Opening Gambits: Cross-Media Self-Reflexivity and Audience Engagement in Serial Cinema, 1936-2008[1]

Ilka Brasch (Leibniz University Hannover), **Felix Brinker** (Leibniz University Hannover)

Abstract

This article contrasts the opening sequences of cinematic serial narratives from the 1930s to the 21st century, taking a particular interest in their specific 'politics of engagement,' that is, in the ways these opening sequences articulate a film's preferred mode of reception. These opening sequences establish the following films as parts of both chronologically told serial narratives and of more widely sprawling, 'non-linear' transmedial clusters, referencing comics or other media and making use of their particular aesthetics to self-identify as fragments of a larger series and to delineate trajectories for further serial engagement.

Understood as the practice of re-telling or continuing an already known story in a way that "achieves a dialectic between order and novelty, […] between scheme and innovation" (Eco 2005, 200), narrative serialization has been at work in American film production at least since the days of early cinema and Edison's unauthorized remakes of Biograph pictures (Forrest & Koos 2002). However, while "cinema has repeated and replayed its own narratives and genres from its very beginnings," as Kathleen Loock and Constantine Verevis note, it was only during the last two decades that film scholars have begun to seriously consider serial

phenomena (Look and Verevis 2012, 2). This new interest informs a number of recent publications that engage with varying serialization practices in Hollywood cinema and beyond—including work on remaking, sequelization, and related phenomena like adaptation, franchising, and transmedia storytelling that can similarly be understood in terms of repetition and variation (Loock and Verevis 2012, 2-3; Kelleter and Loock 2017, Loock 2017).[2] The focus on mainstream contemporary and (post)classical Hollywood cinema has recently been broadened by studies of film serials (see, for example, Barefoot 2011; Brasch; Higgins 2016), a form that has traditionally received less academic attention than other, more self-contained types of narrative film. The recent prominence of research on cinematic serialization furthermore coincides with an increased interest in the topic of popular seriality in general, which is evidenced in a number of studies and collections that examine serial storytelling across multiple media and historical periods (see, for example, Allen and van den Berg 2014; Kelleter 2012; 2017; Kelleter and Loock 2017; Mayer 2014; Hayward 1997).

In the following, we combine a study of serialized feature films across the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st with a consideration of sound-era film serials to trace approaches to serial storytelling across different filmic forms and over several decades. To parse out continuities but also shifts in cinema's construction of serial narratives, we examine a number of examples from three decades across the 20th and 21st centuries—namely, the film serials *Ace Drummond* and *Radio Patrol* from the 1930s, the 1978 superhero blockbuster *Superman*, and a number of comic book movies from the first decade of the 21st century (including 2004's *Spider-Man 2* and 2008's *The Incredible Hulk*)—and consider how these productions signal their serial character. To do so, we follow David Bordwell's observation that "the viewer tends to base conclusions about the narrational norm upon the earliest portions of the syuzhet," (1985, 151) the story that unfolds. Hence, we turn to the opening

sequences of these examples to examine how they propose a preferred mode of audience engagement. We therefore suggest that the very first moments of installments of our case studies all articulate how the respective examples of serial film want to be consumed. We furthermore argue that all of our examples exist at a nexus of two different but closely related types of narrative serialization and therefore delineate two distinct and separate trajectories for serial engagement.

Writing about early 21st-century television, Ivan Askwith uses the term 'engagement' as a shorthand for a "range of possible investments (financial, emotional, psychological, social, intellectual) that a […] [recipient] can make in a media object" (Askwith 2007, 49; Ziegenhagen 2009, 79). Askwith emphasizes that recent television series aim to encourage an active audience behavior beyond the regular viewing of new episodes. To survive and prosper within a competitive media environment, network television dramas like *Lost* (2004-2010) invite a range of activities that contribute to their commercial success, including conversations and discussions on social media, the consumption of tie-in products and spin-off narratives in other media, as well as the participation in fan culture (see 49-50).While Askwith's argument is specific to contemporary television, serial narratives of all media and periods have developed means and devices to ensure such an active and ongoing engagement—the most obvious being the cliffhanger ending, which is meant to ensure continued consumption across the "narrative break" that separates installments and invites the audience to speculate about events to come (Hagedorn 1988, 7; see also Lambert 2009). Through such and similar devices, serial narratives practice a 'politics of engagement,' i.e. a particular employment of the serial form (and of the medium in which it appears) that is geared towards pre-structuring and steering consumers' reception practices (cf. Brinker 2015, 305-08). Engagement in this sense is not a stable category, but one that, like serial forms more

generally, is impacted by "varying media and medial formats [...]; by the technological, political, and cultural contours of [...] media environments, and by the complex and uneven interactions of authors, audiences, and larger institutional configurations," as Ruth Mayer notes about the principle of popular seriality in general (6). Accordingly, different types of serial cinema aim to solicit multiple forms of audience engagement, which differ considerably from the serial engagement demanded by the television series that Askwith discusses.

