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Border crossings: Serial figures and the evolution of media

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Media's influence on narrative form and subject matter is never fully transparent, but its impact manifests especially in cases of serial narration and particularly in the production of what we call 'serial figures'. In these contexts, media do not just serve as narrative platforms, but become self-reflexive objects in their own right, supporting continuously-shifting narrative functions. Principles of seriality and mediality therefore stand in a tense, historically variable interrelationship, which we propose to examine in greater detail.

A serial figure, in our definition, is a type of stock character that became entrenched in the popular-cultural imagination of the 20th and 21st centuries and whose career was shaped across a range of different media. Examples include the plurimedial figures of Frankenstein's monster, Dracula, Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan, Fu Manchu, Fantômas, Superman, and Batman. With a view towards figures such as these, we plan to explore how different media forms affect the contents of serial narration and, in turn, how these narratives reflect their medial framings and reframings. Aspects of repetition and recognisability, which are central to serial figures, are thus set in relation to the explicit variations or subtle revisions inherent in the figures' various stagings – in relation, that is, to transformations or breaks that hinge on the figures' move from one medium to another or that have to do with changing modes or techniques of representation within a given medium. Our starting point here is the idea that the enactment of serial figures does not just take place

via a plurality of media or media forms, but that media and their specific modalities become prominently thematic in serial productions – i.e. that the staging of serial figures exhibits a narratively and media-historically significant dimension of self-reflexivity: serial figures reflect and document the evolution of media forms in a marked and condensed manner.

It is thus no coincidence that serial figures experienced their heyday during the peak period of mass-media proliferation and differentiation from 1880 to 1960. The early phase of this period, during which modern mass media and global media networks were being established and consolidated, coincided significantly with the apex of Western imperialism, and the development of mass media is closely tied to the growth of modern industrial societies and the processes of economic globalisation. We argue that these developments play more than just a diegetically significant role for the success story of serial figures. The political, societal, and medial transformations of the first half of the 20th century do not simply provide a real or thematic backdrop for the medial proliferation of serial figures, but are complexly and materially-entangled with them.

1.

The material dimensions of serial narration, which we conceive as a process of autonomous unfolding, come to the fore in the imbrication of seriality and mediality. This means that stories about serial figures appear, in a sense, to write (and to update) themselves: they gain a momentum of their own (an *Eigendynamik*, to borrow a term from systems theory), such that references to the authority or intentionality of an author must appear obsolete or at least insufficient.[2] To be clear, we are not suggesting that there is a constant or universal connection between mediality and seriality; instead, the relationship between mediality and seriality is always in flux, as it is determined through a complex and precarious fabric of culturally and historically-specific conditions.

This paper focuses on the processes of differentiation and re-convergence, of transformation and affirmation that inform the mutual influence and interference between serial narratives and media formats. The point of this approach goes beyond the argument that serial narration is contingent on its media – that would be a platitude applicable to any form of narration. Neither are we primarily interested in exploring how media and media forms

impact narrative content.[3] And finally, this paper does not seek to rehabilitate a radical variant of media determinism: we do not claim that the contents and processes of serial narratives are *solely* determined by media forms or that they unfold *only* by conforming to the affordances of their mediality. Yet the extreme alternatives to a media deterministic approach are not convincing either. After all, serial narratives do not generate specific media forms or formats; practically every medium can be used for or adapted to the purposes of serial narration. There is, then, no inherent, univocally definable relation between seriality and mediality, despite their undeniable connection to one another. This suggests that serial figures themselves play an instrumental role in shaping the particular intersections of mediality and seriality in the course of their narrative and material development.

Referring to the dynamics of iterability and reproducibility that defined the popular career of Sherlock Holmes, Michael Chabon has described serial narratives as 'storytelling engines': 'among the most efficient narrative apparatuses the world has ever seen'.[4] These storytelling engines keep on running, cranking out ever-new stories, even when their authors pass away or their production teams vary and change. Building upon Chabon's provocative thesis, we argue that serial figures operate as the very *engineers* of the changing intersections between seriality and mediality; serial figures should be seen, that is, as the actual driving forces in the development of their serially-enacted narratives. By considering these serial storytelling machines and their formative conditions, we can make sense of the emergence and workings of the seriality-mediality nexus and begin to understand its impact on processes of narration and reception – as well as its relation to the broader lifeworld of serial audiences.

