a mass of splintered planks. Chapter 10 begins with the vessel’s former occupants bobbing around in the water amid the flotsam while awaiting rescue. Presumably they had failed to film an explanation of how they survived the cataclysmic collision and therefore felt it safest not to remind the audience of the crash’s lethal force.

35 J. E. Stocker, “Phantom of the Air,” _Motion Picture Herald_, September 23, 1933, 47; and “Phantom Creeps, The,” _Motion Picture Herald_, November 30, 1940, 52.
rescued through a second tunnel of which we were hitherto unaware. Cliff-hanger take-outs feature a lot of previously hidden tunnels.

As well as broadening our view of lateral spaces to unveil concealed escape routes, take-outs frequently rely on expanding our knowledge of spaces below (or, more rarely, above) the frame line. The opening chapter of *Jungle Girl* (Republic, 1941), “Death by Voodoo,” ends with Nyoka (Frances Gifford) and Jack Stanton (Tom Neal) racing through a tunnel ahead of a raging torrent that threatens to sweep them through a cave mouth. The drama is heightened by an exterior shot that shows the opening is near the apex of a precipitous cliff. After the replay, we discover that a wide river lies below, into which they dive and swim to safety. Republic was obviously pleased with this take-out because they reused this device and much of the same footage for the cliffhanger of “The Fatal Flood” in *Manhunt of Mystery Island* (Republic, 1945). Golden age serials prove that river gorges, waterfall plunge pools, and excellent swimmers are a dime a dozen. Within urban locations, hotel and restaurant canopies serve a similar function for heroes who failed to grab hold of previously unseen fire escape railings after tumbling from high roofs; drying fishing nets offer a seaside variant for *Manhunt of Mystery Island*’s Lance (Richard Bailey) after his cliff-top topple in “Satan’s Shadow.” Spatial revelations of this ilk allow us to reassess our previous understanding of the space in which cliffhanger events occurred. Such enlightenment supplies a logical solution to the puzzle and provides (at least a bit) more plausibility than examples such as Midnight’s cockpit escape, in which the means of his survival remains obscure.

In rare cases, revelations of a different nature offer a plausible basis for survival. The hero of *Adventures of Captain Marvel* (Republic, 1941) is Billy Batson (Frank Coghlan Jr.), who needs only to pronounce the magic word *Shazam!* to transform into superhero Captain Marvel (Tom Tyler). An early demonstration of Marvel’s superpowers follows the cliffhanger of chapter 2, “The Guillotine.” Although no normal person lying unconscious below a descending blade could be expected to evade bisection, such is Marvel’s superhuman constitution that the impact shatters the blade, awakening him in the process. The take-out may not be realistic in real-world terms, but it is verisimilitudinous, not to mention child-pleasingly nifty.

The excitement of cliffhangers stems from the withholding of information (sometimes in conjunction with dramatic spectacle); this generates suspense and stimulates speculation as to how the purportedly fatal puzzle will be solved. Sequential take-outs continue the story either by revealing pertinent facts in subsequent shots or by skipping potentially tricky explanations entirely and moving on swiftly. There is nothing inherently cinematic about these take-outs; the new information (or lack thereof) supplied by subsequent events might be just as easily narrated in written form. Nor do these take-outs conflict with any key principles of classical continuity editing, and the narration, so far as it goes, is reliable. Admirable though this may seem, many contemporary and modern viewers have deemed that—excepting rare instances such as Marvel’s delivery from the guillotine, which is enlivened by an element of surprise—the general results can be at once prosaic and implausible and consequently rather unsatisfying as entertainment.
Augmented and incompatible take-outs, by contrast, often feature higher levels of intrigue and imagination. Furthermore, they frequently rely on cliffhanger narration in which the structure of the puzzle rests on generating audience expectations that core principles of classical narration are operative, before providing solutions that undercut attendant assumptions in ways that sequential take-outs do not.

**AUGMENTED TAKE-OUTS**

Augmented take-outs differ from sequential ones in that the cliffhanger replay invariably includes an additional element. In each case, the cliffhanger narration elides tracts of space and often also time. Yet, whereas sequential take-outs fill the gaps in our knowledge after we have been shown the moment of fatal peril for the second time, augmented take-outs insert supplementary shots or scenes before the point of crisis. When we watch the events again, information that was previously withheld is meted out in such a way that situations that seemed to augur fatal catastrophe are revealed as less deadly than they first appeared. The narration reconstructs events so as to enable audiences to see in advance that everything will be okay.