On the most basic level, studying engagement means asking for the concrete formal means and devices by which serial narratives alert their audiences to their ongoing nature, that is, to the ways in which these narratives attempt to direct the recipient's attention towards other parts of the narrative and related opportunities for media consumption. How, in other words, do examples of serial film establish a relationship to earlier iterations of the same story in other media? How do they signal that the film at hand is merely one installment in a larger body of related works? How do films communicate that they want to be watched as part of a series? Answering these questions requires us to go beyond the easy application of seemingly clear-cut labels, and to pay close attention to the formal operations of serial film, as well as to the historically specific media environments in which they operate.

Two Types of Serial Narration

Radio Patrol, *Ace Drummond*, *Superman* and the comic book movies discussed later on are all doubly serial. Firstly, they are themselves serial narratives that tell their stories through a segmentation into short chapters (*Ace Drummond* and *Radio Patrol*) or as installments of longer film series (*Superman*, *Spider-Man 2*, *The Incredible Hulk*) that unfold a narrative continuity across several films. As such, these productions tell ongoing stories about a core cast of central recurring characters who live through a chain of varying adventures—of which

each re-iterates a basic plot schema or conflict that is usually centered around the confrontation between heroes and villains.[3] This type of serialization proceeds linearly in so far as it entails the development of one continuous story within the formats of the film serial or the blockbuster series. Secondly, since all four titles adapt ongoing comic narratives to the big screen, they are themselves mere installments of larger, cross-media series that encompass a number of parallel and separate incarnations of the same intellectual properties, central figures, and basic narrative schemata in film, comics, and elsewhere.

Ace Drummond and *Radio Patrol*, for example, co-exist with ongoing, eponymous series of newspaper comic strips that tell similar detective stories but exist in separate narrative continuities. Similarly, the various cinematic incarnations of *Superman, Spider-Man,* and *The Incredible Hulk* co-exist with a plethora of alternate (and, at times, markedly different) versions of their protagonists in other media, including comics, animated television cartoon series, and digital games.[4] In this respect, our examples are also products of what Shane Denson discusses as a "non-linear [...] compounding or cumulative [...] seriality" that proceeds opportunistically across formats and platforms, and which results in the creation of various separate, alternate takes on the same characters and properties (Denson 2011, 532). This second, non-linear type of serialization entails the reiteration of known narrative formulae, popular characters, and successful properties in order to translate and export them into new markets and media.[5]

Whereas linear serialization seeks to engage audiences along a singular narrative trajectory, non-linear serialization spreads multiple alternative, "loosely connected" iterations of the same narrative, which relate to each other extra-diegetically rather than diegetically, through the recurrence of iconic features that are repeated and reconfigured for the new medial

contexts into which they are translated (Mayer 2014, 9). In what follows, we will demonstrate that the opening sequences of *Ace Drummond*, *Radio Patrol*, *Superman* and more recent examples of the comic book movie negotiate both types of serialization and make this doubly serial nature explicit. More precisely, we suggest that the very first scenes of our examples position these films in relation to both linear and non-linear serial trajectories and thereby alert viewers to their embeddedness in a larger network of related narratives and media. Significantly, all of our examples do so through representations of other media, most notably, the medium of comics.[6]

Film Serials

In 1936, at the outset of what is considered the 'golden era' of sound serials that lasted until 1944 (Higgins 2007, 8, 98), Universal released the aviation serial *Ace Drummond*. Its thirteen two-reel chapters appeared weekly in rural and suburban cinemas across the United States, which usually featured them in Saturday matinees and before the Friday night features. At the time, serials were tailored to a child audience, but they usually also had an adult appeal (Barefoot 2011, 180-183). Golden-era serials particularly harvested the popular action and adventure comic strips that flourished in daily newspapers at the time. Accordingly, *Ace Drummond* borrows its protagonist hero from the eponymous comic strip, which appeared in the Sunday supplements of W. R. Hearst's King Features newspaper syndicate, and thereby participates in the growing trend of comics' adaptations. While it takes up characters from the comic and its aviation theme, the serial does not adapt plotlines from the comic strip.

