

## Seriality (Spring 2017)

### FILMSTUD 423: Seriality (Graduate Seminar)

#### Seminar:

Tue 1:30-4:20pm

Room: McMurtry 350

Prof. Shane Denson

Office: McMurtry 318

Office Hours: TBD

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#### Screenings:

Thurs 7:30-9:20pm

Room: McMurtry 115

### Course Description:

In this seminar, we will think about serial forms and serialization processes across a range of media and investigate their relations to our aesthetic experiences, media-technological apparatuses, and sociocultural formations. We will focus especially on the popular, commercial forms of seriality that have emerged since the nineteenth century and dominated large sections of popular culture in the forms of serialized novels, film and radio serials, and television series. But this investigation will be relevant as well for the study of "high art," or art forms situated outside the realm of "the popular." This is true not only for movements, like Pop Art, that engage explicitly with popular culture, but also for a wide range of artistic practices that are affected or informed by industrial processes and utilize for their expressive or aesthetic purposes the formal techniques of seriality. Ultimately, we may inquire whether there is a deeper relation between seriality and mediality more generally – whether media rely for their conceptual definition or practical efficacy upon a serial interplay between repetition and variation. On the other hand, however, we will attend also to the possible differences between industrial, pre-industrial, and digital forms of serialization and think about the role of seriality in media-historical shifts and transformations.

The course seeks to illuminate forms and phenomena that are central to our cultural and aesthetic experience of the world. In addition to engaging with a wide range of readings and viewings assigned by the instructor, participants are invited to contribute actively to the course's comparative focus with materials, projects, and presentations of their own.

**Please make sure you are registered for the class on Canvas. Handouts and additional course material will be posted there.**

### Required Textbooks:

Rob Allen and Thijs van den Berg, eds. *Serialization in Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Scott Higgins, *Matinee Melodrama: Playing with Formula in the Sound Serial*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2016.

Frank Kelleter, ed. *Media of Serial Narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2017.

Frank Kelleter. *Serial Agencies: The Wire and its Readers*. Winchester: Zero Books, 2013.

Additional readings (listed in the course schedule) will be made available via Canvas.

### Course Requirements:

1. Regular attendance and preparation for class. This includes class meetings, screenings, and discussion sections. Irregular attendance will negatively affect your final grade. Active participation will help improve your final grade. Readings are to be completed by the date listed on the syllabus.
2. Short written and/or videographic responses to the reading and viewing assignments each week. Questions or prompts will be announced in class the week prior. Please be prepared to present your text or video response in

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class. You are allowed no more than one missing assignment; late assignments (i.e. assignments received after class and up to 7 days afterwards) will count as half-complete (i.e., you are allowed no more than two late assignments). Assignments received more than 7 days late will not be accepted.

3. Presentation of readings (and relevant audiovisual materials) and moderation of discussion. Your presentation should summarize readings and connect them to other relevant materials (texts, films, videos, artworks, etc.) and contexts, as well as formulating questions that will help focus class discussion.
4. Final assignment (details below).

### **Final Assignment:**

There are two basic options for your final assignment: 1) a traditional term paper, or 2) a piece of scholarly and/or creative videographic work. Details for each type of assignment are listed below:

#### **Option #1 – Term Paper:**

Term papers (5000 words) are to be submitted by **Friday, June 9, 2017 (no later than 3:15pm)**. As a prerequisite for the final paper, a 1-2 page proposal will be due in class on **May 23, 2017**; you should be prepared to discuss your progress and turn in an updated proposal or progress report on the final day of class (**June 6, 2017**). In your proposal, you should outline the focus or object of your analysis, explain the specific method(s) of analysis, state your reasons for choosing this approach to the topic, and formulate a tentative thesis statement. The final paper should be written in a scholarly format, with a complete bibliography, and should consist of the following:

