Media of Serial Narrative

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CHAPTER 1

Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality

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WHAT IS CULTURE if not a realm of repetition and variation? Without prac-
tices of continuation, modification, and expansion, we might not be able
to tell stories at all. And yet reproduction is not a self-evident theme in the
humanities. Almost intuitively, the study of narrative concentrates on figures
of distinction, construction, or functionality: Work, Text, Structure. Even
when our stories have long given up on the aura of closure—even when they
deal with the blessings or perils of endless repetition, or when they apply
"serial methods" (as modernist avant-gardes have done again and again, from
Gertrude Stein to Andy Warhol and well on into their postmodernist self-
description)—we persist in addressing these proliferating acts of sequencing
as self-contained oeuvres and finished products. Even the most open work of
art must apparently come to an end at some point. To exist as an artwork at
all, it must find a place (perhaps distrusted but always identifiable) between
two book covers or in a catalogue raisonné, under a unified title, credited to
one or more human creators.[1]

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1. My introductory paragraphs modify observations from Kelleter 2012a. On the "open"
work of art, see Eco 1962. On Gertrude Stein, see Haselstein 2010a/b. The controversy surround-
ing the authentication of Andy Warhol's *Red Self-Portrait* highlights the aesthetic constraints of
(post)modernist serialism. On this issue, see Dorment 2009. On *serialism* as a programmatic
method and conceptual topos of modernist art and philosophy, see Kelleter 2012a: 13–17.

The will to formal closure probably derives, like art itself, from existential needs. What John Dewey (1934) described as *aesthetic experience* is certainly not dependent on happy endings, but every conclusion holds a promise of serendipitous coherence. Cessation makes a text look like a text, even when the story that is being told offers no solution. Of course, the study of literature and film has long known about the sensory, psychological, and even epistemological satisfaction that comes with narrative closure. The sense of an ending: entire models of society, such as systems theory, benefit from this.[2] But setting up conclusions is only part of what stories do. The other part has to do with uncertainty about final outcomes, with the postponement of a definite end, the promise of perpetual renewal. Even finished tales seek to continue and multiply themselves. Popularity and repetition have always worked hand in hand, from the daily bedtime story to such standardized entertainment formats as the detective novel or the TV medical drama. Commonly, such genres provide smooth endings, but what paradox is inherent in the fact that they do so again and again, without a redeeming overall conclusion to their perpetual acts of narrating?

True, at some point we stop telling bedtime stories to our children, but that moment usually comes when they have advanced to other narrative routines. It is also true that at the end of a detective novel, the crime is usually solved and order has been restored—but then the next misdeed is always lurking in the background of the seemingly finished tale. What if Sherlock Holmes had used his extraordinary skills to solve just one case and had then retired? Would we recognize him as the character we know today? Or would J. R. Ewing still be the same to us if he had put just one business intrigue in motion? We explicitly enjoy these characters as serial figures that recur with the same or similar—though repeatedly mutating—properties. In horror films, too, the final thrill often comes with the recognition that diegetic death only sets up diegetic resurrection.[3] Perhaps this helps explain why so many popular genres, especially crime stories and superhero comics, like to present the protagonist's opponent as his doppelgänger. Such constellations point to the knowledge that serial forms hold about their own rules and conditions. As each puzzle calls for a

solution, so each solution calls for another puzzle. The hero requires a suitable villain as one episode requires the next. There is no end to it: the Flood is followed by another imperfect world; after the Messiah, a new Prophet arrives; one love novel is superseded by the one that comes after.

Classically, these two basic impulses of storytelling—the satisfaction of conclusion and the appeal of renewal—are balanced through suspense and resolution. Tension is built up to be released again. Anyone looking at this issue with an exclusive interest in completed individual stories (as literary scholarship has taught us with its concentration on works of art) loses sight of the fact that the tension curve rises again after a story has ended: What might be different in the next monster movie—or, for that matter, in the next book of cultural theory? To study the importance of these questions means to study the cultural work of serial narrative. It also means to study the dependency of culture on serial reproduction.

The present volume addresses these concerns with special regard to the media of serial narrative, investigating popular series in literature, comics, cinema, television, and digital technologies. The term *popular* is used here in a strictly historical sense. Thus, in the following chapters, *popular culture* describes a set of social and aesthetic practices that first surfaced in the mid-nineteenth century, closely tangled up with the logic of industrial reproduction and the technological affordances of new mass media (Hagedorn 1995, Hayward 1997, and Kelleter 2012a). As always, historical precedents can be traced back even further—say, to the early days of print capitalism—but it was in the wake of early newspaper novels such as Eugène Sue's *Les mystères de Paris* (1842–43) that mass-addressed serial narratives began to dominate Western entertainment formats. Today, they constitute a large-scale system of commercial storytelling best described as *popular seriality*—an ever more self-aware and increasingly expansive field of narrative that has been causing significant shifts in the relationship of cultural domains. This is particularly true in our own digital era, when even the capacious term *modernization* appears too old-fashioned to capture the full force of these transformations. (Both the social sciences and the humanities can hardly keep up with a process of innovative destruction that makes them produce ever new and quickly replaceable formulas for what used to be called—before it turned into a permanent experience—*cultural change.*)

It may seem unfashionable, if not covertly elitist, to distinguish popular culture in this fashion from other fields of cultural reproduction, such as a self-described "high" culture (understood as a realm of canonized aesthetics and institutionalized refinement) or "folk" culture (in the sense of a self-styled "people's culture"). But focusing on how different storytelling domains describe

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2. On the concept of *aesthetic experience,* see Bubner 1989; specifically for popular culture, see Maase 2008. On the phrase *sense of an ending,* see Kermode 1967. To my knowledge, there is no study that relates the plausibility of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory to its aesthetic dimension.

3. See the endings of Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976; still reintegrating the shock of renewal into a scene of narrative closure) and John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978; one of the first postclassical horror films that made the device of revoked closure explicit *as* a device before it became a genre convention). On undead characters as instances of serial media's self-reflexivity, see chapter 6 in this volume.

and perform themselves in their shifting exchanges and intermixtures allows us to take seriously the empirical reality of their self-distinctions without taking at face value the borders and hierarchies they so precariously produce.[4] From the perspective proposed here, popular culture requires no special legitimization as an object of study. In fact, the history of existing research seems to indicate that partisan advocacy of popular culture has often served to obscure the specific-ities of this stunningly successful field of aesthetic practice. Thus, when I now address comics, newspapers, novels, film serials, Hollywood remakes, televi-sion series, or computer games as explicitly commercial products, this implies no critique of their social standing or suspicion of their ideological motives. Instead, it accounts for how they relate (to) themselves and their specific way of doing things. Within a differentiated sphere of cultural reproduction, these entities regularly operate as *undisguised commodities,* that is, as commodities which, unlike traditional artworks, do not usually try to cover up their eco-nomic conditions and only rarely claim to have transcended them.