The serial does, however, employ the aesthetics and narrative mode of comics to introduce viewers to the ongoing plot at the beginning of each installment. From its second chapter

onwards, the credits of each of *Ace Drummond*'s chapters are followed by a shot of the hands of an invisible reader opening the pages of a newspapers' comic supplement. The recognizable headline "Ace Drummond – by Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker" indicates that this is the real double page spread. The following shot then shows a close up of an individual comics' panel, which is not from the actual newspaper but shows this week's chapter title instead. A series of pans to the right arrange a number of panels in succession, which outline in drawings and narrative boxes the ongoing plot, reminding loyal patrons where last week's cliffhanger left off and enabling new viewers to enjoy the following installment. By resorting to a comic strip aesthetic, the serial's plot recap establishes a connection to the narrative off-screen, that is, to a larger referential network connected to *Ace Drummond.* This opening sequence thus comprises the two serial structures within which the weekly chapter finds itself: it places *Ace Drummond* in relation to its newspaper source in terms of a non-linear seriality, and it explains the linear seriality of the consecutive chapters.

A similar re-familiarization with plot elements of previous installments occurs at the beginning of each week in *Radio Patrol* (Universal, 1937). Again from its second week onwards, each of the serial's chapters features an early sequence that adapts narrative techniques used in comic strips to recapitulate relevant plot elements: The camera zooms in on a boy on a couch who is engrossed in a comic book titled "Radio Patrol," which has photographs of the serials' protagonists on its cover. Afterwards, a close up of an individual panel indicates the week's chapter title. The boy then turns the page from one panel to the next, each of which uses a drawing and a narrative box to explain pivotal plot points of the preceding chapter and thereby establishes a narrative continuity between the serial's installments.

In comparison to the plot recaps of *Ace Drummond*, *Radio Patrol*'s evocation of its comic strip paratext appears markedly more stylized and artificial. In *Ace Drummond*, the camera shares the perspective of the reader of the comic strip, who opens the newspaper and reads the individual panels left to right. *Radio Patrol*, by contrast, introduces a diegetic child reader with a comic book that only features a single panel on each page—which may or may not have been a result of copyright discussions between the studio and the newspaper syndicate. The layout of *Radio Patrol*'s diegetic comic book in fact resembles a Big Little Book, that is, a series of children's books that were popular and cheaply available in the 1930s. Both *Ace Drummond* and *Radio Patrol* had their own Big Little Books, which reprinted a choice of panels from the comic strip alongside sentences that explained the narrative. Through its invocation of the Big Little Book and through the mise-en-scène of its chapter introductions, the serial self-stylizes as a product marketed for a child audience. At the same time, the lacking resemblance to the actual newspaper strip underlines the fact that the serial exists apart from the narrative told daily in the newspapers.

To shortly summarize, both serials pit the narrative possibilities and affordances of comics against their own mode of storytelling in recap sequences that combine reference to a character's appearance in the coexisting medium with a strategic continuation of the more linear seriality of the installments. By addressing their own seriality as well as their relationship to media other than film, *Ace Drummond* and *Radio Patrol* articulate suggestions of what one could call an ideal mode of reception; they express a politics of audience engagement that places the film serial at the nexus of the audience address of comics and film. On the one hand, the opening sequences highlight that the place of sound serials in cinema is similar to the place of the comic strip in newspapers—they appear in the less serious kid-section, providing regularly returning entertainment that strives to be neither art nor education.

On the other hand, the intro sequences of *Radio Patrol* and *Ace Drummond* point to the narrative, stylistic, or even cinematographic similarities between comics and film serials, that is, the features that distinguish the serials from contemporaneous, more prestigious films.

Film serials exist both institutionally and stylistically outside the scopes of classical Hollywood. Most sound-era serials were produced by Columbia, Republic, and Universal, and Hollywood's major studios generally avoided producing them. Serials were thus produced and released outside of the studio-era monopoly system, with its vertically integrated studios and affiliated cinema chains. However, they flourished on the independent market that provided entertainment for suburban and rural theaters throughout the country (Brasch 2018, 74-80). When Jared Gardner describes the similar modes of storytelling and cross-media relations of comics and film before American film's transition to the classical paradigms in the 1910s, he mentions the film serial as an exemption—as a form that refused to participate in Hollywood's increasing negation of modernist fragmentation and narrative gaps in favor of classical continuity (2012, 22). Indeed, film-serial narratives foreground ruptures, breaks, and fragmentation in both the silent and the sound eras, especially in their assembly of repetitions, stock characters, and plotlines but also in their mix of genre iconography and their use of recycled footage. In fact, the serials' nods towards the comics' medium transform the otherwise common editing technique of the optical wipe into a reminder of the serials' fragmentary nature.

