

### **Managing Mass Culture: Serialization, Standardization and Modernity, 1880-1940**

**Veranstalter:** Ilka Brasch / Ruth Mayer / Christina Meyer, Hannover

**Datum, Ort:** 23.04.2015–25.04.2015, Hannover

**Bericht von:** Svenja Fehlhaber, Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Osnabrück

The international conference summoned prominent researchers from the field of media and cultural studies to advance research and critical discussion about seriality within a modern American culture of mass production and dissemination. The assumption that inspired the conference was that serial forms not only chart the nature of modern culture's intricacy and contingency or reflect upon and negotiate this very culture but also generate new serial epistemologies (thus orientation and experiences) rather than recurring to former models of narration. The conference had invited contributors to reflect upon forms of serial management in their papers on phenomena of modern mass culture.

After co-organizer Ruth Mayer (Hannover) had extended some words of welcome and identified the backdrop to the academic interest in seriality, the DFG research unit „Popular Seriality – Aesthetics and Practice,“ ROB KING (New York) set the tone for the conference. His keynote lecture commenced by providing a conceptualization of ‘managing mass culture’, outlining how the conflation of the two concepts came to signify a new mode of address in which implementations of mass culture are object to a set of abstract yet clearly delineated operations. In the context of an emergent populist rhetoric in New Deal America, King turned to the comedian Robert Benchley, whose transformation from vanguard sophistication, or „mad inconsecutiveness,“ to an ‘average’ mass media identity performing „civic pedagogy“ in „How To...“ short subjects, King urged, is an implementation of an emergent mode of address in the 1930s. The serial format (not only) Benchley seized for this instructional populist address at the time, as King argued, aimed at dissolving dichotomous socio-economic frontiers as well as affirming the comic persona's avera-

geness as a normative proposition to communally realize the egalitarian logic of New Deal rhetoric.

In the first conference panel, devoted to comics, co-organizer CHRISTINA MEYER (Hannover) presented her research on Nell Brinkley's creation of the ‘Brinkley Girls’ since 1908, which she read as „serial gender attractions across media.“ Emphasizing the functions serial forms assume in processes of identity (re)formation, Meyer delineated the transmedial sprawl of Brinkley's ‘Girls’ before she turned to the artist's paneled romance serials. By relating gender negotiations, economic frameworks and the cultural context, Meyer convincingly argued, the serials' portrayal of young women unleashed from domestic restraints – even if eventually ‘confined’ by marriage – female readers' regular re-engagements with contemporary gender discourses and thereby gradually advanced the ideology of female independency.

MICHAEL CHANEY (Hanover, NH) offered an insightful reading of the „Krazy Kat“ newspaper comic strip from the vantage point of seriality. Chaney argued that the surreal poetics of „Krazy Kat“ in its narrative as well as through the strip's images reflects its own serial negotiation and management of race and gender fluidity, polysemy and linguistic entropy. He furthermore explained the mapping of the vast narrative desert of „Krazy Kat“ via Jimmy Corrigan's illustration of the ontological crisis of comic reading as included in *The Smartest Kid on Earth*.

In the second panel, FRANK KELLETER (Berlin) established insightful parallels to King's and Meyer's contributions in his analysis of Roosevelt's serial crisis management in Depression radio. Starting from the insight that ceremonial, synchronized media practices may generate what Benedict Anderson calls ‘imagined communities’<sup>1</sup>, Kelleter drew up a structural similarity between the idea of controlled serial sprawl Roosevelt modeled his Fireside Chats on and the economic principle of a ‘managed’ perpetual momentum of industry and monetary flow that the president expounded to the nation in serial and

---

<sup>1</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1983.

clearly delineated form (time, pace, register, diction). In effect, Kelleter proposed, by recoding serial sprawl in a democratic ideology of controlled capitalism, the Fireside Chats were designed to establish this very principle as a remedy to the crisis within the American public through a form of „parasocial interaction.“

SCOTT HIGGINS (Middletown, CT) turned to another mass-cultural phenomenon of the 1930s: figural characterization in American sound serials. Higgins started from the insight that sound serials focus on operationality rather than causality and, in connection with their structural logic to mandate and repeat rather than grow, they defy psychological depth. Drawing on Ruth Mayer and Shane Denson's concept of the 'serial figure'<sup>2</sup>, Higgins illustrated with serials such as *The Phantom Empire* (1935) how the format appropriates melodramatic principles yet foregrounds the iconic in the conception of characters rather than exteriorizing psychology. From this lack of characterization, Higgins argued, there arises the asset of the sound serials' 'play value': They offer endless possibilities of ludic re-enactment. Serial characters, Higgins convincingly reasoned, are not contained by serials but „multiply spaces of narration,“ which enables them, in a serial logic, to sprawl beyond their medial confines.