The modified version corrects our previous misapprehensions of how the actions leading up to the cliffhanger unfolded in space or time. In many cases, different camera angles provide new points of view, offering windows on mitigating events of which we were previously unaware. In other cases, the editing reveals that a significant interval was elided; events that formerly appeared contiguous turn out to be separated by sufficient time for escape. Often, both strategies work in unison. In every case, the narration of events leading up to a chapter ending is shown to be less trustworthy than one would normally expect in other parts of a serial chapter or, indeed, in most non-serial films of the same era.

Among the most straightforward examples of augmented take-outs are those in which a change of camera position disrupts our prior understanding of how events unfolded in space without any accompanying modification of how we understood their timescale. Three illustrations of this rather overworked device can be found in *The Spider’s Web* (Columbia, 1938) alone. “Sealed Lips” concludes with the car of hero Richard Wentworth (Warren Hull) crashing into an electric fence and exploding, “While the City Sleeps” ends with his car plunging from a cliff, and in “The Road to Peril” his car is crushed by a rockfall. In each case, the replay includes an insert showing Wentworth jumping out and rolling to safety before calamity strikes, whereas the original framing obscures his leaps from audience view by shooting vehicles from the passenger side or some similarly obstructed angle. Myriad similar examples reveal protagonists bailing out from stricken planes—an exit strategy scarcely less banal than walking unscathed from the wreckage but considerably more plausible.

Other augmented take-outs also enhance our understanding of the spaces in which concealed actions had occurred, thus demonstrating that the protagonist’s range of options was wider than we realized. In *The Phantom* (Columbia, 1943), things had looked very bad for Geoffrey Prescott (Tom Tyler) as he floundered at the bottom of “The Mystery Well” while
his persecutors knocked lumps of masonry down the shaft. As the take-out subsequently reveals, a side tunnel just above the waterline allows Prescott a means of egress; he is safely out of the way before the blocks descend. Elsewhere, hitherto unseen caves and closets allow umpteen heroes to dive swiftly for cover and thus avoid obliteration by avalanches, cave-ins, explosions, and fireballs.

Take-outs such as these may involve slight plasticity of time and motion. In *The Phantom Creeps*, for instance, the speed at which Bob’s (Robert Kent) seaplane appeared to approach a pier at the end of “The Menacing Mist” made his window of opportunity for bailing out look a bit iff y to me. Nevertheless, such take-outs work with the premise that although our vision was formerly restricted, we have no need to substantially reassess our understanding of the pace of events. Other augmented take-outs, by contrast, make plain that a crucial interval of time was occluded.

In *Gang Busters*, “Under Crumbling Walls” ends with Vicki (Irene Hervey) and Bannister (Kent Taylor) trapped in a tower block undergoing demolition. When a huge explosion rocks the building, they are knocked to the floor and covered by a mighty fall of debris. This shot is immediately succeeded by an exterior long shot of the tower’s complete collapse. The editing implies, of course, that these events are contiguous. In the replay, however, the insertion of extra footage shows them picking themselves up and escaping the building before the final explosion is detonated. Similarly, in *The Mystery of the Riverboat* (Universal, 1944), “The Brink of Doom” concludes with several key characters bound and gagged in the ship’s engine room while a dial shows the steam pressure mounting to the max. After the ship’s steward, Napoleon (Mantan Moreland), tries and fails to reduce the pressure, the chapter ends as the engine explodes. Our second view of events reveals that a hefty chunk of time before the explosion was elided, during which the apparently bumbling steward dragged the captives to safety.

In my previous examples, all relevant action (whether seen or unseen) unfolds within one discrete and relatively confined space. Other augmented take-outs introduce additional strands of action, crosscutting between the characters in peril and the approach of hitherto unseen rescuers. *Jungle Jim* (Universal, 1937) supplies an entertainingly innovative specimen of this formula. “Drums of Doom” ends with Jim (Grant Withers) and his sidekick, Malay Mike (Raymond Hatton), standing backed against the wall of a fortress bailey, facing the arrows of a native firing squad. Footage inserted into the replay shows an ally clambering atop the battlements, knocking out a sentry, grabbing his shield, jumping down from the wall to land in front of Jim and Mike at the very moment the arrows are loosed, and intercepting the deadly missiles with the purloined shield. This take-out exemplifies the school of “plausible preposterousness” that industry pundit Arthur James hailed as “the acme of the art of rapid storytelling” in motion picture serials.36

So far, I have focused on usage of camera position and editing to shape audience (mis)understanding of cliffhanger events, yet soundtrack elements

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can also create false impressions—a factor that has received little scrutiny to date. There are two main ways in which serial-makers utilized this sleight of hand: one centers on continuous sound accompaniment and the other on a one-off sound effect.