Stylistically, the serials' main point of differentiation from Hollywood's predominant group style lies in the cliffhanger, which emerged in the 1920s.[7] Repeatedly, serials suggest the inevitable death of the protagonist in what Higgins calls "hidden ellipses," that is, the following chapter repeats the cliffhanger scene but inserts new footage that details the hero's

escape or rescue in the nick of time (Higgins 2007, 100; Brasch 2018, 102). In these instances, serials highlight what in comics' studies has been theorized as the "gutter:" the space between panels that can be opened up and expanded, and that needs to be filled by the readers' imaginations (Gardner 2012, McCloud 66-67). In his introduction to comics' analysis, Scott McCloud juxtaposes the acts of closure performed by film viewers, who connect individual images involuntarily and at a rapid speed, and by readers of comics, who actively and consciously work to establish a connection between the panels (68). Film serials tell stories in between these two extremes, profiting from the closure of the moving-image medium but highlighting the interstices in their characteristic cliffhangers. Whereas recent studies criticize the equation of the visual space between comics' panels with the narrative gap of reader-response theory (Round 100),[8] the cliffhanger sequences of film serials in fact themselves perform such an equation—they literally open the gap between the film's frames, arresting the flow of images and expanding time, filling the gutter with new images and narrative information that creates a new sense of closure radically different from the previous week.

The plot recaps at the beginning of *Ace Drummond* and *Radio Patrol* each foreground the gutter—either by slowly panning over it or in the comparatively long time it takes *Radio Patrol*'s diegetic kid reader to flip a page—paradoxically in ways that remove the actual cut. These recaps thus stress the narrative particularities of comics and ask the viewers to approach the upcoming film in a similar manner—as a string of scenes that are often discontinuous, that can be opened up and expanded, and that require the participation and at times the creativity of the viewer in order to make sense.

Interlude: Superman (1978)

Four decades later, the opening moments of Richard Donner's 1978 *Superman* offer an engagement with the comics' medium that is strikingly similar to the ones offered by *Ace Drummond* and *Radio Patrol*. Donner's film begins with the black-and-white image of a lavish curtain that opens to reveal a darkened movie screen. Following a few quiet notes of John Williams' orchestral score, we hear the sound of a film projector starting as the screen is illuminated by an inter-title reading "June 1938," framed in a 1.37:1 aspect ratio, the old Hollywood standard. Fading to black, the letters give way to the image of an over-sized comic book lying on top of an old-fashioned tablecloth, centered in the middle of the diegetic frame. Under its title (*Action Comics*) and the listing of its price (10 ¢), the comic is emblazoned with the hand-drawn depiction of two vaguely tubular starships speeding away from an outer-space explosion, but just as we are close enough to discern more detail, the book is opened by the hand of a child who flips over to the first page. With the image in the frame slowly moving in on the panels of the comic book, the child starts speaking about the "great city of Metropolis" in the "ravages of world-wide depression." Turning the page to reveal additional panels with street scenes, the child narrator tells us about the work of the journalists at the Daily Planet and their job of "informing the public," as the last panel on the lower right corner of the book's third page, which depicts the rooftop of the newspaper building, grows bigger. Moving in on the panel, the frame on the screen within our screen dissolves into an actual shot of the Daily Planet building and the sculpture of a spinning globe on its roof, with the camera panning upwards into the night sky to capture nothing but black again. At this point, the film's opening titles appear in full color in the center of the image, blue-on-black in front of a field of stars moving towards the spectator and dissolving the boundaries of the screen-within-the-screen (along with its curtains) to claim the full 2.35:1 aspect ratio as the opening theme breaks into fanfare.