Our argument is based on a distinction between two different types of fictional agents in serial narratives, or more precisely: between two different forms of serial existence. We differentiate between serial figures on the one hand and series characters on the other. The latter denote characters in the more or less closed fictional universe of a serially-ongoing narrative (such as a soap opera or serialised novel). In the course of their narrative development, series characters tend to acquire psychological depth, they are given complex biographies and branching genealogies, and they are primarily of interest because of their prehistories and potential future development. Serial figures, in contrast, are generally presented as flat and unchanging; they undergo a 'virtual beginning' with each new staging, 'ignoring where the pre-

ceding event left off', as Umberto Eco once wrote of Superman.[5] Accordingly, whereas series characters grow and develop a more or less linear biography, serial figures are shaped and reshaped through the repetitions, revisions, and reboots of their stories.

Clearly, the terms 'serial figure' and 'series character' denote ideal-typical figurations, which in reality are never clearly delineated but tend to merge and blend in concrete narrative actualisations. In fact, serial figures have often evolved out of series characters: many of them (Tarzan, Sherlock Holmes, Fu Manchu, Fantômas) were first introduced in magazine or newspaper installments, were further developed in serial novels, and ultimately mutated by way of multiple media changes into serial figures proper. The serial figures Superman and Batman were first established as just two among many characters featured in anthology-style comics periodicals before being turned into the protagonists of their own publications on the grounds of their success. The transitions are thus fluid; our purpose in introducing the terminology of series characters and serial figures is not to establish clear-cut typological categories, but rather to help identify the aggregate status or developmental phases of dynamic figurations.

In differentiating between rounded characters and flat figures, we are referring exclusively to the diegetic integrity or dis-integrity of narrative biographies (at the narratological level of 'story' or *histoire*), not generic differences between narrative methods (at the level of 'discourse'). Thus, the experiential world of a series character may be conveyed through flashbacks, allusions, loops, and other non-linear narrative techniques – but it is still possible, in most cases, to reconstruct a coherent biography from the narrative fragments. In contrast, the various instantiations of a serial figure may be presented by way of various linear narratives, but when viewed comprehensively – taking into account *all* the stories that constitute a serial figure – the figure will inevitably exhibit a palimpsest-like biography that resists diegetic coherence (a fact that becomes particularly evident in the attempts of fan communities to synthesise coherence and closure out of a panoply of narrative variations, installments, and parallel universes).[6]

Considered structurally, therefore, the series of enactments and reenactments that generates a serial figure has less in common with an ongoing television series than it does with a disjointed series of murder cases; the seriality of a serial figure is really not that different from the seriality of a serial killer.[7] In both cases, seriality is constituted in the repetition of ritualised acts, the commission of which allows for formal or situational variation but

fails to produce progression on a psychological or narrative-biographical level. There is therefore no developmental logic between one action and the next; the serial figure learns no more from its past than the serial killer does. Both of them would appear to be caught in an endless loop of repetition compulsion. This is especially apparent in a case of serialisation like that of Frankenstein films, which revolve around the incessant mechanistic repetition of a basic plot and the episodic rebirth of the monstrous figure.[8]

We can therefore differentiate ideal-typically between two types of figure-oriented serialisations. Series that proceed more or less linearly, by means of successive episodes and a progressive dynamic of development, tend, at least in their classical forms, to be told in a more or less stable and inconspicuous medial frame and feature characters in the proper sense of the word: series characters.[9] Serial figures, in contrast, propagate through more or less mechanical repetitions of predetermined patterns. The monster is created, it turns on its creator, it runs amok and is ultimately defeated through the combined efforts of the village community. Through this process, order is restored – but only temporarily, until the next re-telling of the story. Even if the story itself is self-contained and does not demand the sort of continuation that we expect from an episode of *Grey's Anatomy* or *Dallas*: there *is* a possibility of continuation inscribed into narratives around serial figures, too. Regardless of whether we are watching a Frankenstein or Tarzan film or reading a Sherlock Holmes or a Fu Manchu story, there is no ultimate narrative, no finale, that can definitively conclude the series. Ironically, this fact becomes most pertinent when the protagonist dies a spectacular death (think of Sherlock Holmes's dramatic end at Niagara Falls or Fu Manchu's numerous deaths at the conclusion of each narrative, not to mention various attempts to kill off a superhero like Superman or Batman). The iterability of flat, serial figures implies not only their episodic existence (like that of cartoon figures), but also their ability to extract themselves fully from the diegetic construct of a narrative world, from its attendant demands for continuity, and even from the medium itself through which a fictional world is otherwise invisibly constructed. This is why serial figures can so easily take up residence in new narrative worlds (one day Frankenstein is in eighteenth-century Ingolstadt, then suddenly in present-day America) and jump from one medium to another (from novel to film to radio to television to computer game, etc.). Serial figures are not even required to undergo significant change in the process of such transplantation; in these non-linear acts of serialisation,

serial figures remain relatively constant, while it is the variations in the medial parameters of their staging that come to the fore in each adaptation.