Opening the third panel, AMY BORDEN (Portland, OR) delineated a film cycle of early American cinema, the „sausage cycle“ as the panelist called it, as a serial structure. Within a film cycle, a serial negotiation of current anxieties occurs while changes in the medium itself are highlighted, Borden argued and went on to relate historical reports on the consumption of pets with arising nativism in the US. Within this context, she illustrated the backdrop against which nativist immigrant portrayals were coupled with the sausage machines as an attraction of mechanical transformation in various media of the day. In a number of examples, Borden illustrated the cycle's comment on medial change: from self-referential machine attractions, where the sausage machine signifies the motion picture camera and the act of restoring the 'object' to animated existence resembles projection practices, toward narrative in-

tegration and psychological depth.

Borden's paper was followed by KATHLEEN LOOCK (Berlin), whose presentation on sound remakes of silent films in the 1930s implicitly tied in with Higgins' notion of a ludic potential that Loock had connected to the non-repeatability/non-rewatchability of early serials during the discussion. An extensive range of contemporary sources enabled Loock to read such remakes and their transmedial proliferation (for instance extensive coverage in trade papers) as sites of film-historical memory that both replace and preserve: Talker remakes, Loock pointed out, trace technological progress from silent to sound film, produce a generational awareness of film's historicity and, thus, take on archival functions within a media culture marked by fast forfeiture rates.

SABINE HAENNI (Ithaka, NY) opened the concluding panel on film serials with an innovative paper on the entanglements of gender, empire and animality. As the conception of 'empire' changed, Haenni argued, the serial *The Adventures of Kathlyn* (1910s), for instance, critically comments on (European) forms of violent and hegemonic imperialism. It imagines an American cinematic empire – a (white and) feminized empire, as Haenni maintained in her case study – which does not rely on principles of killing and domination but serial proliferation. As a counter-force, Haenni noted, the serial's principle of endless substitution successfully manages the wild animals' – as well as the serial queen's – unpredictable nature. In the discussion, Kelleter connected the emergent conception of empire to the idea of the 'soft empire'. While Kirsten Twelbeck suggested that the serial structure might be a broader narrative strategy of the day that encodes a process of imperial exploration, appropriation and assessment, Ruth Mayer urged to read the serial as an indication of a broader feminization of empire which capitalizes on perpetual (serial) readjustment.

In her own talk, RUTH MAYER (Hannover) then implicitly drew up parallels between Haenni's characterization of the serial queen,

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Mayer / Shane Denson, Grenzgänger. Serielle Figuren im Medienwechsel, in: Frank Kelleter (Ed.), Populäre Serialität: Narration - Evolution - Distinktion. Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jahrhundert, Bielefeld 2012, pp.185-203.

Meyer's adventurous Brinkley girls and her own focus: the detective in American serials of the 1910s. Although they signal their generic tradition, serials such as *The Trail of the Octopus* (1919), which Mayer took as a case study, radically depart from it. A multiplication of modern temporalities explodes the linearity of plots. Against this backdrop, Mayer argued in line with Kelleter or Haenni, the serial makes provisional sense of how to cope with contingency. It effects synchronization on two levels: the plot accelerates and proliferates into unrelated parallel actions and explores options rather than following a narrative trajectory towards resolution; the modern detective is involved in the midst of the action rather than bringing order to modern chaos from a distance. It is the very point of the format, Mayer concluded, to focus on the operational dimension of detection, on action rather than agency and immersion rather than observation. In the discussion both Kelleter and King underlined Mayer's notion of a productive integration of contingency and regulation. While Kelleter retraced the element of control in the predictable medial format (episodic structure, regular recurrence, clear time frame), King validated Mayer's claim as a principle of slapstick comedy of the day.