This opening does very little to introduce the film that follows, as it neither features Superman nor any other of the film's characters; it also does not foreshadow any of the film's central themes. The sequence does, however, draw attention to Superman's long history in comics and film—and, as Matt Yockey suggests in his reading of the scene, it uses the device of the embodied voice-over and the reference to old-fashioned comic books to evoke a sense of childlike wonder and nostalgia for bygone times (Yockey 2008, 30, see also 32-33). Upon closer inspection, the film here references two classic incarnations of the Superman figure simultaneously: the first appearance of the figure in the first issue of *Action Comics* in June 1938 and the 1948 Columbia *Superman* serial with its similar title sequence featuring black-and-white footage and a comic book.[9] Before beginning to tell its own story, Donner's film thus reminds its viewers of the long history of the protagonist in various media—and immediately afterwards foregrounds its status as the latest, technologically most up-to-date version of the Superman property by having the full-color opening credits replace the old-fashioned movie screen.

In this respect, the sequence can be understood as a response to a key challenge faced by serial narratives of all types, periods, and media—the need to, as Frank Kelleter put it, "tell the same story again, but in a new way" (2012, 27). Donner's film does so in a situation in which Superman is already firmly established within American popular culture, and at a point in time at which most Americans would have been familiar with the figure from his appearances in the comics, animated TV shows, or reruns of the 1950s *Adventures of Superman* television series.[10] Simultaneously, Donner's *Superman* also has to perform the beginning of a new series of blockbuster films, and therefore emphasize its own innovative character—which is why it contrasts old media with the spectacle of 70s blockbuster cinema. Like the opening moments of the serials discussed above, *Superman*'s pre-title sequence is a

moment of confluence between linear and non-linear modes of serialization, in which the film tries to channel the audience's pre-existing familiarity with other incarnations of the Superman figure into an ongoing engagement with itself and its future sequels.

Since the production of *Superman II* (Dir. Richard Donner/Richard Lester, 1980) was already well underway by the time Donner's film premiered in American theaters—both films were shot back-to-back to reduce production costs (see Meier 2015, 116)—*Superman* was faced with a particularly pressing need to prepare its viewers for the coming of additional installments. As a result, the scenes that follow the title sequence already lay the groundwork for events that would only play out in the sequel. After the titles, the film takes us to Superman's home world Krypton, where his father Jor-El (Marlon Brando) acts as prosecutor in a trial against fellow Kryptonians Zod, Non, and Ursa, who are eventually punished for crimes against their society and banished into the 'Phantom Zone,' an interdimensional prison. At this point, the three villains exit the film and are not seen again until the sequel. Although set up for future plot developments and to secure the audience's anticipation of the next installment, these early Krypton scenes create a dramaturgic problem for the film as a whole, since they set up plotlines that are left open and reprised only years later.[11]

The rest of the film's first hour features a string of episodic segments that retell Superman's origin story from his crash on planet Earth as a young child and his upbringing in Smallville, Kansas to his hidden superhero identity in the city of Metropolis. Like the pre-credit sequence discussed above, these segments arguably do little for the narrative that follows and are hardly referenced in the second half of the film. It is only around the 54-minutes mark that the film's main plot begins—namely, the hero's attempt to stop villain Lex Luthor from sinking California into the Pacific. Judged by the standards of non-serialized Hollywood cinema,

Donner's *Superman* possesses a peculiarly bloated narrative structure with an overlong first act whose scenes do not advance the plot in a narratively efficient manner. Arguably, however, the film's first hour does become productive for the attempt to restart the Superman mythos from a new (yet already known) point of departure. Aside from retelling the origin story of the protagonist, the scenes featuring the young Superman provide a chance to stage his powers in a spectacular fashion and with state-of-the-art special effects. In doing so, the hero's origin story becomes worth watching, including for those already familiar with the figure. *Superman*'s unusual narrative structure can therefore be understood as a direct result of the film's serial character. Put differently, the film's narrative digressions are typical for serial narratives, which, as Kelleter notes, generally tend to forego an adherence to classical norms of narrative closure and coherence in order to produce possibilities for further narration ("Einleitung" 25-27).

Accordingly, *Superman*'s opening sequence can be understood as a primer for the serial character of the film that follows. In this respect, the reference to comics and the evocation of the protagonist's long trans-medial career remind us that the film's plot, just like the serials discussed above, might require some cognitive work and goodwill on the part of the viewer in order to make sense. The opening thus invites us to approach the film as one would a comic book or an episode of a television serial—as merely one installment in a larger body of stories about the Man of Steel that make only limited sense if consumed in total isolation from each other.

Whether viewers puzzled over the significance of the film's opening moments clearly did not detract from its box office success, which ensured the production of three sequels and laid the foundation for a first cycle of commercially successful superhero blockbuster films that lasted

until the late 1990s. In the next century, the superhero blockbuster genre would rise to new heights and churn out an unprecedented number of films based on various superhero figures—of which many included similarly self-reflexive opening moments.