Our terminological distinction of characters versus figures is therefore not arbitrary. A character connotes depth and complexity, while the figure in its flatness must be considered in close relation to a background, i.e. its narrative or medial horizon. But this relational position of the figure means that serial figures – particularly under the conditions of media change – can become points of reference for diverse figure/ground-reversals, such as are familiar from Gestalt psychology.[10] While series characters are generally contoured before a stable diegetic background that lends them depth, serial figures can enact a surprising reversal: the figure then becomes the ground from which *the medium* emerges as a figure. When this happens, the differences between literary text versus film or film versus comic become thematic in the serial narrative. And more subtle media changes can also announce themselves, such as the transition from silent to sound film or the differences between filmic, televisual, or computer-generated images.

Two unwaveringly iconic serial figures may serve to illustrate this processual exchange between figure and medium: Frankenstein's monster and Tarzan the ape-man. The iconic form of each figure was established in the cinema of the early 1930s, and in both cases it is closely tied to a particular actor, even though numerous other performers and formats have ultimately been employed to update the iconic prototypes. In many ways, Boris Karloff *is* Frankenstein's monster, and Johnny Weissmuller *is* Tarzan. At the same time, these actors' embodiments of the figures in 1931 and 1932, respectively, is inseparable from the transition from silent to sound cinema. It is in the context of early sound film that both figures lost, of all things, the linguistic articulation that had distinguished them as literary characters. In their now iconic forms, attention was instead directed towards the eerie non-linguistic noises produced by these bodies, which in turn strikingly accentuated the technical possibilities of the new medium.[11] Of course, this spectacular media-reflexive dimension of the figures wore off in the process of their iconisation and the habituation of sound cinema as a no-longer-novel medium; the figures' initially foregrounded mediality thus became inconspicuous or invisible over time. Accordingly, many such moments of medial self-reflexivity in the staging of serial figures are today only apparent when they are carefully historicised and reconsidered in the context of the media changes that determined their development.

Seen in this light, it is the more subtle shifts and transformations within specific media formations that are especially interesting, such as the transposition of a figure en-route from the stand-alone novel to the serialised tale, from the vaudeville stage to the single-reel silent films of the 'cinema of attractions', or in the transition from silent to sound film.[12] In these contexts we find evidence that serial figures are contingent on plurimediality: their seriality is propelled by the serial progression and transformation of the media formats in which they are staged. To return, then, to the terms of the distinction introduced above: series characters classically exist *within a series* – and thus the medial format of the series more or less constitutes their ecosphere, the frame or horizon within which characters thrive, and which itself cannot be spectacularly thematised; serial figures, on the other hand, have their ideal-typical existence *in series*: as a series of varied repetitions, unfolding not within a homogenous medial and diegetic space, but rather between or across such narrative spaces.[13]

2.

How do serial figures and the nexus of seriality and mediality that they occasion come about? To answer this question, we have to consider more closely the historical unfolding of the two serial forms of existence that we have delineated above. As we have suggested, the connections between seriality and mediality are manifold, and they extend well beyond our specific interest in serial figures. Roger Hagedorn describes serial narration generally as a form of new media promotion. Serial *feuilleton* novels augmented newspaper sales, for example; color comic strip series promoted new four-color printing processes. Similarly, early radio and television series worked towards attracting an audience to the then new media, motivating potential media consumers to purchase expensive equipment and then getting them hooked with ongoing content.[14] Popular seriality is thus closely connected to a media modernity under constant pressure to innovate.[15] This applies to serial forms that generate series characters as well as to the kind of seriality that develops in concert with serial figures. The distinction between series characters and serial figures must therefore be understood against a backdrop of a periodical (and relative) lack of distinction between the serial forms themselves. To repeat: series characters and serial figures do not mutually exclude each other;

they are not absolutely distinct kinds. But the historical and formal relationships that connect these figurations – and the processes of differentiation and convergence that effect their dissociation – give important clues to how seriality and mediality interact and condition one another in the modern world.