I should add that these are key assumptions of the Popular Seriality Research Unit (PSRU) based at the Freie Universität Berlin.[5] Distancing itself both from ideology-critical condemnations and populist or neo-vitalist endorsements of popular culture, the PSRU intends to offer a conceptual out-look situated at a respectful remove from the battle lines established between critical theory (the legacy of the Frankfurt School), cultural studies (in the wake of the Birmingham School), and cultural philosophy (following several master thinkers). Of course, this model is still far too schematic. While the Frankfurt and Birmingham schools are fairly well defined—one a neo-Marxist critique of "the culture industry" that pits the negativity of avant-garde art against illusory freedoms produced by an all-encompassing "mass culture," the other centered on populist notions of reception that put their anticapitalist hopes in acts of "participation" (understood as either countertotalitarian resis-tance or democratic meaning-making)—the field of "neo-vitalist" approaches

to popular seriality is less distinct. As a general tendency, these philosophies privilege motifs such as subversion and speculation, often by splitting up the concept of seriality into an emancipative ("open") and a restrictive ("closed") variety.[6] From their perspective, popular series are likely to be seen as expres-sions of utopian transgression or (media) philosophical conjecture, to be distinguished from the managerial, "practico-inert" seriality depicted in neo-Marxist models like Jean-Paul Sartre's (1960). Early manifestations of this argument described television series as the epitome of a postmodernist aes-thetics of multiplicity (Nelson 1997, relying on Eco 1962). Following Deleuze (1968, 1969), poststructuralist and posthumanist approaches in particular have shown a strong affinity for neo-vitalist positions, portraying seriality as a fun-damental life force of culture. Currently, there is an energetic intellectual mar-ket for diverse *post*-isms that value seriality as a transcendence-bound prin-ciple of nonlinear intensity or speculative temporality, sometimes with barely concealed metaphysical or religious associations.[7]

In terms of cultural history, the emergence of these and similar concep-tual options is interesting, because many of them project the high-cultural serialism of modernist avant-gardes onto popular commodities—a move that would be unthinkable without concurrent shifts in the relation of commercial and canonized aesthetics. But then the analytical utility of neo-vitalist and posthumanist approaches is often limited to reproducing their own sense of philosophical charisma: economic and institutional investigations are some-times deliberately excluded (or suspected to contain a demeaning attitude toward popular culture); studying the socially stabilizing functions of popular series or their psycho-habitual effects tends to be regarded as theoretically regressive; hybridity, self-referentiality, and sensory experientiality (*affect*) are transformed from observational results into evaluative categories.

The challenge, therefore, is to understand popular seriality not as the deceptive formalism of capitalist entertainment, or as the emancipative con-sequence of everyday uses, or as the articulation of elemental sensualities, but as something that emerges from situated historical actors and agencies with particular modes of describing and performing themselves. In the following sections, I will delineate five perspectives that have become central to studies of popular seriality in this vein. I should stress, however, that this theoretical

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4. For a more detailed discussion of this heuristic model, especially concerning the prag-matic compatibility of systems theory (with its interest in self-descriptions and operational closure) and actor-network theory (with its interest in historically situated practices across cultural domains), see Kelleter 2014a. On the distinction of cultural fields (or "artistic cultures"), see Naremore/Brantlinger 1991 and Kelleter 2012a. On the term *self-description,* see especially Luhmann 1999.

5. Apart from its base in Berlin, the PSRU (2010–16), funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), has additional subprojects at the universities of Göttingen (its original base), Hannover, Karlsruhe, Siegen, Tübingen, and Duke University. It has attracted associated projects and fellows from Bonn (Germany), Berne (Switzerland), Utrecht (Netherlands), Aix-Marseille (France), Monash University (Australia), and Middlebury College, Davidson College, MIT, The Ohio State University, New York University, and the University of Virginia (USA).

6. On this topic, see Denson/Mayer 2012 and Kelleter 2014b.

7. Intellectual precursors can be found in Kammerer's pseudo-biological metaphysics of seriality (1919) and Bergson's concept of *élan vital* (1907). Neoliberal versions were formu-lated by Johnson (2005) and, more implicitly, in the context of accelerationist philosophies (e.g., Land 2011). Religious and apocalyptic overtones abound in a number of recent ontological approaches that stress the (dark) sublimity of nonhuman scales and sensitivities.

framework does not serve as a blueprint for all the subsequent chapters in this volume, their individual outlooks remaining visible in every case.[8]

POPULAR SERIES AS EVOLVING NARRATIVES

In Anglo-American media studies, one of the oldest formalist definitions of serial storytelling distinguishes between a "series" and a "serial": the first an episodic narrative of repetitive variation and the second a narrative that works with progressing story arcs (Williams 1974). These are indeed basic manifestations of serial plotting, and their wide conceptual acceptance and safe reproduction in serial storytelling cultures—including academic accounts—has allowed for identifying and creating all kinds of formal possibilities in between. Not surprisingly, there are numerous typological systems that try to define and arrange such forms. As always, one can argue about the logic of their competing terminological decisions (e.g., Newman 2006 and Weber/ Junklewitz 2008). However, when we think of commercial storytelling as a network of cultural practices rather than a set of distinct structures, we notice that all these formats have at least one thing in common. In both their self-understanding and their narrative performance, they can all be distinguished from the types of story associated with the work or oeuvre. As hinted above, this is true even for artworks that conceive of themselves as "open" structures or artworks that deliberately present themselves in fragments or segments—or, for that matter, as multipart works, released serially after composition. At the level of narrative practice, an important difference between such works and popular series (the term *series* now referring to both episodic and progressing stories, but not to so-called miniseries or other serially distributed work narratives) is that the reception of serial forms, in its initial manifestation, does not distinctly "follow" the production and publication of a finished text. Rather, serial reception first happens in interaction with the ongoing story itself. A series is being watched or read while it is developing, that is, while certain narrative options are still open or have not yet even materialized as options.[9]

Put differently, we find a particularly close entanglement of production and reception in serial storytelling. Of course, in work-bound aesthetics, reception and production also stand in a relationship of mutual dependence, but even so they are thought to exist—and are routinely addressed and enacted—as temporally distinct areas of practice. By contrast, serial aesthetics does not unfold in a clear-cut, chronological succession of finished composition and responsive actualization. Rather, both activities are intertwined in a feedback loop. This sets the practice of watching a running series apart from the practice of reading a stand-alone novel or watching a classical feature film. Repeated temporal overlap between ongoing publication and ongoing reception allows serial audiences to become involved in a narrative's progress. In more general terms, seriality can extend—and normally *does* extend—the sphere of storytelling onto the sphere of story consumption.