Serial-makers regularly used the musical score to play psychological tricks during cliffhanger sequences. Long-standing cinematic convention, dating back to the so-called silent era, allows viewers to accept that a seamless musical flow does not necessarily signify that separate shots progress consecutively in either time or space. Nevertheless, when the equally well-established principles of continuity editing suggest they might do so, and when the cutting pace is too rapid to allow the viewer time to consider alternative possibilities, an uninterrupted score can help disguise the fact that units of action may be considerably more disjointed than they seem. The upshot is a false impression that there will be no time for protagonists to avoid whatever the impending catastrophe happens to be. Inserting supplementary footage into augmented take-outs alters the on-screen running time but not the duration of diegetic events, meaning that sound and image must be married differently the second time around.

Similar use is sometimes made of diegetic sound. In *The Phantom Creeps*, the ongoing staccato clatter of a steam locomotive as it rounds a bend before nose-diving from a cliff at the end of “Phantom Footprints” helps to suppress any speculation that a stretch of time was omitted from the sequence. Yet, as the take-out reveals, this is precisely what happened; the initial narration elided a short interval during which most coaches were uncoupled before the engine and front carriage fell.

The use of a one-off sound effect enables a different kind of narrational breach. Many cliffhangers lead protagonists toward a point of explosion or impact. As catastrophe approaches, some kind of raucous crashing sound frequently accompanies the transition between the final diegetic image and the title card advertising the next installment. This is often synchronous with the action’s fleeting fade to black (or white). Audience members are debarred from seeing exactly what occurs in this moment of visual ellipsis but, with everything happening very fast, are likely to connect the sound with the fading image, thus postulating a causal connection. Concurrence is not always underpinned by causality, however, and serial-makers exploited the probability of false assumption. Take-outs frequently reveal that the ostensible sound of impact was, in fact, an artistic punctuation mark denoting the end of the chapter and heralding its successor. Provided we can accept that the noise is non-diegetic, then if the take-out demonstrates that no actual explosion or collision occurred in that moment (though one might come slightly later), the two versions of events are potentially reconcilable and need not be classed as incompatible on this basis alone.

Augmented take-outs are more dependent on manipulation of classical conventions for their effects than are sequential take-outs, and their reshaping of viewer comprehension relies on two assumptions. One is that audience members are sufficiently versed in the conventions of continuity editing to understand how certain shot conjunctions (such as eye-line matches) customarily connote unity of time and space and that they will
entertain a misplaced faith that these norms operate in the cliffhanger. The other is that they will trust in the narration’s reliability enough to believe the cliffhanger offers a candid account of events—or are willing to play along with the idea that this is the case. Any surprise attached to the take-out mechanism relies almost entirely on the abuse of these points of cinematic etiquette. Augmented take-outs belatedly reveal that the narration was more willfully misleading than in cliffhangers resolved by sequential take-outs. Nevertheless, the narration of the take-outs themselves may be construed as fully reliable.

Such a level of dependence on cinematic language places augmented take-outs further from nineteenth and early twentieth-century literary tradition than sequential ones. The fact that they tell the same story twice in different ways is part of this, of course, although it was by no means unprecedented for written narratives to employ reported first-person narration (whether in the form of a letter or an oral account) to provide a new perspective that revised the reader’s understanding of previous events. Nevertheless, it was highly unusual within mainstream fiction for a third-person omniscient narrator to repeat and substantially reconfigure an earlier account. The main point of departure, however, is the chicanery that the viewer’s misplaced construction of shot continuity permits. Failure to honor the tacit pact so crucial to the comprehensibility of classical narration is integral to engineering misreadings of cliffhanger events and to any subsequent pleasure supplied by the take-out’s reveal.

In augmented take-outs, the alternation between spaces previously seen and unseen has minor analogies with the meanwhile structures so common in literary and comic strip narration, but the differences outweigh similarities. Brasch’s proposal that the location of cliffhanger action “not only between the frames but at their edges and beyond the surface of the film set” might be considered in terms of “spatial ‘meanwhiles’” is eminently reasonable. Nevertheless, the speed of cutting between different spaces is far more rapid than print media equivalents, and this structural difference creates a wholly different audience experience.