Convergence-Era Seriality: Opening the 21st Century Comic Book Movie

A quarter century after the premiere of *Superman*, allusions to the comics' medium have become a recurring motif in Hollywood blockbuster cinema. Centrally, this is due to the fact that high-profile blockbuster films based on popular graphic novels or comic book characters now constitute a major Hollywood production trend. The subgenre of superhero blockbuster cinema alone saw a remarkable rise in the number of releases over the 1998-2008 decade, when the big Hollywood studios produced 25 big-budget films based on DC or Marvel Comics superhero titles, as well as numerous additional productions based on other comic book properties—a trend that has only intensified in the years since.[12]

IAlmost all recent films based on Marvel Comics properties feature an explicit reference to the medium of comics in the logo sequence that appears before any kind of opening credits have flickered across the screen. Typically accompanied by the film's soundtrack, the Marvel logo traditionally appears at the end of a quick succession of colorful comics imagery featuring the company's iconic characters as if someone was flicking through the pages of an oversized comic book.[13] Thanks to the widespread popularity and commercial success of superhero movies based on Marvel comics titles, the company's logo has become an iconic branding symbol. Whether audiences acknowledge it or not, it performs a basic gesture that echoes the operations of the opening sequences discussed above, as it references the source medium of the narrative that follows and thereby alerts us to the fact that we are watching not

just any kind of film, but a comic book movie. Simultaneously, the animated Marvel logo establishes this connection in a much more abstract way than early comic book films, as it does not actually feature a visual representation of a comic book or the act of reading comics. While spectators might understand the sequence as an abstract representation of someone flipping through a comic book, no magazine page, no paper, no flipping and no reader are actually on display. Instead we see a string of drawings in the style of classic Marvel comics flickering across the screen. The brief sequence, in other words, invokes comics as a type of visual art rather than as a narrative form bound to a specific paper-based medium.

The animated Marvel logo anticipates a more general tendency in the cinematic negotiation of comic book aesthetics that is also on display in a number of medially self-reflexive opening sequences of the period. The opening titles of Raimi's *Spider-Man 2* (2004), for example, similarly reference comics as an art form but eschew a depiction of comic books as a medium with a distinct materiality. Beginning right after the Columbia Pictures and Marvel Entertainment logos, the film's title sequence opens with a stylized, computer-rendered representation of a spider's web[14] that expands in front of a black and red background—an image that evokes the web motif of the *Spider-Man* title, the preceding film of the series. As the names of the film's principal players appear, the sequence combines the image of the expanding web with slow camera pans over water-color drawings depicting characters and key scenes from the first *Spider-Man*, including Peter Parker being bitten by a genetically modified spider, his beloved Mary Jane, his estranged best friend Harry, Peter's first outing as Spider-Man, and the unfortunate chain of events that lead to the death of his beloved uncle Ben. Narratively, these drawings serve to recapitulate the most important plot points of the preceding installment. Their inclusion in the title sequence thus performs a similar function as

the opening sequences of *Ace Drummond* and *Radio Patrol*, which also serve to cue viewers back into the story-world of the series.

Simultaneously, however, these reminders establish a relationship to the medium of comics, as they are painted in the recognizable style of Alex Ross, an influential comics artist with a pedigree of popular and award-winning cover artwork for both Marvel and DC Comics (see Mason 2004; "Alex Ross Bio"). However, this reference to comic books differs considerably from the scenes featured in *Ace Drummond*, *Radio Patrol*, or *Superman*. Where the earlier examples depict the practice of comics reading directly, *Spider-Man* 2 evokes superhero comics in a more abstract fashion and presents Ross' drawings floating freely against a black backdrop. It. In doing so, the film references comics as an aesthetic rather than as a medium—and the credits sequence as whole foregrounds a cinematic rather than a cartoonish quality.[15] Furthermore, the fact that part of the sequence's imagery has sprung from the hands of a well-known comics artist is hardly obvious to the average viewer. The film, in other words, here establishes a relationship to superhero comics that is legible only for spectators who possess more than a passing familiarity with superhero comics, and thus uses Ross' artwork as a form of cultural capital that legitimizes the film in the eyes of fans.

