

# Media of Serial Narrative

*Edited by Frank Kelleter*



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kelleter, Frank, 1965– editor.

Title: Media of serial narrative / edited by Frank Kelleter.

Other titles: Theory and interpretation of narrative series.

Description: Columbus : The Ohio State University Press, [2017] | Series: Theory and interpretation of narrative | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016056111 | ISBN 9780814213353 (cloth ; alk. paper) | ISBN 0814213359 (cloth ; alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Serialized fiction—History and criticism. | Comic books, strips, etc.—History and criticism. | Film serials—History and criticism. | Television series—History and criticism. | Digital media. | Digital storytelling. | Popular culture.

Classification: LCC PN3448.S48 M43 2017 | DDC 809.3—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016056111>

Cover design by Lisa Force

Text design by Juliet Williams

Type set in Minion and Avenir

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## INTRODUCTION

### About This Volume

THIS VOLUME investigates a storytelling practice that shapes all media of popular culture: serialization. In modern entertainment formats, seriality and popularity are so obviously connected that scholarship for a long time has sidestepped questions about their specific interrelation: What are the structural conditions of serial stories? Which historical circumstances are presupposed or supported by series and serials? How do commercial types of seriality differ from serial structures in other cultural fields? The present volume addresses these issues, focusing on key sites and technologies of seriality since the mid-nineteenth century: newspapers, comics, cinema, television, and digital communication. Paying close attention to the affordances of individual media, as well as to their historical interactions, the book's fourteen chapters survey the forms, processes, and functions of popular-serial storytelling.

The first chapter provides a conceptual framework for these questions, developing a layered theory of "popular seriality." Frank Kelleter presents five interlinked ways of looking at commercial serial storytelling: (1) He argues that serial narratives are best described as *evolving* narratives, because they exist as entities that keep developing in adaptive feedback with their own effects. (2) As a result, practices of *recursivity*, such as the continual realignment of possible diegetic futures with already established pasts, are essential to serial storytelling. (3) Furthermore, commercial series need to be examined

as narratives of *proliferation* that tend to expand beyond the bounds of their original media and core texts. (4) Therefore, it is helpful to think of popular-series practice according to the Latourian model of *actor-networks*. Following this model, popular series can be analyzed as self-dynamic cultural agents, consisting of acting persons, active institutions, and action-conducting forms, objects, and technologies. (5) Consequently, a *cultural-ecological* (or systems-theoretical) approach is well suited to describing the development, since the nineteenth century, of commercial series in correlation with the coevolving conditions of their (capitalist) cultural environments.

Following this theoretical framework, four larger sections then go on to discuss central media of serial narrative with chapters on literature and comics (Part I), cinema (Part II), television (Part III), and digital forms of seriality (Part IV), the latter paying particular attention to transmedia storytelling. The first section opens with an essay by Jared Gardner, who documents the roots of popular seriality in the transatlantic magazine culture of the eighteenth century. This chapter also examines the role of print industries (Benedict Anderson's "print capitalism") in preparing, perhaps even necessitating, the birth of an entire realm of serial entertainment in the nineteenth century—what would later be called *popular culture*. Attempting a deep genealogy of comics, Gardner turns to the American 1840s to discuss how Rodolphe Töpffer's *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck* was understood by contemporaries as employing an original medium of storytelling (a novel told in a series of images) that could yet be treated as something easily recognizable and long familiar. All in all, Gardner's chapter considers the unique ways in which comics have facilitated a range of experimentation with seriality, especially concerning the highly charged relationship between serial storytellers and serial audiences.

Focusing on the same period, Daniel Stein investigates another early form of popular seriality that helped to politicize national entertainment formats in the United States: antebellum "city mysteries." Published in the wake of Eugène Sue's internationally successful *Les mystères de Paris* (1842–43), these sensational newspaper novels did more than merely "represent" the conflicts of their period. As Stein argues, due to their serial production, distribution, and reception, urban mysteries literally made modern politics possible: they structured the field of political agency and (re)produced practical policies in the decades before the Civil War, thus laying the groundwork for an American popular culture that cannot be considered in isolation from its sociohistorical action possibilities.