Take-outs that crosscut between a perilous situation and an approaching rescuer arguably bear a closer resemblance to literary meanwhile than those shooting the same action from new angles. Terlaak Poot characterizes the temporal structures of nineteenth-century literary cliffhangers as either continuous (the story carries straight on, as in sequential take-outs) or discontinuous, in which suspense is heightened by inserting other narrative material before the cliffhanger is resolved. In this latter group, however, the meanwhile moves entirely away from the cliffhanger situation to other characters and events before returning to it; these events, moreover, do not necessarily have bearing on the take-out and often simply delay the solution instead of

37 One celebrated example is the final-act reversal of a third-person account of a murder in Agatha Christie’s Ten Little Niggers (London: Collins, 1939), published in the United States as And Then There Were None (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1940).
38 For further discussion of unreliable narration in literature, see Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
39 Brasch, Film Serials, 21.
40 Terlaak Poot, Bad Timing, 19.
contributing to it. Augmented take-outs are enabled by the intersection of film serial distribution schedules with some of Hollywood’s most familiar narrational conventions. Using cut-ins to provide a different view of the hero’s actions at the very moment they occur, or crosscutting to communicate upcoming rescue, capitalizes on well-established motifs of cinematic language.

Many viewers regard augmented take-outs as more rewarding than sequential ones because they have the capacity to provide solutions that are at once more plausible and less predictable—although the overuse of certain escape methods (such as jumping from speeding cars) soon became hackneyed. Besides attracting relatively little censure in the trade press, their “internal consistency between crisis and resolution” has, as Higgins observes, “become a favorite critical measure for modern commentators.”41 Their “plausible preposterousness,” as James termed it, also provoked far less contemporary disparagement than the incompatible take-outs I discuss next, which some believed took cheating too far.

INCOMPATIBLE TAKE-OUTS
Incompatible take-outs present narrative information that directly conflicts with that provided by the original cliffhanger. The serial-makers rewrite history, creating mutually exclusive versions of what is purportedly the same event. Mandrake’s escape from the plummeting cable car supplies an excellent example; the two versions cannot be reconciled by any logical means. This kind of take-out features prominently in the analyses of other scholars and Higgins in particular. My own account tallies with many of their findings, although I will challenge the degree to which such sequences adhere, as Higgins has argued, to the principles of continuity editing.42

In many respects, incompatible take-outs are structurally similar to augmented take-outs; replays are reedited and usually include a mixture of old and new footage. To boost plausibility, augmented take-outs sometimes downplay elements of peril by removing them from the narration without explicitly excluding them from the sequence of narrative events. For instance, the reedited replay of Spy Smasher’s “America Beware” cliffhanger omits a shot of flames moving perilously near to a box of hand grenades on the back of the hero’s mining car but stops short of demonstrating that the fire could not have gotten so close. Incompatible take-outs go much further and show that events previously depicted simply had not happened. In some cases, one must look closely to spot the cheat; in others the fraud is more barefaced. Either way, serial-makers banked on the likelihood of audiences forgetting details of what they witnessed a week earlier.

In incompatible take-outs, reconstructed events override the original version in at least one of four ways: a significant action or event may be added, a significant action or event may be taken away, the alignment of time and motion may be changed, or events may be reordered. These techniques often

41 Higgins, Matinee Melodrama, 93. One contemporary dissenter was the prolific complainer J. E. Stocker, who objected to cliffhangers in general. Stocker, Phantom Creeps, 52.
42 Higgins, Matinee Melodrama, 4.
coexist within a single take-out. There are also cases in which these changes are compounded by blatant misdirection, which abuses the audience’s presumed trust in continuity editing and other grammatical conventions of classicism.

A flagrant example of the addition of crucial, and quite impossible, material appears in Adventures of Captain Marvel. At the end of “Dead Man’s Trap,” Billy Batson, aided by Betty (Louise Currie), prepares to open a booby-trapped safe that is positioned in the sights of concealed machine guns set to fire as soon as the safe’s door is opened. The final shot shows Betty reading the last number of the combination to Billy, after which there is a pan to the opposite side of the room, passing a French window en route, before the shot holds on the guns as they open fire. In the replay, while Betty reads, three thugs enter from the direction of the window. Two remain by it while the third advances and pushes Betty out of the way as she reads the final number. He then slugs Billy from behind, steps forward to open the safe, and is mowed down by the automated gunfire. In the original version, these men were incontrovertibly absent. The cliffhanger’s final, unbroken panning shot brooked no possibility of them having been previously concealed by editing or camera position. The two sets of events are utterly incompatible.