Hence popular series have a special ability to generate affective bonds and to stimulate creative activities on the part of their recipients, who, for all practical purposes, operate as *agents of narrative continuation*. This is even true when readers "do" nothing but read, because the sphere of production will then automatically make inferences about their behavior as *customers*; a drop in sales thus becomes a reader's response. Beyond that, there are myriad examples of more explicit consumer reactions contributing to the developments of narrative universes (such as letters to the editor or amateur productions). In turn, the quick timing of narrative steps in commercial serial storytelling—that is, the speed with which installments follow each other, in some formats weekly, in others even daily—enables the ongoing story to respond directly to current events and become part of its recipients' daily realities and routines.[10]

Perhaps, then, popular series are not only "vast narratives" (Harrigan/ Wardrip-Fruin 2009)—a term that highlights their ability to spend extended amounts of time telling potentially dense stories—but are also, even when they produce epic effects, *fast* narratives. As commodities, their prime interest is not only to attract but to durably reattract as many readers or viewers as

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8. A different and much shorter presentation of these perspectives in the form of a "dossier" can be found in Kelleter 2017.

9. At a systemic level (i.e., a level of observation that sees popular seriality reproducing itself *as* a storytelling culture), this is even true for certain oeuvre-like formats like "miniseries," novelistic "trilogy" boxes, the on-demand publication of complete seasons, or the retrospective reception of DVD sets. Re-releases, too, often provoke further formal or generic developments in the domain of serial storytelling. Thus, even expired series can act on their larger narrative environments, for example, by stimulating or discouraging self-renewals in spin-offs, reboots, generic cycles, and so forth (see Klein/Palmer 2016). As chapter 7 below argues, this

phenomenon invites us to distinguish between first-order and second-order seriality, the latter shifting serial feedback from the level of the episode or installment to some higher level of cultural continuation (and commonly requiring historical descriptions to reveal its seriality). Of course, none of this is exclusive to popular culture, but it is always distinct to it. (Traffic between cultural spheres does not nullify their operational reality.)

10. Many of these issues are discussed by Gardner (2012) with regard to comics. On fan cultures, see Hills 2002. On television, see especially Mittell 2015. On readers' affective engagement with serialized literature, see Warhol 2003. On the relationship between narrative formulas and audience-based forms of play, see Higgins 2016 and chapter 5 in this volume. On quotidian integration, see chapter 13 below.

possible by regularly exchanging recent innovations with new offerings and quickly updating past manifestations with future-bound variations. (Speed should be measured historically here to prevent the illusion that all of this begins with digital media.) What is crucial in this process of enduring auto-obsolescence is that a series can observe its own effects on reactivated or "engaged" consumers while the narrative proceeds. In other words, these are *evolving* narratives: they can register their reception and involve it in the act of (dispersed) storytelling itself. Series observe their own effects—they watch their audiences watching them—and react accordingly. They can adapt to their own consequences, to the changes they provoke in their cultural environment (which is another way of saying that there is a feedback loop). Incidentally, this explains why narrative failure is a permanent companion of serial storytelling. As in most evolutionary processes, success only means avoiding disappearance, not reaching a final state of fulfillment.

To analyze commercial series, therefore, means to focus on moving targets. These narratives exist, not so much as structures that can be programmatically designed, but as structures whose designs keep shifting in perpetual interaction with what they set in motion. Of course, this is not to say that series cannot behave like works of art or produce artful or epic results. They can and frequently do.[11] But the effect of structural unity that this requires is not in their ontological makeup. Rather, it has to be produced and reproduced by the series and its various agents of continuation in the act of (evolving) storytelling itself.

In terms of methodology, this conception of series as moving targets has far-reaching consequences. From the perspective of a narratological (or otherwise formalist) understanding of seriality, many of the points made in this chapter—and throughout this volume—will seem like a risky "broadening" of the concept of seriality, almost encompassing the notion of popular culture itself. One could claim, for instance, that numerous phenomena of commercial entertainment, such as the duplication of success formulas or the repurposing of popular material by audiences, do not "require" serial narratives (or even popular ones) but can be traced in nonserialized texts as well. Of course, this argument hinges on the assumption that seriality is a formal property of multipart texts. But once we shift our attention to networked cultural practices, seriality will become visible in ostensibly nonserialized textual

structures as well, precisely because these structures can now be investigated as (inter)actions that have been consolidated in domain-specific forms.[12] My point, therefore, is to encourage an understanding of seriality as a practice *of* popular culture, not a narrative formalism *within* it. This is not an issue of "broad" versus "narrow" concepts but of scholastic versus systemic-praxeological modes of description. Or, in other words: one and the same text can be regarded as simultaneously serial and nonserial, depending on the perspective from which it is seen—or, more properly, depending on the historical situation in which its textual activities are mobilized in one way or another.[13]

In an important sense, this argument can be extended into a theory of popular culture itself. Of course, repetition and variation are not exclusive features of popular seriality but basic properties of almost any type of creative activity (cooking, fashion, Bach cantatas, subscription concerts, etc.). Nor is the phenomenon of audience appropriation restricted to popular-commercial material. In principle, every object, sign, or event can always be reinterpreted or diverted from its intended or original use. Nevertheless, there are obvious differences in this regard between popular seriality and serial practices in other aesthetic fields, especially concerning their respective self-understandings and self-performances. Systems-theoretical approaches remind us of the differentiating force of such auto-referential operations. Popular culture, too, in the course of its history increasingly comes to describe itself *as* popular culture, often using references to other domains as strategies of self-reevaluation. From this perspective, popular culture is indeed distinguished from "high" culture, "folk" culture, or quotidian culture, and so on, but not in its material repertory or in the social provenance of single texts or formal habits (workaday clothes can take on pop-cultural meaning; commercial products or producers can be canonized in the field of established art; canonized works or artistic practices can serve entertainment purposes, etc.). Rather, popular culture is distinguished from other aesthetic fields in the varying degrees of explicitness with which it marks its own cultural practices *as* its own, positioning them for shifting purposes of self-reproduction (i.e., providing them with emotional and pragmatic values that ultimately guide possibilities and probabilities of formal design as well).

Thus, if we take seriously the idea of narrative evolution sketched out above (in which series are seen as "moving targets"), we are bound to notice a methodological problem: describing commercial series from an immobile

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11. See, for instance, O'Sullivan's numerous explorations of the artistic dimension of TV seriality (e.g., 2010 and chapter 11 in the present volume). For extended case studies on HBO's *The Wire* in this context, see Kelleter 2014a and Williams 2014. On the question of popular-serial canonization, see Helms/Phleps 2008, Kelleter 2010, and Hißnauer/Scherer/Stockinger 2014.

12. See this volume's chapter on remaking as an evolving cinematic *formatting* practice (rather than a typological matrix for ideal cinematic formats). Compare also footnote 9 above.

13. Compare Mittell's contribution to this volume (chapter 9 below).

perspective—registering and comparing merely formal features, for example—captures only a modest part of their cultural productivity. Here we see a common challenge in seriality studies that is already apparent at the level of formal-narratological analysis. When we isolate individual episodes of an initially open-ended series and then analyze these selections with tools that were developed for stand-alone works, we are probably missing something important (similarly Hayward 1997). To do justice to the evolving, interactive, and auto-adaptive character of serial narratives, we need additional instruments of description.