In the context of the nascent media modernity of the 19th century, the popular publication formats of story papers, dime novels, and penny dreadfuls shed light on the workings of serial figures in their autonomous momentum or *Eigendynamik*. Serial figures acquired some of their central characteristics in these print formats. Popular literature with its mass appeal played a decisive role in the proliferation of serial narrative formats in general and of serial figures in particular. For example, the popular success of the story papers – compact newspaper-like publications full of melodramatic and sensational stories, which were especially popular in the US in the second half of the 19th century – was closely connected to technical-material innovations in the production and distribution of print media: steam-powered printing presses allowed for cheap production, and the transcontinental railway system ensured rapid and widespread dissemination. Under these conditions serial *production*, as a fundamental principle of the newspaper industry's print capitalism, came to be closely conjoined with the production of serial *narratives*. Sequentially-numbered issues made individual texts recognisable as parts of a series, and at the same point permitted the publishers of story papers second-class postal privileges.[16] It therefore made ever more sense to tailor the narratives into ongoing series. Readers were encouraged not to skip any of the regularly-appearing issues, and seriality was transformed from a material circumstance into a narrative principle. Recurring protagonists provided continuity and coherence in ongoing/linear as well as episodic series. The somewhat longer dime novels, which became popular after 1860, also used serial numbering in order to profit from the reduced postal rate; at the same time they intensified narrative serialisation by becoming springboards for cross-media proliferations. Early serial figures such as Buffalo Bill and Jesse James insisted on their hybrid status between real life and fiction; others, such as detectives and underworld heroes of the popular dime novels of the 19th century, cast themselves as mediators between distinct social worlds or spaces.[17]

Claims to authenticity were routinely raised to launch serial figures beyond the frame of dime novels into spectacular theatrical or filmic productions. The figures thus functioned from the beginning as border crossers in a

twofold sense: narratively and conceptually they settled on the borders between good and bad, hero and outlaw, reality and fiction, even life and death. Moreover, formally-materially the figures marked the borders between different serial forms of representation and media. This status as border crossers in a double sense characterises all of the major serial figures of the 20th century: they all oscillate between opposing conditions and worlds; both narratively and formally they highlight the exceptional, the marginalised, the abnormal, the fantastic; in short, *they embody the border*.[18] This liminality in character design is closely connected to the medial liminality of these figures' repeated stagings.

In order to be successful and to thrive across multiple instantiations, a serial figure has to be capable of undermining its own diegetic coherence and withstanding the resulting tension within the diegetic frame of the serial narrative – so that this frame can ultimately be exploded and left behind. This process can be illustrated by way of a comparison between the figures of Tarzan and the now forgotten Whistlin' Dan Barry, both of which emerged in pulp novels of the 1910s. Structurally, the two figures appeared remarkably similar at first. Like the Tarzan stories, the Whistlin' Dan narratives originally appeared as serialised pulp novels before they were reprinted as hardcover books. And after two sequels, Whistlin' Dan underwent a media change: cowboy-film star Tom Mix played the figure in a series of silent films from the early 1920s. Like the ape-man Tarzan, young Whistlin' Dan was a creature located somewhere between nature and culture – a feral wolf child, to be precise. Whistlin' Dan's nickname derived from his eerie whistle, which, like Tarzan's yell, is characterised as wild and animalistic. In this way, both figures established themselves in the popular imagination as border crossers between wilderness and human civilisation, and both also engaged in medial border crossings by migrating from the printed page to the screen. But while Whistlin' Dan quickly disappeared from the popular cultural memory, Tarzan became a lasting icon. Whistlin' Dan's fate as a serial figure may have been sealed when his author, Max Brand, began to evoke emotional depths and psychological conflicts instead of providing space for formulaic action.[19] Accordingly, the third Whistlin' Dan novel marked the early end of Dan's career as a figure, when the tensions between his wild nature and human society led to his tragic death at the hand of his own wife.

Tarzan, on the other hand, became ever flatter and more formulaic in the course of his plurimedial serialisations; the figure showed less and less continuity between its different diegetic permutations and was thus made readily

compatible with enactments that clashed with or disregarded its literary origins. Tarzan's career unfolded in close connection with the media evolution of the 20th century and was repeatedly revitalised through new media formats, such as the filmic updates it received in the 1932 sound film and its sequels or in the spectacular CGI-enhanced animation of Walt Disney's 1999 *Tarzan*. Seen in this way, Tarzan cannot possibly die like Whistlin' Dan; his de-characterised flatness allows him to remain nimble in the face of change, indeed to change his medial environment itself and move on whenever he has plumbed the depths of a specific format.