Building on both Gardner's discussion of the media affordances of serial comics and Stein's interest in the cultural politics of nineteenth-century

periodical print formats, Christina Meyer, in the fourth chapter, unfolds what she calls the *serial matrix* of the most popular comics character around the turn of the century: the Yellow Kid, who first appeared in the Sunday "Comic Weekly" supplement of Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* in the 1890s. Analyzing the narrative structure of the Yellow Kid newspaper pages and their inherent principles of repetition and variation, Meyer demonstrates how these comics offer insight into late nineteenth-century urban discourses of race and social stratification. Moreover, the Yellow Kid's proliferation across commercial media—including advertisements, theater plays, and merchandise—provides an early example of the inherently prolific logic of popular seriality.

The second section discusses cinematic manifestations of popular seriality. Scott Higgins argues that the Hollywood sound serial (between 1930 and 1956) offered an exceptional kind of engagement for spectators and an important alternative to feature-film storytelling. In particular, this chapter illuminates the sound serial's distinctive treatment of time, analyzing it on three levels: the serial as a whole, the episode, and the cliffhanger. At all three levels, Higgins shows, sound serials managed narrative time to combine wildly incredible events with highly conventional structures. Guaranteeing "survival and success" in the face of "staggering improbability," sound serials practiced storytelling as a game in which plotting and characterization were pleasantly subordinated to the performance of technological ingenuity itself.

For Shane Denson and Ruth Mayer, such serial games of repetition and variation are always characterized by a strong sense of (media) reflexivity. The sixth chapter finds this type of serial self-performance best expressed in what it calls *iconic* serial figures, that is, persistent stock characters of popular storytelling that offer themselves to frequent makeovers and media changes, such as Tarzan or Fu Manchu. Within the "political and economic order of modernity," Denson and Mayer argue, such figures operate as "mediating instances" between the old and the new. The chapter focuses on Dracula and his relationship to modern media technologies in Bram Stoker's original novel (1897) and Tod Browning's early sound-era film (1931). In both cases, Dracula is shown to enact a "spectral" logic of serial proliferation, a ghostly wavering between presence and absence that defines the mediality of this figure and drives its repeated resurrections and transformations in and through new technologies of storytelling.

Frank Kelleter and Kathleen Loock also focus on the reflexivity of serial media, discussing the practice of film remaking as an operation that, while related to more explicit forms of narrative serialization in other media, generates specifically cinematic formats of continuation (such as the film sequel, the prequel, the trilogy, the franchise, the reboot, etc.). Compared to periodic

series, these more erratic iterations—the chapter focuses on the manifold remakings of *Planet of the Apes*—provide a relatively abstract, or second-order, type of serialization: they structure media-historic sequences (rather than rhythms of everyday life), they foster far-ranging cultures of knowledge and commitment (e.g., cinephilia rather than concentrated fan cultures), and they provide expansive continuity markers that can inspire large-scale practices of cultural self-performance at the level of pop-generational identity.

In the section's final chapter, Constantine Verevis complements Kelleter and Loock's conceptualization of cinematic remaking with a detailed investigation of remaking practices in the first decades of the new millennium. Unlike in earlier periods, when remakes or sequels were widely seen as inferior formats that indicated Hollywood's waning creativity, industry discourses in the twenty-first century have come to reassess a film's remake status, identifying the transformation of already available material as the creation of additional "value." Strongly relying on postproduction and digital convergence practices, the new millennial remake, as Verevis describes it, sees its predecessor no longer as an "original" but utilizes it as "a prototype and basis for generating serial forms (sequels, series, and cycles)."

The third section, dedicated to television, opens with Jason Mittell raising a question that has often been asked in media scholarship but that has rarely been inflected by considerations of seriality: What do television narratives mean? Or, put differently, how can we talk about TV series in terms of their relation to issues of cultural politics? Using *Homeland* and *Breaking Bad* as case studies, Mittell investigates how representations of gender, ethnicity, and cultural power in these shows are contingent upon constant acts of repurposing within and without their narratives. Although television criticism aims to provide coherent readings, such assessments must remain fluid as long as the series is progressing. In this manner, Mittell argues, the various ways in which viewers, fans, or scholars revisit and revise a program's political meaning demonstrate both the challenges and the stakes of serial criticism.