POPULAR SERIES AS NARRATIVES OF RECURSIVE PROGRESSION

In popular series, narrative organization typically takes place on the go, while the story is moving forward, replacing itself with continual variations of itself, or—particularly in the digital age—renewing itself through more parallel-processed acts of reworking. Among other things, this means that producers cannot revise an overall narrative before final publication to get rid of inconsistencies.[14] Popular series therefore have to do their work of coordination, pruning, and coherence-building within the ongoing narrative itself. As a result, these stories will often appear more untidy than work-bound structures when they are consumed *as if they were* predesigned works. A constantly growing excess of things that have already been told—in the case of television, an excess of connecting options that increases every week—forces them to engage in incessant continuity management (especially when they tell their stories in progressing arcs). However, while the amount of narrative information that has to be arranged grows with each new installment—even in episodic series, once they understand themselves as "cumulative narratives" (Newcomb 1985, 2004)—the underlying commercial production culture all

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14. *Star Wars* is one of the exceptions that prove the rule. It is no longer possible to watch this film as it originally appeared in 1977. Instead, viewers have access only to various enhanced, reedited, and retitled versions of *Episode IV: A New Hope*. Note, however, that these revisions themselves evolved serially—and hence recursively—after the initial film continued to require ever more sequential consistency (including media-technological updates). "Despecialized editions" which try to reconstruct the 1977 theatrical version with the use of various older sources, exist only as fanedits (e.g., Harmy 2011). Narratologically, the initial *Star Wars* movie can therefore be compared to other stand-alone works that were serialized after their success invited further acts of storytelling; in such cases, the first installment is created (*as* a "first" installment) recursively by the second installment. The expression "storytelling on the go" is borrowed from Ganz-Blättler 2012.

but prevents reliance on an overarching trajectory toward closure which would allow the narrative to systematize its innovations from the perspective of a pre-arranged ending. As commodities, popular series have a vested interest in continuing for as long as possible, even when all parties involved know that there is no such thing as real infinity, not even for very successful products. Still, the question of closure poses a fundamentally different problem for serial narratives than it does for work-bound narratives. As Jason Mittell (2015) says, narrative success for television series means being able to continue, not coming to an end.

What Knut Hickethier has described as the "double formal structure" of television series (1991, 2003)—that is, the interdependence of overall narrative and successively unfolding episodes—highlights how in serial storytelling an existing text always prepares its own variation and renewal in another text that does not yet exist. Episodic series, too, have to be told in such a fashion that audiences would like to read or watch the next episode, even when nothing is continued at the level of the plot and when the narrative world supposedly returns to its eternal point of departure. Popular series are structurally geared toward their own renewal. In this manner, they constantly suggest a narrative totality (even to themselves) that is anticipatory by definition because it must remain elusive as long as the series has not yet reached its ending. While these narratives always project a finished story-text—or, in Hickethier's words, an *overall idea* (*Gesamtvorstellung*) of what the series is about—the actuality of compositional finish must remain inaccessible at the moment of ongoing public storytelling itself. In other words, a series' overall idea *evolves* just as much as its moving parts do. This is even the case when some central author has already preplotted a narrative trajectory or planned a specific conclusion—an unlikely situation anyway, since serial narratives are typically produced by a division of labor and under conditions of intense feedback, so that preconceived endings usually exist only as precarious, highly flexible drafts or in the context of so-called miniseries (i.e., work-narratives that are being released in segments).

All these points underline the *recursive* character of serial progression. Recursivity here means the continual readjustment of possible continuations to already established information. Long-running series, in particular, are forced not only to repeatedly reinterpret and even change their pasts but to do so in the very act of continuing themselves. Thus, new elements or unexpected developments—often intruding from such presumably extranarrative realms as production economics (an actor leaving after failed contract negotiations) or the world of geopolitics (terrorist incursions that reverberate within narratives of realism)—have to be realigned again and again with previously told

events. To do so plausibly is a major structural challenge for all running series; failure to do so sets up the narrative for ridicule. CBS's *Dallas* (1978–91) provided a classic example of this problem when the series declared that an entire season had never taken place. Less extreme (or more subtle) strategies of serial recursivity in the face of imminent failure include the gradual rearrangement of character constellations within a large ensemble cast; selective memory construction, for example, through flashbacks that invent a new past (a standard method of "retconning" in superhero comics); revoking the perspective of individual characters by placing them in new contexts or retrospective revelations (e.g., when a character is redefined as a lost family member so that all his or her previous actions are given new meaning); collaborative definitions, usually by engaged audiences, of a narrative "canon" that distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate versions of a story (an almost inevitable consequence of any longer-running series, especially when it is told across media); and many other operations.

As I will argue below, what all these practices have in common is that they foster an intensive tendency toward *self-observation* in serial narratives. There is a rich body of scholarship on the high degree of self-reflection in serial forms (e.g., Engell 2004, 2006, 2009, 2012; Sconce 2004; Denson/Mayer 2012; Jahn-Sudmann/Kelleter 2012; and Jahn-Sudmann/Starre 2013). What should be stressed from the perspective proposed here is that auto-referentiality is not some gratuitous extra that a producer can choose to affix to serial texts or not, but one of their inherent (necessary) features. Precisely because they progress recursively—and because they compete with each other as commodities, that is, as competitors facing failure—serial stories are obliged to monitor their own developments. Both their (structurally) recursive operations and their (economically) competitive operations literally force them to pay attention to their own evolution and, as part of this, to the material and technological conditions of their continued existence. As entities of widely distributed intention, commercial series pay permanent attention not only to the variation possibilities of their stories but typically also to the history of popular seriality itself, including changing generic options and media affordances. And thus, at a higher level of cultural evolution they offer one of the most compelling opportunities to observe how modern popular culture observes itself.