1. A brief introduction outlining your topic and stating – as clearly and precisely as possible – the thesis of your paper. This section should usually be no more than one paragraph long.
2. A short description of the film(s) or other object(s) of your analysis. Here you should provide any essential background that might be needed for the reader to understand your analysis. You should assume an educated reader, who is familiar with film and media studies but perhaps has not seen the films (or other media) being discussed in your paper. If it is not relevant to your argument, do not engage in lengthy plot summaries. On the other hand, make sure that the reader has enough context (narrative or otherwise) to understand the more detailed analysis that follows. Overall, in this section you must find the right balance, which you can do by considering whether each detail is truly relevant and informative with respect to your argument. Anthropologist and cybernetician Gregory Bateson defined information as “a difference which makes a difference,” and you can use this formula as a test for determining which details truly belong in this section. If, for example, providing a plot summary or details about production costs and box-office revenues will make a difference with respect to your thesis (i.e. if a reader needs to know these things in order to process your argument), then this is clearly relevant and belongs in this section; on the other hand, if it doesn't make a difference to your argument, then it probably doesn't belong here. This section should usually be no more than 2-3 paragraphs long.
3. An in-depth analysis of the film(s) or other media object(s) under consideration. Your analysis should be interpretive and argumentative in nature. In other words, it is not enough simply to describe what you see on screen; you need also to persuade the reader that this is important, and that it has certain implications that may not be obvious at first glance. (If something is overly obvious, then it's probably not very informative and certainly not worth arguing.) You are not just describing things but providing a “reading” of them. Keep in mind that the analysis you provide in this section constitutes the main support for your thesis statement. Your analysis is the argumentation that you offer to back up your thesis, while the thesis statement should be seen as the logical conclusion of your argument/analysis. In other words, while you have already told the reader what your thesis statement is (in the introduction), it is through your analysis that you must now prove that your thesis is correct or plausible. Ideally, after reading the analysis in this section, the reader should see your thesis statement as the logical outcome. Keeping this in mind as the test of success, you again need to ensure that

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your analysis is relevant and informative with respect to your thesis statement (if it doesn't make a difference with regard to your thesis, then it can hardly prove it). In addition, you need to make sure that your analysis/argument proves your thesis *sufficiently*. This is a question of the scope of your thesis, and of your ability to prove it through your interpretive analysis. Have you claimed too much in your thesis? Not enough? Ideally, there should be a perfect match between what you claim in your thesis and what your analysis actually demonstrates. When writing this section, you may find that you have to adjust your thesis (and re-write your introduction accordingly) or look for stronger arguments to support it. This should be the longest section of your paper.

4. A brief conclusion. Try not to be too mechanical in summarizing and repeating what you've written, but do make sure that the conclusion demonstrates the paper's overall relevance and coherence. For example, you might return to a detail mentioned in the introduction and use it to highlight the significance of your argument: maybe the detail seemed rather unimportant before but has a very different meaning in the light of your analysis or interpretation. Foregrounding the transformative effect of your argument (i.e. the fact that it makes us see things differently) is a good way to demonstrate the overall importance of your paper, and the device of returning in the end to something mentioned at the beginning is an effective way of giving your paper closure. Obviously, though, it is not the only way to approach the conclusion. You might also demonstrate the relevance of your argument by opening up the scope even farther and considering the questions that your thesis raises for other areas of inquiry. Does your analysis suggest alternative readings for other films or media objects? Does it suggest the need to re-think various assumptions about cinema, about a given genre, or about some other aspect of media inquiry? However you decide to approach it, the point of the conclusion, generally speaking, is to take a step back from arguing for your thesis (you are supposed to be finished doing that by now) and to reflect, on a quasi meta-level, about the overall significance of your argument/thesis. This section should normally be one paragraph in length.
5. A full list of works cited, according to MLA style.

In addition to the above guidelines, please consult the Duke Writing Studio's handout "Visual Rhetoric/Visual Literacy: Writing About Film" (<https://twp.duke.edu/uploads/assets/film.pdf>) when conceiving and writing your paper. The handout includes links to several other helpful resources, including similar handouts from Dartmouth and Yale. A more comprehensive guide is provided by Timothy Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*. Eighth Edition (Boston: Pearson, 2011).

### Option #2 – Videographic Work:

If you choose instead to produce a videographic assignment (or other type of critical media project), you should similarly submit a 1–2 page proposal in class on **May 23, 2017** (or earlier); you should also be prepared to screen an excerpt or rough cut of your project on the final day of class (**June 6, 2017**). Videographic work can be either scholarly/argumentative or creative/experimental in nature, but you should justify in your proposal why your particular approach is suited both to your subject matter and to your own body of work and development as a scholar and/or artist. (A more experimental approach may seem to make more sense for students of art practice than for students of art history/film and media studies, but this is not necessarily true; I would like for you to explain briefly why your approach makes sense *for you*, in relation to your previous work, future projects, and larger academic or artistic interests.) You should also state the estimated length of your video piece and provide a brief rationale. The final project, which is to consist of your video work and a short (approx. 2 pages, in most cases) textual accompaniment, will be due on **Friday, June 9 (no later than 3:15pm)**.