Flash Gordon’s Trip to Mars (Universal, 1938) offers an example in which the take-out erases a crucial action that occurred during the cliffhanger sequence. “Symbol of Death” ends as Zarkov (Frank Shannon) and Barin (Richard Alexander) endeavor to rescue Flash (Buster Crabbe) from a chamber where he is chained to a chair. Both are knocked out by a paralyzing ray, which then hits Flash, rendering him unconscious too. The replay follows the original events up to the point where Zarkov and Barin are struck down. This time, however, Flash is not hit and is thus able to effect a Houdini-like escape from his bonds and save his stricken comrades.

Many incompatible take-outs use a harder-to-spot cheat that entails falsifying the timing of an escape cut-in. The basic strategy is very similar to the type of augmented take-out illustrated by Wentworth’s last-minute leaps from cars in The Spider’s Web. In the incompatible versions, however, the cliff-hanger sequence clearly shows that the endangered protagonist had already missed their moment. In Zorro Rides Again, “Plunge of Peril” leaves Zorro (John Carroll) racing down a steep declivity at full tilt after a dastardly foe has overridden the speed controls of his funicular wagon. The sequence ends as he is brought terrifyingly close to a fatal crash at the base of the slope. The take-out inserts a shot of Zorro jumping from the wagon at around the halfway mark, even though the cliffhanger footage had clearly shown his figure still on the wagon well beyond that point in its descent.

Some take-outs chop and change the order of events more substantially. Adventures of the Flying Cadets reorders cliffhanger events in three separate take-outs, with some of the most egregious cheating used to change the outcome of “Into the Flames.” In the initial sequence of events, during a mass brawl in a burning building, a cadet falls down a lift shaft but lands safely. Next, the punch-up moves inside the elevator, which is knocked out of control and plunges toward the trapped cadet. Finally, a big explosion erupts at the bottom of the shaft, producing a huge billow of smoke and suggesting
a fatal outcome for those in and under the elevator alike. In the restructured version, the smoke surges up the shaft before the cadet falls down it. A subsequent cut-in shows the lift’s occupants applying the emergency brake. Moving the smoke footage to an earlier point in the sequence allows the serial-makers to reassign the explosion to some (rather vague) cause other than the elevator’s plummet. This double-cross allows the remainder of the sequence to proceed along the general lines of an augmented take-out. The key difference, of course, is that in this example the actual narrative line has changed instead of merely the order in which events are narrated.

The key points of conflict in incompatible take-outs usually rest wholly or primarily on visual elements, although, as Higgins had illustrated, there are also instances in which the fundamental discrepancy relates to addition or removal of sound or speech.43 Brenda Starr, Reporter provides an example in which the two versions of the image track are reconcilable, but take-out success hinges on an amended soundtrack. At the end of “On the Spot,” Brenda risks discovery by the homicidal villains on whom she is spying when their actions cause her to let loose a loud scream. In the take-out, she does not scream and can therefore sneak away undetected.

A more complex take-out in Jungle Girl goes further; its “Treasure Tomb” cliff hanger is resolved through a combination of a rescinded scream, the addition of previously non-existent dialogue, and some visual flimflam that rests on misappropriating established elements of film language in order to misdirect the audience. Nyoka, Stanton, and Curly (Eddie Acuff) are trapped atop a retreating floor, which leaves them backed against a stone wall as they perch on a narrowing ledge above a deep shaft. Shots of their faces as they look downward toward the shaft alternate with point-of-view shots of this abyss, in which the ledge slides progressively from sight at the lower edge of the frame. In the penultimate shot, the camera is lowered from a head-on angle of their anxious faces to show their feet on the remaining part of the ledge. Without any cut, the camera tracks to screen left until their feet are out of frame. The shot ends as the remaining inches of the ledge retreat into the wall, on which shadows of Curly’s agitated movements can still be seen. The final shot repeats the angle of the previous point-of-view shots, but this time the camera is lowered rapidly into the shaft. This camera movement is accompanied by Nyoka’s piercing scream.

In the take-out, things happen differently. As the ledge narrows, Stanton looks up and spots an iron ring in the wall to his left (screen right). He yells “Look!” before making a superhuman leap to grab the ring and dangle from it. “Grab my arms!” he shouts. The others leap and hang from his shoulders before the floor recedes entirely. Since a chain attached to the ring has opened a hidden doorway, they are able to clamber to safety. Even though the camerawork in the original cliffhanger footage had carefully created an off-screen space to conceal the escape mechanism, the two soundtracks cannot be reconciled. Furthermore, the cliffhanger’s final shot had aped a point-of-view shot. If interpreted that way, the clear implication of the

43 Higgins, 88, 95.
moving camera was that one or more heroes were making a similar descent—an impression bolstered by Nyoka’s scream.