POPULAR SERIES AS NARRATIVES OF PROLIFERATION

If a serial narrative can adjust itself to its ongoing reception, serial audiences, in turn, possess more freedom than work audiences to impact the stories they consume. As commercial culture expands, audiences become increasingly inclined to make use of this freedom. The history of popular seriality is a growing storehouse of amateur and reader productions, ranging from early unauthorized renderings of Sherlock Holmes—one of the first serial characters in a modern commercial sense—to YouTube fanvids and beyond. These constant appropriations, speculations, unofficial continuations, and so forth, tend to generate *authorization conflicts* (Kelleter/Stein 2012). Since the nineteenth century such conflicts have arisen in numerous historical and structural varieties. A random list includes mild feelings of authorial resignation, as in the case of L. Frank Baum, who after a number of Oz books came to recognize that the serial universe was in charge of its originator rather than the other way round (Kelleter 2012b); intense ownership battles among coauthors (especially in superhero comics; see Kelleter/Stein 2012); or openly hostile fights about output efficiency, usually between a single author—a rare or improbable position in serial storytelling—and highly engaged readers who regard serial authorship as a delegated office.[15]

These and similar conflicts of authorization ultimately feed into genre profusion and genre diversification. They do so via narrative traffic that renders the separating line between producers and fans permeable (fans turning into authors, official authors acting from a self-understanding as fans).[16] From a systemic standpoint, all this activity is best described as a necessary—that is, unavoidable—feature of serial aesthetics. As I will argue below, such narrative traffic expresses popular culture's inherent tendency to produce, out of itself and by itself, ever more diversified continuations, spin-offs, revisions, subgenres, and so on. At this point, let it suffice to say that the culture of serial storytelling *generates* both commitments and conflicts that serve as reliable forces of its own reproduction.[17]

Ever since the first serialized newspaper novels appeared in the wake of Eugène Sue's *Les mystères de Paris* (1842–43), popular serial storytelling has

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15. See the authorization conflicts surrounding George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (since 1996). As early as 1987—before the advent of the Internet—Stephen King dramatized the discontent of serial authorship in *Misery,* a telling exercise in (partisan) pop-cultural self-observation.

16. I am not saying that this is true for every fan or for every author. For most of them, it is not true. But the possibility—and high likelihood—that it will always be true for some fans and for some authors is a defining feature of popular seriality.

17. As indicated by concepts such as *reproduction, self-observation, improbability,* and so forth, my conceptual framework here remains systems-theoretical (Luhmann 1999). I shall return to this point. On the compatibility of systems theory and actor-network theory (discussed below), see Kelleter 2014a.

been characterized by *proliferation*.[18] Even after just a few episodes, a series has commonly accrued so much information and so many narrative possibilities that it will sooner or later develop side formats to accommodate this diegetic overflow. Such formats can be authorized (e.g., spin-offs, tie-ins, or more recent types of transmedia storytelling) or unauthorized (e.g., letters to the editor, fan fiction, etc.). In either case, commercial series tend to proliferate beyond the bounds of their original media and core texts. Significantly, this narrative sprawl affects not only individual narratives but the development of popular seriality at large.[19] It does so because as commercial products, series operate in a storytelling market that (1) compels every single series to keep repositioning itself with an eye to its competitors and that (2) encourages the entire field of serial entertainment to maximize current and future profitability through the creation of generic repertoires, transgeneric "multiplicities" (Klein/Palmer 2016), and "serial clusters" (Mayer 2014: 9).[20] As a result, popular series exhibit a strong propensity *to serialize themselves*. In this manner, the first *Harry Potter* novel is followed not only by a second and third *Harry Potter* novel but by a multitude of competing series about young wizards and sorcerers, complete with engaged audiences and countless media transpositions in movie adaptations, games, and so on. And all of these proliferations can have an impact, in turn, on the narrative trajectory of the source series itself (if such a source can be identified at all).

Long-running episodic series are no different in this regard. Their characters—think of Superman, Popeye, or James Bond—are initially aware of past and future only in a very limited sense. Frequently, as Umberto Eco (1972) stresses, they do not even remember themselves from one installment to the next. This is what makes it so difficult to canonize them in the field of restricted production (Bourdieu 1993). Superhero comics, for example, often lack a single authoritative manifestation or text, even for their origin stories. Instead we are confronted with proliferating variations (figure 1.1).

So while it is true that Superman does not *age* as a character (Eco 1972)— that is, there is no clear sequential trajectory of his life within a coherently unfolding fictional world or work—Superman nevertheless does *develop*: as a

FIGURE 1.1. Many Supermen (DC/Warner Bros. Entertainment).

figure of seriality. This is to say that we can trace countless transmutations of the character without ever being able to decide which one is definitive—a narrative of its own, evolving at a higher level of pop-cultural self-observation. Hence, after a while, the sprawling versions can also include an aged, and even a dying, Superman. But these continuations, dependent as they are on second-order observation, will always be marked as variations, that is, as temporary and revocable innovations within a storyworld that progresses more in the sense that it spreads than it unfolds.[21]

Consequently, to address such proliferating characters as serial *figures* means to recognize them as malleable and persistently shifting narrative elements. This does not mean that they always have to be stereotypical, grafting broad re-instantiations onto an essentially empty frame.[22] Rather, the more

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18. On newspaper novels, see this volume's chapter about "urban mysteries" in antebellum America (chapter 3). Compare also Stein's numerous studies of the generic development of superhero comics.

19. For a more detailed discussion of serial sprawl, centered on the Oz universe, see Kelleter 2012b.

20. Mayer, in one of the PSRU's most detailed case studies (2014), focuses on Fu Manchu narratives between 1913 and the 1970s; see also chapter 6 below. Narratologically minded readers should bear in mind that this is not about "extending" a text-based concept of seriality onto genres and formulas but about redescribing generic structures as consolidated serial practices.

21. On the term *storyworld*, see Ryan 2014. For further discussion of serial storyworlds, see Jenkins's contribution in this volume (chapter 12).

22. My paragraph here summarizes a longer examination of character reversals and changing character constellations in the TV series *Lost* (Kelleter 2015). For comparison, see Denson and Mayer's investigations of what they call *iconic* serial figures, such as Dracula or Fu Manchu, whose transmedial malleability very much depends on their "flatness" (2012 and chapter 6 below). On the difference between iconic and more explicitly serialized forms of repetition and profusion, see Gardner (2010), who argues that iconic formats (such as the single-panel comic) lend themselves to stereotypical representations, while more fully executed serial formats (such as the multipanel gutter) invite ambivalent characterizations. The ideological dimension of iconic serialities is also stressed in Mayer 2014.

their proliferation tells its own story—which can also happen *within* a series—the more these serial figures allow and indeed provoke increasingly rounded incarnations that can explore alternative shapes and nuances in great detail (Sherlock Holmes as a modern-day hipster, Dr. Watson as an Asian American woman, *Lost*'s hero Jack Shephard as an irresolute nihilist, villain Ben Linus as a harmless teacher, etc.). Perhaps this is what defines serial figures in the current media ecology: they *produce* characters at high speed; they have a marked—and often marketed—capacity for multiple characterizations.