Beyond the aforementioned scholarly vs. creative dichotomy (which is clearly open to debate, if not outright rejection), there are many possible types and modes of videographic work that you might choose to pursue. We will watch a number of examples in class, while the quarterly peer-reviewed journal *[in]Transition* (<http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/intransition/>) might be consulted for a broader overview of existing work.

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"Scholarly" approaches need not (and probably should not) be structured like an academic term paper, but they should certainly provide evidence of scholarly research and the conventions pertaining to it. In this respect, it is worth thinking through the guidelines for term papers, above, and considering how and in what respects they either do or do not apply to videographic criticism and analysis, which in terms of content and methodology might follow more traditional principles of humanities-based film studies or instead avail itself of the tools and techniques of digital humanities.

"Experimental" approaches must also demonstrate a high level of practical and critical rigor. They should be executed in such a way as to illuminate or invite speculation about significant aspects of the work or works to which they respond – or the material, semiotic, or other central characteristics of post-cinematic media more generally. They may take the form of short videos, or they may employ other (computational or analog) means for generating images that perform such work.

In all, the emerging field of videographic (and related) studies of moving-image image remains highly experimental and open to innovation. It will thus be one of our central tasks in this course to work through ideas about goals and methods, and more generally about the relations of videographic work to traditional film studies scholarship and to critically informed creative responses.

### **Students with Documented Disabilities:**

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: <http://oe.stanford.edu>).

### **Grading:**

Your final grade for the course will be calculated as follows:

30% Weekly assignments

20% In-Class Presentation/Discussion

50% Final project

### **Course Schedule:**

#### **04.04. Introduction: Seriality, Media, Narrative, History**

TEXTS: Frank Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality" (in Frank Kelleter, ed. *Media of Serial Narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2017. 7-34); Shane Denson, "'To Be Continued...': Seriality and Serialization in Interdisciplinary Perspective" (*Journal of Literary Theory Online* 17 June 2011); Roger Hagedorn, "Technology and Economic Exploitation: The Serial as a Form of Narrative Presentation" (*Wide Angle: A Film Quarterly of Theory, Criticism, and Practice* 10.4 (1988): 4-12)

#### **04.06. Screening: *The Perils of Pauline*, episode 1 (Pathé 1914); *Zorro's Fighting Legion*, episode 1 (Republic Pictures 1939); *Penny Dreadful*, Season 1, episode 1 (Showtime 2014)**

#### **04.11. Seriality as Social Formation**

TEXTS: Frederic Jameson, "Foreword," and Jean-Paul Sartre, "Collectives" (in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique*

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of *Dialectical Reason, Vol. 1: Theory of Practical Ensembles*. New York: Verso, 2004. xiii-xxxiii, 253-276); Iris Marion Young, "Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective" (*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19.3 (1994): 713-738)

**04.13. Screening: *The Perils of Pauline*, episode 2 (Pathé 1914); *Zorro's Fighting Legion*, episodes 2-3 (Republic Pictures 1939); *Penny Dreadful*, Season 1, episode 2 (Showtime 2014)**

### **04.18. Print Serialities**

TEXTS: Mark W. Turner, "The Unruliness of Serials in the Nineteenth Century (and in the Digital Age)" (in Rob Allen and Thijs van den Berg, eds. *Serialization in Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2014, 11-32); Daniel Stein, "Serial Politics in Antebellum America: On the Cultural Work of the City-Mystery Genre" (in Frank Kelleter, ed. *Media of Serial Narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2017. 53-73); Rob Allen, "'Pause You Who Read This': Disruption and the Victorian Serial Novel" (in Rob Allen and Thijs van den Berg, eds. *Serialization in Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2014, 33-46); Maria Damkjaer, "'Split [...] Peas'" (in Rob Allen and Thijs van den Berg, eds. *Serialization in Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2014, 47-61)

**04.20. Screening: *The Perils of Pauline*, episode 3 (Pathé 1914); *Zorro's Fighting Legion*, episode 4 (Republic Pictures 1939); *Penny Dreadful*, Season 1, episode 3 (Showtime 2014)**

### **04.25. Comics and Seriality**

TEXTS: Umberto Eco, "The Myth of Superman" (*diacritics* 2.1 (1972): 14-22); Jared Gardner, "Antebellum Popular Serialities and the Transatlantic Birth of 'American' Comics" (in Frank Kelleter, ed. *Media of Serial Narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2017. 37-52); Christina Meyer, "Serial Entertainment/Serial Pleasure: The Yellow Kid" (in Frank Kelleter, ed. *Media of Serial Narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2017. 74-89); Shane Denson, "Marvel Comics' Frankenstein: A Case Study in the Media of Serial Figures" (*Amerikastudien/American Studies* 56.4 (2011): 531-553)