In the last paper of the conference, co-organizer ILKA BRASCH (Hannover) examined the 1925 serial *The Power God* with regard to the impact that a focus on electricity as light has on the visual aesthetics and appeal. Relating the serial's central theme to contemporary debates on the commercial 'ownership' and containment of electricity, Brasch drew on two arguments that emphasize moments of self-awareness in the serial. Comparing the serial to films of the 1930s, she argued that flickering lights that re-occur throughout the serial and are reflected on the audience's faces in the electrified cinema space draw attention to film projection's own reliance on electricity – or even to the technological predecessors such as photography, as Kirsten Twelbeck suggested in the discussion. Brasch then abstracted the narrative-perceptual mode of serials more generally from Tom Gunning's description of the cinema of attractions as „Now You See it Now

You Don't.“ The temporal logic of this form, which „stresses both the spectator awareness of the act of seeing and the punctual succession of instants“<sup>3</sup>, Brasch showed, resurfaces in the flicker of dark and light, which simultaneously effects self-awareness and an experience of thrill for the viewer. While the viewing experience is of an assaultive character, Brasch concluded, the serial structure of the narrative counteracts this very sense of powerlessness.

As the panel structure of the conference already indicates, the papers presented at the conference dealt with a variety of serialized formats that were engaged, as the contributions collectively argued, in an endeavor of managing mass culture in the first decades of the 20th century. The dialectics of containment and sprawl that Rob King had identified as the focal concepts of the conference were demarcated and specified in the contributions by Meyer, Kelleter, Higgins, Haenni and Mayer, thus allowing for productive debates on generalities and specifics of the connection between contingency and serial epistemology. A central dimension of this conflation that transpired throughout the talks and discussions was the idea that serial formats function as forms of 'management' in the sense that they engage in contemporary discourses (political, economic, class- or gender-related), imagine forms that make modernity manageable to the individual and, through their very format of controlled sprawl, may even generate collectives, ideologies or joint objectives.

While Kelleter, Mayer and Brasch, among others, stressed the serial as a mode of modern temporality, a number of other contributions underscored that serial formats often produce particular forms of address. Beyond the collectivizing impetus, the papers presented by Borden, Loock and Brasch converged in their assumption that frequently, there is a self-referential quality to serial forms of mass culture on the basis of which they draw attention to the historical, medial or technological conditions of their very exist-

<sup>3</sup>Tom Gunning, „Now You See It, Now You Don't.“ The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions, in: Lee Grieveson / Peter Krämer, *The Silent Cinema Reader*, London 2004, pp. 41–50, here p. 41.

---

tence and invite audiences to reflect upon these.

Overall, the intersecting arguments detailed above produced lively debates that delineated common grounds yet were equally sketching paths for future research on the form and function of popular seriality. Meanwhile, the methodology of transmedial research most of the papers employed when assessing an extensive range of contemporary sources to formulate their claims stipulated the qualitative standards for research in the field.

### **Conference Overview:**

#### *Introduction*

Ruth Mayer (Hannover)

#### *Keynote Lecture*

Rob King (New York), *Becoming Joe Doakes: Averageness, Populism and Seriality in Robert Benchley's 'How to' Short Subjects*

#### *Panel I: Comics*

Chair: Jens Bonk (Osnabrück)

Christina Meyer (Hannover), *Managing the Modern Girl? The Romance Serials in the Newspapers, 1918-1937*

Michael Chaney (Hanover, NH), *What Can Krazy Kat Tell Us About Seriality and Comics Poetics?*

#### *Panel II: Mass Culture*

Chair: Svenja Fehllhaber (Osnabrück)

Frank Kelleter (Berlin), *Managing the Crisis: Depression Radio and FDR's Fireside Chats*

Scott Higgins (Middletown, CT), *Operational Psychologies: Sound Serial Characters and Ludic Portability*

#### *Panel III: Remaking*

Chair: Felix Brinker (Berlin)

Amy Borden (Portland), *Tasty Links: Film Cycles and the Intermedial Contexts of the Sausage Machine*

Kathleen Looock (Berlin), *'Match Them If You Can': The Cultural Work of 'Talker Remakes'*

#### *Panel IV: Film Serials*

Chair: Bettina Soller (Hannover) / Julia Leyda (Tokyo)

Sabine Haenni (Ithaka, NY), *Gender in the Jungle*

Ruth Mayer (Hannover), *In the Nick of Time? Detective Serials, Temporality, and Contingency Management, 1919-1926*

Ilka Brasch (Hannover), *Flashes of Light(n)ing: The Power God (1925) and the Aesthetic of Electricity*

Tagungsbericht *Managing Mass Culture: Serialization, Standardization and Modernity, 1880-1940*. 23.04.2015–25.04.2015, Hannover, in: H-Soz-Kult 08.06.2015.