POPULAR SERIES AS SELF-OBSERVING SYSTEMS AND ACTOR-NETWORKS

Based on the points discussed so far, Henry Jenkins's apt definition of popular culture as "participatory culture" (1992) can be rephrased here to denote a field of practice in which the responsibility for textual formats and formal developments rests in the conflictive division of labor of the production process itself—a process that increasingly comes to include readers and viewers as agents of narrative continuation and second-order self-awareness.[23] If we describe things this way, recipients appear no longer as mere "users" of prefabricated commodities. The idea of "usage" suggests the prior existence of a consensus industry that is separated by an almost ontological divide from its human subjects, while these subjects, in turn, are said to repurpose hegemonic dictates only in a secondary process of productive reception (hopefully for counterhegemonic purposes). In more familiar terms, serial acts of appropriation, extrapolation, or rewriting are likely to appear as the subversive doings of a readerly "people" resisting the impositions of a manipulative "power bloc" of industrial authorities (Hall 1981 and Fiske 1989). Or, to cite more recent versions of this constellation: audience activities are seen to *democratize* processes of meaning-making that would otherwise revert to an undesirable default position of centralized control. They allow diverse identities to articulate themselves.

This is a tempting narrative, especially if you are troubled by the high-modernist elitism of the "culture industry" paradigm (Horkheimer/Adorno
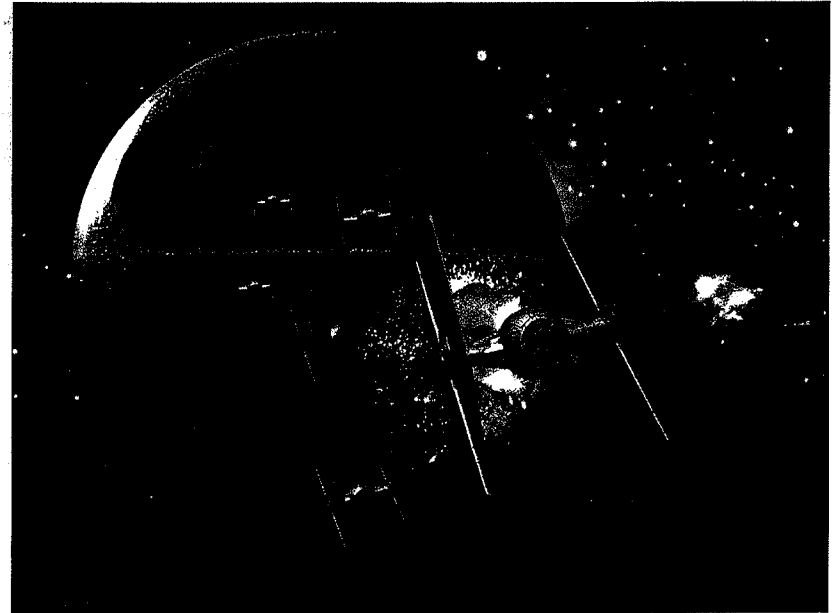

FIGURE 1.2. *Star Wars: Empire at War* (Petroglyph Games/LucasArts, 2006).

1947) yet want to hold on to Marxian explanatory models. In fact, 1970s scenarios such as "the people vs. the power bloc"—but also some of its critical updates, recoding subversion as democratic self-assertion—reproduce a character constellation that has itself been a mainstay of (Western, particularly Anglophone) popular storytelling ever since the nineteenth century (figure 1.2).

But there are a number of problems with this script, even in its later, more nuanced (and frequently more Americanized) manifestations that de-emphasize straightforward resistance in favor of grassroots participation. To begin with, supply and demand are more closely entangled in serial storytelling than this narrative—or better: this particular *self-description* of popular culture—suggests.[24] As we have seen, this is true in *temporal* terms

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23. I say *increasingly* because the self-understanding of popular audiences coevolves with the self-performances of popular products. For this reason it is interesting to ask at which points in history audience members come to recognize themselves *as* members of an audience in an act of mass communication (rather than as individual readers confronted with one distinct and clearly bound text-object, such as a novel). There are obvious differences in this regard between nineteenth-century newspaper readers writing letters, twentieth-century fan communications, and twenty-first-century digital outlets for networked fan art (or, for that matter, industrial authors producing their own officially sanctioned fan fiction in *What If* and *Elseworld* spin-offs).

24. Calling theories of participation *self-descriptions* of popular culture, in Luhmann's sense of the term, is the opposite of critiquing them for some supposed "complicity" with a totalizing regime of oppression. Rather, it serves to underline the productive involvement of (chiefly Anglophone) academic modes of explanation in the reproduction of popular culture itself. This concerns the fact that scholars of contemporary media are always doing more than simply analyzing those media, especially when they operate within and on the same cultural environment as their objects of study. For example, when American television scholars examine American television series, they typically position themselves within the same narrative matrix

(a serial commodity is not supplied once and for all and *then* utilized; instead, supply and demand feed back into each other).[25] But also in *emotional* and *institutional* terms, descriptions of the production/reception nexus as a divide between calculating providers and intractable users fail to account for the high degree of permeability between professional and amateur practices that is such a noteworthy feature of commercial storytelling. This is not to deny that there are power relations and hierarchies in serial production cultures. On the contrary, it is to stress their full force outside the reassuring round of populist or metaphysical character constellations (rebels fighting the empire, elemental forces refusing to be named, etc.)—constellations that our critical theories have often inherited from popular storytelling itself.[26] So, at the very least, it can be asked where the human intentions of both resisting and participating subjects—and their academic observers—actually come from. Of course there are jealously guarded borders of access, responsibility, and ownership; countless authorization conflicts attest to this fact. But these inequalities exist and reproduce themselves through contested practices that evolve in reaction to their own results. Thus, the entire culture of serial storytelling maintains its unlikely existence via the proliferation of competing arguments, strategies, self-identifications, ideological positions, philosophical translations, attributions, negotiations, alliances, mobilities, and so on.

In other words, production and reception—or industrial and quotidian actors—are best understood as *coevolving* forces. Once we see them this way, the widespread desire for an operational space outside "the system" (conceptualized both by the Frankfurt and the Birmingham schools as a totalizing, frequently totalitarian, structure that nonetheless harbors residual spaces of

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of democratic self-reference which their objects are also engaged in (e.g., by developing distinctively American notions of participation, anti-elitism, or commodity-based identity articulation). For a more detailed discussion of how (U.S.) media studies and (U.S.) media practices act as interdependent forces within a larger (U.S.) media and storytelling culture, see Kelleter 2014a.

25. Theories of "aesthetic experience" which try to save popular material from anticapitalist reductionism tend to turn this chronological scenario around, positing a prior sensuality that inheres in objects *before* they are commodified. Reading commercial texts thus becomes an exercise in identifying moments of transcendent "irreducibility," which can take many forms "precisely" (as the saying goes): "intensity," "mediality," "thingness," "alterity," "affect," and so forth. These philosophical models (with often European sources) share the antitotalitarian pathos of Anglophone cultural studies but prefer to project their visions of emancipation or incommensurability on nonhuman forces rather than human individuals.

26. Compare Boltanski 2014 on the parallel emergence of sociology and the detective novel. Similar investigations could be launched—with different temporal arguments—for political economy and the sentimental novel, literary phenomenology and the romance, the modern metaphysics of nonhuman being(s) and the horror film, or network philosophies and the picaresque imagination.