**04.27. Screening: *The Perils of Pauline*, episode 4 (Pathé 1914); *Zorro's Fighting Legion*, episodes 5-6 (Republic Pictures 1939); *Penny Dreadful*, Season 1, episode 4 (Showtime 2014)**

### **05.02. Serial Cinema 1: Film Serials**

TEXTS: Scott Higgins, *Matinee Melodrama: Playing with Formula in the Sound Serial* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2016); Shane Denson, "The Logic of the Line Segment: Continuity and Discontinuity in the Serial-Queen Melodrama" (in Rob Allen and Thijs van den Berg, eds. *Serialization in Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2014, 65-79)

**05.04. Screening: *The Perils of Pauline*, episode 5 (Pathé 1914); *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931)**

### **05.09. Serial Cinema 2: Remakes and Recursions**

TEXTS: Shane Denson and Ruth Mayer, "Spectral Seriality: The Sights and Sounds of Count Dracula" (in Frank Kelleter, ed. *Media of Serial Narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2017. 108-124); Frank Kelleter and Kathleen Loock, "Hollywood Remaking as Second-Order Serialization" (in Frank Kelleter, ed. *Media of Serial Narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2017. 125-146); Constantine Verevis, "New Millennial Remakes" (in Frank Kelleter, ed. *Media of Serial Narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2017. 148-166)

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- 05.11. **Screening: *The Perils of Pauline*, episode 6 (Pathé 1914); *Zorro's Fighting Legion*, episode 7 (Republic Pictures 1939); *Penny Dreadful*, Season 1, episode 5 (Showtime 2014)**
- 05.16. **Serial Television 1**  
TEXTS: Jason Mittell, "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television" (*The Velvet Light Trap* 58 (2006): 29-40); Jason Mittell, "The Ends of Serial Criticism" (in Frank Kelleter, ed. *Media of Serial Narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2017. 169-182); Sudeep Dasgupta, "Sensing the Opaque: Seriality and the Aesthetics of Televisual Form" (in Frank Kelleter, ed. *Media of Serial Narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2017. 183-203); Sean O'Sullivan, "The Inevitable, the Surprise, and Serial Television" (in Frank Kelleter, ed. *Media of Serial Narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2017. 204-221)
- 05.18. **Screening: *The Perils of Pauline*, episode 7 (Pathé 1914); *Zorro's Fighting Legion*, episodes 8-9 (Republic Pictures 1939); *Penny Dreadful*, Season 1, episode 6 (Showtime 2014)**
- 05.23. **Serial Television 2**  
TEXTS: Frank Kelleter, *Serial Agencies: The Wire and its Readers* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2013).
- 05.25. **Screening: *The Perils of Pauline*, episode 8 (Pathé 1914); *Zorro's Fighting Legion*, episode 10 (Republic Pictures 1939); *Penny Dreadful*, Season 1, episode 7 (Showtime 2014)**
- 05.30. **Convergence and Plurimediality**  
TEXTS: Henry Jenkins, "Searching for the Origami Unicorn: *The Matrix* and Transmedia Storytelling" (chapter 3 of *Convergence Culture*. New York: NYU Press, 2006. 93-130); Marc Steinberg, "Condensing the Media Mix: Multiple Possible Worlds in *The Tatami Galaxy*" (*Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 21.2 (2012): 71-92); Dan Hassler-Forest, "*The Walking Dead*: Quality Television, Transmedia Serialization and Zombies" (in Rob Allen and Thijs van den Berg, eds. *Serialization in Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2014. 91-105)
- 06.01. **Screening: *The Perils of Pauline*, episode 9 (Pathé 1914); *Zorro's Fighting Legion*, episodes 11-12 (Republic Pictures 1939); *Penny Dreadful*, Season 1, episode 8 (Showtime 2014)**
- 06.06. **Digital Seriality**  
TEXTS: Shane Denson and Andreas Sudmann, "Digital Seriality: On the Serial Aesthetics and Practice of Digital Games" (in Frank Kelleter, ed. *Media of Serial Narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2017. 261-283); Shane Denson, "Visualizing Digital Seriality; Or, All Your Mods Are Belong to Us!" (online); Thijs van den Berg, "The Serialization Game: Computer Hardware and the Serial Production of Video Games" (in Rob Allen and Thijs van den Berg, eds. *Serialization in Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2014. 184-200); Patrick Lemieux, "From NES-4021 to moSMB3.wmv: Speedrunning the Serial Interface" (*Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 8.1 (2014): 7-31)