Sudeep Dasgupta, in the tenth chapter, explicitly relies on Mittell's theory of televisual meaning-making. In particular, he engages with Mittell's account of "forensic" viewing and proposes to expand the attendant concept of narrative complexity to encompass the sensory presence of nonsignifying "things" in contemporary television series. For example, Dasgupta argues that in *Mad Men*, screen images of/as objects resist the forensic project of fixing meaning by force of their "sheer" materiality. According to Dasgupta, such moments of "opacity" in serial storytelling require us to do more than analyze plot and character: we also need to attend to the sensory experience of television seriality in a period after postmodernism.

Equally interested in the multifaceted nature of contemporary American television series, Sean O'Sullivan closes this section by placing shows such as *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, *Deadwood*, *The Wire*, and *Breaking Bad* within a spectrum of storytelling techniques that spans narratives of surprise and narratives of the inevitable. "Surprise," as O'Sullivan describes it, acts as a practice either of unexpected revelation or, more subtly, of structural unpredictability. By contrast, narrative "inevitability" privileges what cannot be avoided but which—for exactly this reason—produces suspense. Among other things, the chapter details how *Breaking Bad* reanimated surprise as a storytelling philosophy for a plot premised on inevitability, thereby expanding the use of serial surprises in ways that both draw from television's past and offer new directions for its future.

The final section of *Media of Serial Narrative* discusses the impact of digital communication and transmedia entertainment formats on serial narration. Henry Jenkins turns to the Oz universe to delineate digital-age practices of building and rebuilding serial worlds. Focusing on Disney's prequel, *Oz the Great and Powerful*, Jenkins argues that we still lack an aesthetic terminology to appropriately describe and appraise serial narratives that achieve remarkable world-building but fall short of some of the more traditional virtues of storytelling. Drawing on theories of popular seriality that stress serial narrative's tendency toward proliferation and accretion, this chapter examines the resulting tension—so characteristic of our current entertainment media—between two types of audience desire: the desire to follow a streamlined core narrative on the one hand and the desire to experience a richly populated and abundantly growing storyworld on the other.

The next chapter addresses the empirical sphere of reception. Christine Hämmerling and Mirjam Nast present the results of an ethnographic study that traced and compared reception practices for the two longest-running serial narratives in Germany: the science fiction pulp novel series *Perry Rhodan* (since 1961) and the TV procedural *Tatort* (since 1970). Focusing on what they call *quotidian integration*—that is, various ways in which recipients integrate narrative commodities into their everyday lives, making serial stories socially meaningful—Hämmerling and Nast conclude that central assumptions of contemporary media theory concerning technological convergence and participatory fan activities are in need of empirical qualification.

Finally, Shane Denson and Andreas Sudmann present a theoretical and methodological model for approaching digital seriality in its most typical manifestation: computer games and gaming cultures. Seriality, they argue, is a vital but often ignored feature of digital games and one that bridges the (alleged) conceptual opposition of narratological and ludological accounts of

gaming. This is true not only for gaming software and hardware (with its numbered successions, sequels, prequels, etc.) but also for the experiential structure of iterative “levels” or “worlds” within the act of gaming itself. In fact, at the “paraludic” level of transmedia relations (to comics, films, television, and their respective storytelling cultures), digital games experimentally insert themselves into an entire ecology of serial media—the very subject matter of the present volume.

Of course, many more topics could have been included: radio, soap operas, telenovelas, sports broadcasting, and countless other types of popular seriality. By necessity, this book must make selections. But in doing so it draws on a scholarly network that has produced multiple further accounts, including studies on topics not discussed but often referenced here. Written in close collaboration by an interdisciplinary set of scholars from the United States, Germany, Australia, and the Netherlands, these fourteen chapters aim to contribute to a better understanding of the wide distribution and broad appeal of serial narratives since the nineteenth century. In their sum, they raise questions that are central to grasping the media realities of the twenty-first century: Which types of narrative practice are specific to popular series, and how are they shaped by the constraints and possibilities of their media technologies? How can we explain the progressively shrinking boundaries between storytelling and story consumption in long-running series? How do serial narratives organize time and space, and how do they contribute to larger social practices of spatiotemporality? Which transformations in the field of cultural distinctions are produced by complex commercial narratives when they are embedded in urbane or modish lifestyles, traditional canonization practices, or innovation-hungry academic knowledge cultures?

*Media of Serial Narrative* takes its departure from these questions, drawing a detailed image of popular seriality in print periodicals, cinema, television, and digital media.