· irreducible existence) becomes itself visible in systemic terms. In particular, the constellation of a unified center versus multitudinous peripheries—which exists in many variations and nuances, not just in its early expression of "the people vs. the power bloc"—can now be investigated as a scenario not so much *about* but *of* popular culture. The same might be true for the axiological bifurcation of the very concept of seriality into an emancipative and a repressive variant, a motif that almost comes to define philosophical storytelling after World War II. Yet analyzing something in systemic terms is not a question of uncovering totality; it is a question of tracing reproductive practices, that is, reconstructing how disparate agents coevolve while sustaining their precarious differences through interlocking self-descriptions.

But isn't this just a rhetorical sleight of hand? Couldn't it be argued that I am personifying series (perhaps seriality itself), ascribing agency to something that is really the result of deliberate human actions? It all depends on what we mean by *agency* and how we want to account for the presence of nonhuman and transhuman (institutional) factors in serial storytelling. Based on the points discussed so far, we can describe popular series as *self-observing systems,* in the sense that they are never just the "product" of intentional choices and decisions, even as they require and involve intentional agents (most notably, people) for whom they provide real possibilities of deciding, choosing, using, objecting, and so on. In shaping the self-understanding of their human contributors, series themselves attain agential status. As praxeological networks, they experiment with formal identities and think about their own formal possibilities. And they do not do so *instead* of human beings but *with* and *through* dispersed participants, employing human practitioners (who are sometimes much younger than the series in question and who will often express a sense of practical commitment to it rather than a sense of originating authorship) for purposes of self-reproduction. Series are not intentional subjects but entities of distributed intention.

Rather than raising the question of usage, therefore, it seems useful to raise the question of agencies. Scriptwriters, fans, executive boards, television scholars, cable networks, camera setups, genre conventions, program slots, canons, memes: they all *do* something in the act of serial storytelling, but their actions and inter-actions are highly specific to each evolving narrative. For the type of research advocated here, it has therefore proven valuable to think of popular-serial practice along the lines of the *actor-network* model provided by, among others, Bruno Latour (2005, 2013).[27] But the point of this reference

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27. On the value of ANT for seriality studies, see Engell 2009, Kelleter 2014a, Mayer 2014, and chapter 14 in this volume.

does not reside in its master-theoretical charisma. The (currently) innovative flair of a philosophical name is not important here. Important are the methodological consequences of such an approach—or similar ones with perhaps less stylish appeals. What matters, in other words, is that popular series are appropriately described as active cultural institutions that consist not just of the stories they tell but also of the manifold proceedings and forces that are gathered in their acts of storytelling. These are actor-networks in the sense that they owe their existence to a (re)productive assemblage of acting persons and transpersonal institutions as well as action-conducting forms, narrative conventions and inventions, technologies with specific affordances, and nonpersonal objects and aesthetic theories about such objects.[28]

Therefore, instead of drawing an axiological distinction between production and reception in which the former is cast as manipulative, restrictive, or commercial, and the latter as liberating, critical, or wayward, it seems more promising to reconstruct how shifting positions of commercial "production" and "reception" are created, maintained, and complicated through historically specific (i.e., evolving) practices of pop-cultural self-description and self-performance. The methodological challenge of this approach is to map in dense descriptive detail the concrete actions and carriers of action that come together, however disharmoniously, in a given serial narrative. This perspective is suitable for seriality studies because commercial series are inevitably multiauthored, produced and consumed in many-layered systems of responsibility and performance, and always dependent on both the material demands of their media and the constraints of their cultural environments. In fact, series habitually reflect on these conditions in their own (acts of telling) stories, inviting us to think of serial agency as something dispersed in a network of people, roles, organizations, machineries, and forms.

POPULAR SERIES AS AGENTS OF CAPITALIST SELF-REFLEXIVITY

My fifth perspective on popular seriality builds on, and slightly modifies, Benedict Anderson's notion of the "imagined community" (1991). Often invoked, sometimes trivialized, this concept does not describe a people's shared opinions or agreed-upon fictions. Anderson's theory is not about manufacturing

consent but about collective interactions that channel dissent into improbable feelings of togetherness. Seen this way, antagonisms can strengthen communal cohesion if they are conducted in the context of linked communicative practices. Thus the nation—Anderson's exemplar of an implausibly large-scale, yet strangely sustainable, collective—thrives on the existence of debate, controversy, and even polemics.

Imagined communities are paradoxically unified by enduring differences. For Anderson, this concerns the curious fact that the modern nation is composed of people who never have to meet; who need not belong to the same family, ethnicity, religion, or political party; who are not required to live in the same place or even the same time zone; and who do not have to hold the same opinions but who nevertheless will recognize themselves as members of the same "community" and feel emotionally attached to it (be it positively or negatively). Why? Because they read the same newspapers, listen to the same radio programs, or watch the same sports events, even when rooting for different teams. In this sense, imagined communities are produced by a costly system of practices, institutions, and technologies. They are "imagined" in the sense that they are never given but always made. They require work more than coercion, effort more than control. Their cohesion arises, as Arjun Appadurai suggests (1996), from a million daily acts of unforced routine. Or, in the words of Bruno Latour, modern society is "not a building in need of restoration but a movement in need of continuation" (2005: 37).

Put differently, imagined communities are dependent on the operations of technological mass media. In fact, large territories became governable only with the invention of modern communication machines that were capable of binding together remote spaces through synchronized practice (Innis 1950). It is no surprise, therefore, that Anderson finds his prime example of the workings of imagined collectivization in the act of newspaper reading in the nineteenth century: a "ceremony" that is "incessantly repeated at daily or half-daily intervals throughout the calendar" (1991: 35). The result is procedural communality where dogmatic communality is no longer probable or even possible.[29]

There is an obvious connection between the reproductive practices of Western modernity observed by Anderson and the activities of popular seriality. As argued above, popular series should not be thought of as mere resources of culture that can be used freely for autonomous follow-up actions.

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28. For the term *affordance*, see Uricchio (2014), who refers to Norman's (1988) popular study of object design. For an ecological usage (denoting the "action possibilities" of an object or environment), see Gibson 1979.

29. The preceding (as well as parts of the following) paragraphs modify a section from my essay on Franklin D. Roosevelt's Fireside Chats (2014b). For Anderson's take on seriality, see Chatterjee 1999, Denson/Mayer 2012, and Mayer 2015; compare also chapters 2, 3, 7, and 14 in this volume.

Rather, serial narratives, as actor-networks and self-observing systems, contribute to how the people who produce and consume them (sometimes doing both things at the same time!) understand themselves and proceed in these roles. Thus, while consumers, producers, media scholars, and so forth, operate as agents of narrative continuation, serial narratives in turn operate as agents of role differentiation: they produce "producers" just as they make fans or encourage people to "be" critics or scholars—that is, to *act* as such.[30] Thus, in terms of creating inhabitable fictional spaces, in terms of forging affective bonds between different and differing agents of continuation, the power of popular series resides at least as much in *how* they create storyworlds (in Ryan's and Jenkins's understanding of the concept) as it does in the types of stories they tell.