In sound serial cliffhangers, what audience members would instinctively identify as point-of-view shots can seldom be relied upon. As our heroes draw closer to dangerous falls or collisions, the narration often incorporates a shot of the approaching hazard filmed from a camera moving rapidly toward it. In such cases, the camera seems to be placed in the space occupied by the hero; in many examples, an eye-line match cements our assumption that we are seeing what they see. As we subsequently learn, they never came quite so close to doom as these bogus point-of-view shots suggested (unless we feel charitable enough to interpret them as representing the terrified victim’s subjective, rather than objective, point of view).

Nor are point-of-view shots the only film technique that serial-makers have subverted in order to distort audience interpretation of events, as two final examples of misdirection illustrate. I should note that misdirection can occasionally be found in augmented take-outs, but I discuss it here because most occurrences in my sample are conjoined with indisputable incompatibilities.

In *The Green Hornet* (Universal, 1940), three kinds of unreliable narration run hand in hand in “Disaster Rides the Rails.” A fight between hero and villain in the carriage of a fast-moving train is interrupted by its dive from a cliff. One of the final shots in this rapidly edited montage, which is sandwiched between two exterior shots of the plunge, is an image of the men’s struggle, which rotates in a 360-degree spin. The first cheat is that the carriage door, which was previously closed, is open in the take-out, allowing them to fall out of it before the train jumps its rails. The second is that the cliffhanger’s final shot of the men, shown in the spinning image, was located after the train fell—whereas the take-out had already extracted them from the peril by this point. Third, this cheating is compounded by the rotation itself, which is revealed to be a mere dramatic effect instead of a representation of the carriage’s overturn.

Another variant occurs in *Manhunt of Mystery Island*, in which the core mechanism of the take-out solution relies upon previous misdirection, albeit compounded by a small but significant change to the timeline of events. The climax of “The Murder Machine” features a shootout between the occupants of two speedboats, during which Claire (Linda Stirling) pilots the front boat while Lance fires at their pursuers from its stern. To add further tension, we know their boat contains a ticking time bomb. The chapter’s last four shots are as follows: (1) a close-up of the bomb timer showing it has reached the “danger zone” and will detonate soon; (2) a medium shot of Lance discovering his gun is empty; (3) a close-up of the bomb timer nearing zero, then obscured by smoke as we hear a blast; and (4) a long shot of the boat as it is blown to smithereens.

In the replay, the order of the first two shots is reversed. This buys Lance some crucial extra time to perform the actions shown in a subsequent insert: he spots the bomb and throws it overboard behind the boat. One additional shot shows the pursuers approaching the stretch of water where Lance dumped the bomb. This is followed by a repeat of the cliffhanger’s two final
shots. What we actually saw, this revision implies, was the pursuers’ virtually identical boat exploding.

As with my previous example, this solution is made possible through the combination of several techniques. The take-out features incompatible timelines, as well as being augmented by additional footage, but this time its potency rests largely on a general audience expectation of the camera remaining focused on the visual element in which they are most interested. Unless explicitly signaled otherwise, to direct the camera in such a way is one of the fundamental codes governing the classical style. As we follow Claire and Lance’s boat, we do not expect what appears to be conventional continuity editing to slip us a fast one and substitute another similar-looking boat—unless, perhaps, we’ve seen The Tiger Woman (Republic, 1944), in which the “Echo of Eternity” cliffhanger pulls off a very similar switch.44 Yet, despite this dirty trick, the solution is sufficiently ingenious to be relatively satisfying from an audience perspective.

As these examples illustrate, cliffhangers solved by incompatible take-outs appear to follow the conventions of classical storytelling, but this is a fraud. Instead, serial-makers create suspense, and subsequent surprise, by rewriting its language to deliver a different result from the one their use of established techniques would lead audiences to expect. The delayed revelation that their apparent adherence to the principles of continuity editing had deliberately given false impressions of temporal and spatial organization proves this narration utterly unreliable.