Aaron Taylor has discussed such a courting of fan audiences as a form of "cultic management," as the attempt to "acknowledge[...] and potentially colonize[...]" fans' "influence within a more dispersed film-going community" (2014, 181). In this respect, *Spider-Man 2*'s title sequence marks the film as a paradigmatic example of early 21st century popular culture—i.e. as a media object that is mass-addressed, but nonetheless tailored to solicit the good will of particularly vocal and active niche audiences. In his *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins similarly argues that the support of active, proselytizing viewers who

act as "brand advocates" for their favorite media objects is increasingly central to ensure cultural visibility and commercial success within an increasingly crowded media environment (Jenkins 2006, 73; cf. 1-15, 68-74). Responding to this situation, *Spider-Man 2* stands at the nexus of linear and non-linear types of seriality and positions itself as an object of fan(nish) appreciation. Accordingly, its evocation of the comics' medium is less literal as in our earlier examples and targeted at a particular sub-category of viewers rather than at the audience in general.

Raimi's film is not the only comic book movie from the first decade of the 21st century to appeal to the insider knowledge of dedicated fans. The first minutes of Louis Leterrier's *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), for example, re-stage the opening titles of the 1978 television drama series of the same name by recreating of some of its most iconic imagery in great detail. The credit sequence thereby references a popular earlier incarnation of the film's protagonist in a way that is legible only for spectators who are already familiar with the history of the figure.[16] Like *Spider-Man 2*'s titles, *The Incredible Hulk*'s opening also serves a constructive narrative purpose. Like in the TV show, it retells the protagonist's tragic origin story and introduces the film's central characters. At least as important, however, is the fact that the film uses a reference to a "classic" incarnation of the Hulk figure to signal its adherence to the spirit of the source material(s).

A similar double strategy is used at the beginning of Robert Rodriguez' *Sin City* (2005), which adapts stories from Frank Miller's eponymous comic series for the big screen. After the studio credits, but before the opening titles, Rodriguez's film begins with a three minutes-long episodic prologue that narrates the story of a contract killer taking out his target on a penthouse balcony overlooking the skyline of *Sin City*'s titular locale. More important than its

narrative content, however, is the fact that the prologue introduces the film's trademark visual style. Like the rest of the film, the scene is presented in stark black-and-white with only occasional blotches of color. Framing its characters against backgrounds that are almost entirely computer-generated, the prologue sequence approximates the artwork featured in Frank Miller's *Sin City* comics—in fact, both the visual style and narrative content of the scene are patterned closely after the one-shot "The Customer Is Always Right," which is included in Miller's 1998 collection *Booze, Broads, Bullets: Eleven Sin City Yarns.* Like *Spider-Man 2*'s inclusion of Alex Ross's art or *The Incredible Hulk*'s nod to the television series of the same name, this intertextual dimension is obvious only to viewers already invested in Miller's work and the comic book origins of Rodriguez' film. Although in a more oblique fashion than the other examples discussed in this article, *Sin City, The Incredible Hulk,* and *Spider-Man 2*'s opening moments all acknowledge their status as installments in larger non-linear serial sprawls and, by doing so, reward a fannish engagement with the film.

Conclusion

All of our examples of serial film use their opening sequences to emphasize their relationship to earlier or alternate versions of the same narrative in other media, and thereby call attention to their status as mere installments in larger, non-linear series. We can understand these moments as akin to opening statements in a court proceeding or the first moves of a game of chess—they frame the events that follow and attempt to set the terms for their own reception.

By calling attention to their position in a larger serial context, the first minutes of these films make uninitiated viewers aware of the fact that what they are about to see partially necessitates broader, transmedial background knowledge and that what follows has, in a sense,

already begun. These medially and serially self-reflexive opening sequences are thus endowed with remarkable narrative efficiency that runs counter to norms of narrative closure and coherence commonly associated with Hollywood cinema. By thematizing their own seriality right from the start, these films can delegate the task of filling in the gaps within their fragmentary narratives to other texts, installments, and media—or to viewers attuned to these connections.

All the examples discussed here offer comparable negotiations of their relationship to earlier and/or alternate media incarnations of the same narrative. While serials such as *Ace Drummond* and *Radio Patrol* evoke the look and feel of eponymous comic strips that co-existed and unfolded in parallel with the serials themselves, *Superman* looks back on the decades-long trans-medial career of its protagonist. More recent comic book movies reference their serial pre-history to encourage and reward the interpretive and comparative practices of fan communities. This points to a central difference: where *Ace Drummond* and *Radio Patrol* alert viewers to the synchronous unfolding of related serial narratives in other media, later openings attempt a connection to earlier incarnations.