In other words, series are entities of distributed intention that are nevertheless unified *procedurally* as cultural agents. As a result, even more than work-bound narratives, they resist symptomatic readings that would seek to reveal a tightly controlled motive underlying whatever is being told. This is not to say that serial storytelling takes place in a realm beyond ideology. But popular seriality's ideological dimension seems to be little dependent on acts of encoding. Instead, it calls to mind those acts of communicative assembling that Benedict Anderson sees involved in the creation of imagined communities. In other words, the analysis of seriality requires a nonsymptomatic model of ideology.

Invoking ideology, then, to talk about popular series is not the same as advocating a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Felski 2011) that wants to uncover questionable political positions within serial texts. The goal here is neither to expose false consciousness nor to reveal commercial interests as the hidden— hence "true"—meanings behind all other pursuits of serial stories. In fact, the very idea that depth or concealment indicates truth is best approached as one of modernity's most *popular* scenarios. If we adopt this perspective, the notion of remote or disembodied powers working behind the scenes becomes visible as the signature, not of critical thought as such but of a particular type of symptomatic reading—perhaps we should better say *symptomatic storytelling*—that borrows and continues key conventions of Western popular culture itself. Recognizing this, one will perhaps be less inclined to substitute critique—as a practice of reliable description in an imperfect world—with neo-ontological theologies of art.

All of this is to say that popular series are ideological not so much by means of their narrative content (which, being the result of dispersed authorization anyway, cannot easily be pinned down to canonized propositions or unified effects) but more by means of their self-adaptive narrative operations and media procedures (which include representational inequities and activist countermeasures). Their evolving, recursive, proliferating, and multi-agential mode of storytelling enables cultures of attachment—*imagined communities*— that are all the more powerful for being held together by shared communications—shared conflicts and anxieties, too—rather than shared opinions. This helps explain why in many self-descriptions of popular seriality, including scholarly accounts, words such as *engagement* and *participation* have widely ceased to function as descriptive statements and have become value statements instead—an observation that is especially true for popular seriality's prime culture: the United States of America. In terms of its *ideological practice,* then (i.e., its practice of sustaining *ideas* rather than hidden purposes), commercial serial storytelling has widely come to understand and to perform itself as an essentially democratic culture. More importantly, it has come to configure the democratic—originally based in theories of communal and public face-to-face deliberation—as an expansive culture of (frequently commodity-based) representational struggle, mediated involvement, and ubiquitous choice.

What are the practical results of such self-descriptions? Which habits and occupations are stabilized by the expectations, gratifications, and disappointments that keep serial narratives alive? What do all these controversies about participation, authorization, canonicity, representational politics, inclusion and exclusion, and so on, bring into existence? At its most abstract, my (systems-theoretical) argument suggests that popular seriality, understood as a larger historical phenomenon that has accompanied Western modernity since the mid-nineteenth century, supports a practical *regime of continuation* itself. What is being continued here is the contingent, but historically powerful, partnership between democratic ideologies and a particular system of cultural production. It is worth remembering in this context that one of the most difficult problems of serial storytelling consists in translating repetition into difference. Following Eco (1990), this has been said so often that we sometimes like to move beyond these terms. But we ignore Eco's lesson at our own peril, because what looks like a simple matter of narrative technique on closer inspection turns out to be a core problem of modernity itself: the problem of renewing something by duplicating it. This problem lies at the heart of an entire system of cultural production that, for want of a better term—and without need for revelatory pathos—is still best described by the name it has chosen to describe itself: *capitalism.*

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30. This is the Latourian question: What needs to be in place—how many productions need to have already occurred—before an individual can act as a "producer" and lay claim to that title?

It is not a coincidence, then, that starting in the mid-nineteenth century, seriality has become the distinguishing mark of virtually all forms of capitalist entertainment. Serial storytelling seems to be a central praxeological hub in the shaky yet traditionally potent alliance between market modernity and the idea of popular self-rule. This is so because serial media, interactive from the start, embody what may well be the structural utopia of the capitalist production of culture at large: the desire to practice reproduction *as* innovation, and innovation *as* reproduction. Popular seriality promises to duplicate creatively, involving contributors without number to endlessly generate its own follow-up possibilities. Little wonder that commercial series have an almost innate interest in issues of renewal, expansion, and one-upmanship (Jahn-Sudmann/ Kelleter 2012). No mere "illustrations" or passive mirrors of developments that are happening outside of them, they can be regarded as prime sites of *capitalist self-reflexivity*, especially concerning capitalism's increasingly tenuous association with the much older (initially premodern) notion of democracy.

Consider that capitalism, as a self-aware and self-theorizing economic system, functions only under the condition that it creates belief in its continued existence in the future (Vogl 2010). Credit transactions are possible only if everyone involved has confidence that there will be further transactions tomorrow (and the more the better).[31] Continuation is the name of the game, and serial media play an important part in creating systemic trust in the improbable reality of their own—and hence their own culture's—persistence. By packaging proliferating narratives into variation-prone structures, schedules, and genres, popular series day in, day out sustain the illusion that the unexpected always comes in a familiar format: that there will forever be something *following* from our present-day excitements and that each disaster is simultaneously a continuation of our stories and debates because the new and the unsettling always reach us in the reassuring shape of what is already known. Whatever else popular seriality tells us, whichever plots it offers us, whichever characters it lets us love or hate, it always also assures us that there will be no end to the return of our stories, no end to the multiplication of our story engagements—and thus no end to the world we know and imagine and controversially practice as our own. Serial media reproduce a sense of infinite futurity, without which capitalist market cultures would threaten to collapse at every crisis point.

Serial narratives, then, may be less hospitable to propositional persuasion than work narratives (or philosophies, for that matter); their evolving,

recursive, proliferating, and multi-authored mode of storytelling tends to neutralize—or rather to multiply and diffuse—charismatic master intentions by sheer force of dispersion.[32] But in enabling procedural communities of commitment and conflict—through what mass-addressed storytelling *does* in praxeological ensembles, not merely through what it formally *is*—popular seriality serves to shape, mobilize, and adaptively readjust modern practices of belonging and identity articulation in fast-changing market societies, not least by encouraging these societies to describe themselves as participatory cultures of engagement, debate, and choice.

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31. For a more detailed discussion of these issues, centered on American radio during the Great Depression, see Kelleter 2014b.

32. This is most visible in series that are theoretically committed to doctrinaire systems of thought, such as Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins's evangelical *Left Behind* novels (1995–2007) or the *Sun Koh* fantasy dime novels (1933–36) in Nazi Germany. The practical tension between serial sprawl and closure-bound political or religious dogmatism in such formats is described in chapter 3 below (on urban mysteries). On the *Left Behind* series, see Stein 2009b.

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