The example of Tarzan points to the mechanisms of serial figures' plurimedial enactments: Tarzan is located at the conceptual border between human and animal, while the easy recognisability and flatness of the figure serve to propel it beyond the borders of its original narrative universe. Similar conditions mark the beginnings of other prototypical serial figures. They all eventually explode the frameworks of their original enactments both narratively *and* medially (i.e. self-reflexively). Serial figures are liminal and operationally-expansive: *they are figures of spread and sprawl*.

3.

Successful serial figures are marked by their openness and indeterminacy; they lend themselves to transhistorical adaptation and appropriation. However, this does not mean that their success stories cannot be historicised. In fact, such a historicisation proves most illuminating, as it is far from coincidental that the starting points for many successful serial figures are located in the 'long' 19th century, and they are thus closely linked with phenomena of industrialisation, colonisation, and imperialism. What Chabon writes about Sherlock Holmes applies equally well to the figures Frankenstein, Dracula, Tarzan, Fu Manchu, Fantômas, and (with significant qualifications) even to the comic book superheroes Superman and Batman: their emergence attests to the western fascination with white spots on the map, to the 'Cape-to-Cairo spirit' of colonialism and industrialisation.[20] Chabon associates the spread of the serial narrative form with the expansive spirit of empire: both pursue projects of (commercial) appropriation and dissemination, both aim at control while being subject to the dynamics of the contact zone, and both are marked by an autonomous momentum – away from an original author or medium – that indicates an inherent ambivalence of narratives and political

processes that can never be fully controlled or ideologically fixed but instead provoke continual revision and adaptation.[21] The narrative border crossings of the serial figure hence reflect serial modes of mediation: even when such a figure is not originally designed as serial, it quickly gains a serial momentum in the course of its unfolding – a momentum that is better described by the semantics of expansion (in terms of sprawl or spread) than by the imageries of linear progression.[22] Serial figures jump from medium to medium, they adapt to new conditions and make them their own, they mutate, they spread, but still they remain discernable as themselves.

The expansive dynamic of serial fiction is therefore complexly imbricated with the structures of political and economic expansion that were developed in the 19th century and consolidated in the 20th. This relation is not one of mere analogy, but attests to reciprocities and homologies: it is a relation of mutual interdependence. Consequently, we do not conceive of the projects of popular serial narration simply as attempts to *represent* the abstract processes of industrialisation and global capitalism that are rooted in the imperialism of the 19th century. Serial narrations, particularly the narratives of serial figures, are actively involved at a much more fundamental level in the production and dissemination of the capitalist ideologies of modern industrial societies. It is hardly a coincidence that Benedict Anderson evokes a 'logic of the series' in order to capture the global expansion of the modern nation state.[23] Following Anderson, the basic idea of the nation state, with its 'modular', compatibility-oriented political and economic system, is rooted in a 'new serial thinking' that generates a 'new grammar of representation'.[24] This political logic of the series rests on the same principles and mechanisms as popular seriality: 'a characteristic feature of the instrumentalities of [the] profane state was infinite reproducibility, a reproducibility made technically possible by print and photography'.[25] The very same technical procedures of reproduction and proliferation that Hagedorn identifies as the propelling forces of serial narration motivate Anderson's modular vision of the world as a global figuration:

> [t]he world had to be understood as one, so that no matter how many different social and political systems, languages, cultures, religions, and economies it contained, there was a common activity – 'politics' – that was self-evidently going on *everywhere*. [....] [T]his natural universality has been profoundly reinforced – everywhere – by an unself-conscious standardization of vocabulary […].[26]

Anderson characterises novels and newspapers as important agents in the implementation of global simultaneity and universality, with its 'homogenous,

empty time'.[27] In his focus on bourgeois media formats, however, he ignores the popular cultural machines of sensational and melodramatic – quite often serial – narration in print and on the stage, which in the 19th century surely played a no less important role in the transnational negotiations of nation and nationality.[28] Moreover, for the epoch from 1880 to 1960 (and afterwards), the mass media of cinema, radio, and television would become incomparably more effective than the novels and newspapers of the previous century in their role as tightly-synchronised mediators of the experiences and fantasies of simultaneity at the heart of the nation's success story, as told by Anderson.[29] It is a semantics of seriality – with terms such as regularity, ritualisation, standardisation, repetition, and variations of the familiar – that best expresses the essential cultural work of these media.[30] More than the novels and newspapers of the 18th and 19th centuries, the mass media manage to process collectivity by way of serialisation, to render it into a serial principle. They therefore epitomise, to quote Anderson once again, 'how basic to the modern imagining of collectivity seriality always is'.[31]