Watched a week apart, minor discrepancies would have been hard for contemporary viewers to spot, although more glaring examples did not go unremarked. Barefoot notes the above-average number of complaints within the trade press about such cheating in Robinson Crusoe of Clipper Island (Republic, 1936).45 Moreover, while trade papers indicate a widespread industry assumption that children are less discerning than adults, observation of audiences suggested otherwise.46 “Even the children give those kind of endings the razz,” wrote one exhibitor of Ace Drummond (Universal, 1936), while the authors of a British study of children’s responses to Jungle Queen (Universal, 1945) found that the children detected alterations to timings “and occasionally expressed disappointment and annoyance that such unfair technique had been employed.”47 Dwelling on such detail was discouraged, however. In order for the heroes to survive and the story to proceed, audiences must accept that the take-out, rather than the cliffhanger, offers the definitive version of events. There was, as I have already noted, no direct precedent for incompatible take-outs within the literary mainstream, although, as Higgins observes, parallels have since arisen with video gaming’s widespread practice of respawning.48

44 See Higgins, 93–94, for a detailed description of the Tiger Woman sequence.
45 Barefoot, Lost Jungle, 111.
46 See, for instance, “The Phantom of the West,” Film Daily, December 7, 1930, 12; and “The Vanishing Shadow,” Motion Picture Herald, March 31, 1934, 54.
48 Higgins, Matinee Melodrama, 181.
DISTRIBUTION OF TAKE-OUT TYPES

My labeling of *sequential*, *augmented*, and *incompatible* take-outs is based on their formal qualities, although one might equally define them by the relative levels of audience satisfaction reported by contemporary and modern commentators. Either way, the take-outs are less crucial to the overall viewing experience than the fanfare attached to cliffhanger chapter climaxes might suggest; many pleasures of sound serials lie elsewhere, be it in visceral spectacle, breathtaking stunt action, futuristic technologies, or exotic costumes. Nevertheless, the distribution of different kinds of take-out, both across the industry’s overall output and within individual serials, indicates producer awareness that viewers did not deem all strategies equally gratifying.

Everson reports that the first three chapters of a sound serial usually benefited from a disproportionate allocation of budget and imaginative effort, because these were screened in advance to exhibitors and reviewers.\(^{49}\) The take-out distribution in my sample shows a general tendency to make greater use of augmented take-outs within these chapters than across series as a whole. In the overall sample, 51 percent are sequential, 32 percent augmented, and 17 percent incompatible.\(^{50}\) By contrast, the distribution within the first three chapters (which includes the two take-outs appearing in chapters 2 and 3) is 45 percent, 45 percent, and 9 percent, respectively.

This indicates a proactive response to exhibitor and audience feedback that augmented take-outs generally provide the best reward for a viewer’s close engagement with the cliffhanger’s narrational riddle. As we approach the end of the series, by contrast, the sample shows a slight shift toward more incompatible solutions. The distribution of final episode take-outs stands at 45 percent, 32 percent, and 23 percent, although we should be cautious of assigning too much significance to such a small shift within a sample of this size.

The sample also indicates a very slight trend toward a growing use of augmented take-outs, mainly at the expense of sequential ones, across the ten-year period surveyed, but, again, the sample size precludes robust conclusions. Whether a comprehensive survey would ratify or reverse such indications, and the implications of such findings, might prove a productive avenue for further studies. What seems more certain is the variation in the proportion of take-out types favored by different producers. Columbia relied the most heavily on sequential take-outs, followed by Universal. Republic was by far the heaviest user of incompatible take-outs, which vastly outnumbered Columbia’s and Universal’s combined total.\(^{51}\)

The disparities between Universal and Republic figures can be explained, at least in part, by a level of variance in their main target audi-

\(^{49}\) Everson, introduction, xx.

\(^{50}\) Where a take-out combines features of more than one of my categories, I have classed it according the highest level of narrational unreliability. For example, in *Jungle Jim*, the cliffhanger of “The Cobra Strikes” features multiple perils; in the take-out, one peril is solved sequentially (and implausibly) and another through the unveiling of additional information. I have classed this take-out as augmented.