Before Anderson sketched the imagined community of the nation in serial terms, Jean-Paul Sartre had developed quite similar ideas about the serial as fundamental to the idea of the collective, although Anderson does not refer to him.[32] Much like Anderson, Sartre locates the formative power of the serial on the level of social praxis or 'practical realities'.[33] As a case study for his cartography of the serial, Sartre refers, like Anderson after him, to the ritualised act of reading the newspaper, but then he also turns to other, more contemporary media practices, such as the consumption of radio broadcasting. The collective activities of media modernity interest Sartre as an 'ensemble of material circumstances',[34] through which a purely negative 'relation of exteriority between the members of a temporary and contingent gathering' or assemblage is produced.[35] The type of collective that is generated through the serial practices of modern life is comprised, paradoxically, of isolated and anonymous individuals, forming a precarious and unstable partnership of convenience that is shaped solely through common activities and in relation to common experiences of alienation: 'radio listeners at this moment constitute *a series* in that they are listening to the common voice which constitutes each of them in his identity as an Other'.[36]

With his emphasis on the material basis of such associations, Sartre accentuates an aspect that is more or less neglected in Anderson's work: the fact that the serial collective is comprised not just of human subjects, but of subject-object chains, often in the form of human-machine ensembles (such as

the factory) or mass media assemblages of audiences and technical apparatuses. He thus underscores the fact that the processes of media modernity are not controlled by individual actors or agents. According to Sartre, not even political parties possess this agency; they too are 'obliged to adapt [...] to the serial structure imposed by the mass media'.[37]

While Sartre argues for the need to overcome the 'passive activity' of serial media reception through a renewed political effort at group formation, we would like for the moment to take a more neutral view of the logic of the serial.[38] How are the technical processes of serial production and dissemination connected with cultural and social processes of signification and exchange? We can maintain, with Sartre, that not only news stories, narratives, opinions, and messages circulate via media, but also that the human and technical agents and arbiters of these contents themselves appear as objects of serial dissemination – similar to the model of actor-networks theorised in the wake of Bruno Latour.[39] Accordingly, social contexts of production and interaction are to be understood as decentralised, mutable assemblages that cannot be univocally separated into passive – instrumental – and active components.[40] This is especially conspicuous when we consider the 'storytelling engines' of serial narration and serial figures. These narrative machines represent highly networked arrangements – series, in short – in which the positions of narrator and narrated object, projector and screen, figure and background, are interchangeable and variable.[41]

In this context the liminality of the serial figure – its existence at the intersection of various contradictions and material contingencies – proves to be its most crucial attribute. The serial enactment of recurring figures, figure constellations, or plot lines revolves, in all of our case studies, around fundamental conceptual or ideological inconsistencies which are dramatised or showcased, rather than 'reflected' or resolved. Consider the dichotomy of monstrous timelessness and cosmopolitan up-to-dateness that figures like Frankenstein's monster and Dracula signify, or Tarzan's tightrope walk between the jungle and the modern metropolis, or the fact that Fu Manchu's 'Chineseness' is simultaneously associated with the primitive and with technoscientific sophistication.[42] In all of these and in many other cases, the ideological parameters of a serial figure are manifested in the serial structure of its enactment; ideology works *as series*.

Serial figures are never fully present, never completely palpable, because they obtain their form or *Gestalt* spectrally, through implicit or explicit references to earlier dramatisations and to speculative future developments or

possibilities.[43] The narratives around these figures operate through gestures of experimental oscillation between opposing principles and categories and follow thereby the volatile logic of a scrutinising, searching referentiality: they constitute, to cite the title of Anderson's 1998 study, *specters of comparison*.[44] A figure like Fu Manchu can therefore become the epitome of the 'yellow peril' ideology in the United States and elsewhere, not because he expresses a political conviction or even just an ideological platitude, but because he simultaneously suggests and serially delays or defers such certitudes. Sartre describes this phenomenon with reference to anti-Semitic 'knowledge':