\(^{51}\) Columbia take-outs were 69 percent sequential, 26 percent augmented, and 5 percent incompatible. The respective figures for Republic were 34 percent, 38 percent, and 28 percent; and for Universal they were 54 percent, 32 percent, and 14 percent.
ence and the associated implications of the aforementioned industry sup-
position that children put less stock in plausibility than do adults. Republic
director William Witney explains that their audience “was supposed to be all
kids.”52 At Universal, by contrast, Morgan Cox’s opinion that “the take-out
should always be plausible” was rooted in the studio’s courting of a cross-
genерational audience for at least some of its serials.53 Pre-publicity for its first
sound serial, *The Ace of Scotland Yard* (1929), included the announcement that
“noted psychologist and student of emotions” Dr. William Marston, employed
by Universal in an advisory capacity, had developed “a new technique in
serial chapter endings . . . especially designed to have a more compelling
adult appeal.” This intervention responded to common criticisms “that serials
have a stronger hold on children than grown-ups on account of their too
frequent improbability and their violent anticlimaxes at the end of each chap-
ter.” Universal claimed “Doctor Marston would eliminate that fault by supply-
ing exciting but reasonable menaces with an appeal to the mature mind.”54

Columbia’s heavy reliance on sequential take-outs accords with a wide-
spread perception of this studio as having the weakest grip on how to please
serial audiences. Higgins calculates that from 1934 to 1947, “Exhibitor critics
favor Republic product slightly ahead of Universal’s and well ahead of Colum-
bia’s.”55 For Gary Johnson, the studio was guilty of a fundamental “failure
to understand the serial form,” evidenced by a “dunderhead approach” to
ciffhangers, which saw it promptly deflate whatever suspense the peril might
have generated.56 Why bother with an ingenious take-out when their chapters
so often ended with a “See! See! See!” spiel, delivered in the manner of a
fairground barker and accompanied (in some cases) by teaser clips of the fol-
lowing week’s highlights—all showing the hero or heroine very much alive?

**CONCLUSION**

As Edward Branigan has eloquently explained, “Narration comes into being
when knowledge is unevenly distributed—when there is a disturbance or dis-
ruption in the field of knowledge.”57 Such disruption is seldom more obvious
than in cliffhanger chapter endings, and the means by which serial-makers
redressed the balance of knowledge during take-out sequences is fascinat-
ing, with their regular subversion of deeply entrenched codes of classicism
often showing considerable sophistication. As Brasch has argued, the sound
serials’ “non-compliance with the rulebook of classical Hollywood cinema
enabled them to redefine their own modes of address accordingly.”58 Yet the
serials’ relationship to classicism is not a straightforward case of opposition
or variance. As I have shown, cliffhangers and their take-outs often center
on a dynamic that explicitly invokes the conventions of continuity editing to
construct an intriguing puzzle for audiences to decode during the weeklong

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52 Witney, *In a Door*, 186.
54 “Dr. Marston, Universal Psychologist, Evolves New Suspense for Serials,” *Universal
56 Johnson, “Serials.”
58 Brasch, *Film Serials*, 239.
interval between episodes. At the same time, serial-makers frequently relied upon this industrially embedded exhibition interlude to disguise substantive revisions of the narrative events previously depicted.

One could argue that all take-outs feature some degree of unreliable narration, although in the sequential category this is really just a matter of failing to provide a plausible account of what happened. Ron Backer takes this stance, as his own category of “survived through it cheats” makes clear.\(^59\) I am inclined to concur with Higgins, who argues it is only really cheating if there are obvious conflicts between cliffhanger and replay footage, as is the case in what I call incompatible take-outs.\(^60\) Either way, there is certainly a sliding scale of reliability, which, in structural terms, corresponds to a shift away from literary precedent toward a complex use of film language that challenges and reconfigures some of classical Hollywood’s widely operative norms.

Crucially, contemporary audience responses indicate that their default viewing schema did indeed rest on assumptions that classical models of continuity editing would (or at least should) be followed to a large degree and that the most satisfying cliffhanger take-outs offered a logical and plausible solution to the question of how the hero would survive. Differences between the take-out strategies of the three major production companies bespeak a degree of variance in their demographic targeting and in the acuity of their estimations of what those viewers wanted, as well as their conscious pursuit of product differentiation.

Sound serials raise many interesting questions relating to audience experiences, pleasures, and reading strategies, as well as to the acceptable latitude of mainstream filmic technique. As the recent wave of sound serial scholarship has demonstrated, detailed appraisal of this cinematic format reminds us that neither the language nor the pleasures of sound serials are wholly contained by the contemporaneous conventions associated with the live-action fiction feature, nor do their customarily low budgets equate to a paucity of narrational sophistication or innovation. Close attention to the mechanisms of cliffhangers and their take-outs leads us toward more accommodating interpretations of the provision and consumption of filmed entertainment in the so-called classical era.

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\(^{59}\) Backer, *Gripping Chapters*.

\(^{60}\) Higgins, *Matinee Melodrama*, 86.