> *The* Jew (as the internal, serial unity of Jewish multiplicities), or *the* colonialist, or *the* professional soldier, etc., are not ideas, any more than *the* militant or […] *the* petty bourgeois, or *the* manual worker. The theoretical error (it is not a practical error, because *praxis* really does constitute them in their alterity) was to conceive of these beings as concepts, whereas – as the fundamental basis of extremely complex relations – they are *primarily* serial unities.[45]

Similarly, the Fu Manchu narratives project a knowledge of 'Chineseness' through their seriality, a knowledge that never has to be fully realised because it always already appears to have been written and will always already be written someday. The reproducible, modular quality of the serial figure is responsible for the steady dissemination of ideological knowledge, yet it is precisely this quality that also grants the figure a striking narrative and ideological flexibility – it gives the serial figure the potential and the momentum for revisions, reversals, and reappropriations.

In any case, the intertwined processes of serialisation and medialisation have to be considered in the context of the sociopolitical and technical conditions that give rise to them. The serial figure thus turns out to be fundamentally contingent on the material and conceptual parameters of modern industrial societies and the golden age of mass media, during which the careers of the figures considered here unfolded in parable-like fashion. Today, however, the logics of political and mass-media seriality, such as Sartre and Anderson each described in their own ways for the contexts of colonialism, imperialism, and the industrialised world of the 20th century, no longer apply without qualification. In the age of digitalisation, it would seem that the semantics of modularisation, with its implications of transferability and appropriation, are giving way to the semantics of convergence and the latter's implications of confluence and participation.[46] New forms and formats of the serial are being established; perhaps the serial figure in its classical form has had its day. The distinction between serial figures and serial characters, which

was useful in describing the media landscapes of the 19th and 20th centuries, would also seem to have become significantly more blurred in the early 21st century. In the context of a pervasive media convergence, against the background of radical rearticulations of production and reception and the development of transmedia narrative formats (which have a number of things in common with, but are by no means identical with, the plurimedial processes that we have described here), new frameworks are being established for the production of serial figurations. But even if the logic of the serial that characterised the mass-media unfolding of the 20th century is no longer perfectly congruous with the mediation of the present, it remains an essential touchstone in any historical account of our recent past and the ongoing self-historicisation of our media history.

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Notes

[1]   The present text is a translation of an article that originally appeared as 'Grenzgänger: Serielle Figuren im Medienwechsel' in *Populäre Serialität: Narration-Evolution-Distinktion. Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jahrhundert*, edited by Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012: 185-203). Since the original German publication in 2012, a number of important contributions to the study of seriality have appeared, including works by the authors (including Denson 2014, Mayer 2012, 2014, 2016, Denson & Mayer 2012, 2017); an anthology with contributions from the DFG Research Unit on 'Popular Seriality', of which the authors were part (Kelleter 2017); special issues of journals, including an issue of *Velvet Light Trap* (no. 79, 2017) on 'Serials, Seriality, and Serialization', an issue of *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* on the topic of 'Digital Seriality' (Denson & Jahn-Sudmann 2014), an issue of *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* on 'Die Serie' (Beil et al. 2012); and other collections (e.g. Allen & van den Berg 2014) and monographs (e.g. Kelleter 2014, Mittell 2015, Brasch 2018, Higgins 2016, Jenkins et al. 2013, and Freeman 2017, among others). Rather than update the present article to reflect this recent explosion of 'seriality studies', we have felt it proper to preserve the text – which played its own role in this explosion's German context – while making only minor modifications.

[2]   For definitions of authorship in narratology, see Jannidis & Lauer & Martínez & Winko 1999, as well as Jannidis 2004. For serial narratives that (appear to) write themselves, see Hügel 2012.

[3]   Relevant work on screen adaptation and related practices includes Schneider 1981, Limbacher 1991, McFarlane 1996, Mecke & Roloff 1999, Naremore 2000, Elliott 2003, Aragay 2005, Stam & Raengo 2005, Hutcheon 2006, and Cartmell & Whelehan 2007.

[4]   Chabon 2008, p. 47.

[5]   Eco 1979, p. 117.

[6]   Cf. Denson 2011.

[7]   The connection between serial figures and serial killers is also of historical interest. The vigilantes and avengers that romped about in the European and American feuilleton novels of the 19th century, such as Eugène Sue's *Les mystères de Paris* (1842-1843) or George Lippard's *The Quaker City, Or, the Monks of Monk Hall* (1845), exhibit the same compulsive drives as the serial criminals whose tracks they follow, and many of the heroes of 19th century American dime novels were, strictly speaking, killers who had run amok (Slotkin 1992). The border-crossing status of these protagonists lives on in figures like Sherlock Holmes, whose story is intimately connected to the prototypical serial killer, Jack the Ripper – and Jack the Ripper's story was itself told serially in newspapers and magazines. It could be argued that the popular myth of the serial killer as a figure in compulsive repetition arises in large part from the modern fascination with fictional serial figures (cf. Walz 1996, Seltzer 1998, Schmid 2005). For more on Holmes and Sue, see Hügel 2012.

[8]   Cf. Denson 2007, 2011, 2014.

[9]   This applies at least to most serial narratives before the 1980s; afterwards, there is an increasing number of serial formats in which self-referentiality becomes common for series characters (cf. Kelleter 2010, 2011) or in which subtle nuances are introduced into the characterisation of serial figures. See, for example, Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula* (1992) and Kenneth Brannagh's *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994), or the Batman figure in films such as *Batman Begins* (2006) or *The Dark Knight* (2008).

[10]   Cf. Denson 2008.

[11]   Cf. Spadoni 2007, Denson 2008.

[12]   Cf. Gunning 1986.

[13]   Note that our terminological distinction of serial figure versus series character does not line up with the more established distinction between (episodic) series and (ongoing) serial. The latter distinction approximates the formal episodicity of serial figures versus the linear development of series characters (while, somewhat confusingly, aligning series with serial figure and serial with series character), but it fails to account for the material and media-technological changes at stake in our distinction, which transcend any single narrative line of progression, however it may be described in formal terms.

[14]   Cf. Hagedorn 1988.

[15]   Cf. Engell 2001.

[16]   Cf. Fuller 2003, DeForest 2004.

[17]   Cf. Slotkin 1992, Denning 1998.

[18]   Even Sherlock Holmes was created against the backdrop of a Social Darwinist essentialisation of crime and social deviance; cf. Thompson 1993, pp. 60-83; Huh 2003.

[19]   Cf. DeForest 2004.

[20]   Chabon 2008, p. 49.

[21]   Cf. Mayer 2002, 2011.

[22]   See also Kelleter & Stein 2012.

[23]   Anderson 1998, p. 34.

[24]   Ibid.

[25]   Ibid. 1991, p. 182.

[26]   Ibid. 1998, pp. 32-33.

[27]   Walter Benjamin, quoted in Anderson 1991, p. 24. See also White 2004.

[28]   Cf. Allen 1991, Denning 1998, Fahs 2001, Castro-Klarén & Chasteen 2003, and Edelstein 2010.

[29]   Cf. Spigel 1992, Tichi 1992, Hempf & Lehmkuhl 2006, Hipfl & Hug 2006, Shavit 2009, as well as Berry & Kim & Spigel 2010.

[30]   See also Hickethier 2012.

[31]   Anderson 1998, p. 40.

[32]   Cf. White 2004, p. 62.

[33]   Sartre 1960, p. 253.

[34]   Ibid., p. 255.

[35]   Ibid., p. 257.

[36]   Ibid., p. 276.

[37]   Ibid., p. 273.

[38]   Ibid., p. 271. For Sartre, seriality exemplifies the instrumentalisation of the individual by the modern state (see also Young 1994). For Anderson, on the other hand, serial practices, at least in their manifestation as 'unbound seriality', provide a potentially emancipatory and universally accessible idea of the political (1998, p. 29). Anderson therefore differentiates between a positive and negative type of seriality: the logic of the serial, he argues, functions either to interpellate or register subjects (in what he calls 'bound seriality') or to dynamise and inspire them in more democratic fashion ('unbound seriality'). We follow Chatterjee (1999) in his critique of Anderson's terminology and understand both formats as dialectically entangled.

[39]   Cf. Latour 2005.

[40]   With a view towards contemporary television series, see Kelleter 2014.

[41]   See also Denson 2014.

[42]   Cf. Denson 2007, 2008, 2011, 2014; Mayer 2008, 2011.

[43]   Cf. Denson & Mayer 2017.

[44]   To reiterate: in its flatness and (stereo)typicality, the serial figure is characterised by exactly the features that Anderson attributes to the global expansion of political and economic orders: 'emptiness, contextlessness, visual memorableness, and infinite reproducibility in every direction' (1991, p. 185) – and which Sartre terms '*interchangeability*' (2004, p. 259) or 'fluid homogeneity' (ibid., p. 262).

[45]   Sartre 2004, p. 285.

[46]   Cf. Jenkins 2006.