In different ways, however, all of our examples illustrate that the basic principle of popular seriality—understood as the re-iteration of success formulae through the repetition and variation of their constituent elements—continues to inform the commercial production of popular narratives today just as it did in the middle decades of the 20th century. By putting their seriality on display, all of our examples encourage a mode of reception that is mindful of the different dimensions of serial cross-reference simultaneously at work within them. As we hope to have shown, this dimension of narrative seriality is best discussed from a perspective that takes questions of audience engagement—rather than just the relationship between texts,

narratives, and installments—into account. Our examples also show that some of the phenomena that are, at times, discussed as hallmarks of a 21st century media landscape—such as comic book adaptations, formal self-reflexivity, and trans-mediality—are rooted in much older mass medial practices.

Works Cited

Ace Drummond. Directed by Ford Beebe and Clifford Smith, performances by Noah Beery Jr., John King, and Jean Rogers, Universal, 1936.

"Alex Ross Bio." *Alex Ross Official Online Store – Prints, Posters and Hard Covers For Sale*, n.d.. www.alexrossart.com (accessed 10 Jan. 2019)

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

Askwith, Ivan D. "Television 2.0: Reconceptualizing TV as an Engagement Medium." Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. *Comparative Media Studies Writing. Massachusetts Institute of Technology.* 10 Aug. 2007. https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/41243. (accessed 8 Jan 2019)

Balio, Tino. *Hollywood in the New Millenium.* London: BFI, 2013.

Barefoot, Guy. "Who Watched That Masked Man? Hollywood's Serial Audiences in the 1930s." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 31.2 (2011). 167-190.

Brasch, Ilka. *Operational Detection: Film Serials and the American Cinema, 1910-1940*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2018.

Brinker, Felix. "NBC's *Hannibal* and the Politics of Audience Engagement." *Transgressive Television. Politics and Crime in 21st-Century American TV Series,* in Birgit Däwes, Alexandra Ganser, and Nicole Poppenhagen, eds. Winter 2015. 303-328.

---. “On the Political Economy of the Contemporary (Superhero) Blockbuster Series.” *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film*, in Shane Denson and Julia Leyda, eds. Falmer: Reframe Books, 2016.

---. “Transmedia Storytelling in the ‘Marvel Cinematic Universe’ and the Logics of Convergence-Era Popular Seriality.” *Make Ours Marvel: Media Convergence and a Comics Universe*, in Matt Yockey, ed. Austin: U of Texas P, 2017: 207-233.

Bordwell, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film.* London: Methuen, 1985.

Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960.* New York: Routledge, 1985.

Denson, Shane. “Marvel Comics’ *Frankenstein*: A Case Study in the Media of Serial Figures.” *Amerikastudien - American Studies* 56. 4, 2011. 531-553.

Denson, Shane, and Ruth Mayer. “Grenzgänger. Serielle Figuren im Medienwechsel.” *Populäre Serialität: Narration, Evolution, Distinktion*, in Frank Kelleter, ed. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012. 185-203.

Eco, Umberto. “Innovation & Repetition. Between Modern & Postmodern Aesthetics.” *Deadalus* 134. 4, 2005. 191-207.

Ebert, Roger. “Superman Movie Review & Film Summary”, 15 Dec. 1978. https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/superman (accessed 21 Jan. 2019)

Freeman, Matthew. “Up, Up and Across: Superman, the Second World War and the Historical Development of Transmedia Storytelling.” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 35. 2, 2015. 215-239.

Forrest, Jennifer, and Leonard R. Koos, eds. *Dead Ringers: The Remake in Theory and Practice.* New York: SUNY Press, 2002.

Forrest, Jennifer. “The ‘Personal Touch:’ The Original, the Remake, and the Dupe in Early Cinema.” *Dead Ringers*, in Jennifer Forrest and Leonard R. Koos, eds. New York:

SUNY Press, 2002. 89-126.

Gardner, Jared. *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-First-Century Storytelling*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2012.

Gilmore, James N., and Matthias Stork, editors. *Superhero Synergies: Comic Book Characters Go Digital.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

Gordon, Ian, Mark Jancovich, and Matthew P. McAllister, eds. *Film and Comic Books.* Oxford: UP of Mississippi, 2007.

Gordon, Ian. "Superman and America." *9a Arte* 4. 1, 2015. 6-15.

Hagedorn, Roger. "Technology and Economic Exploitation: The Serial as a Form of Narrative Presentation." *Wide Angle* 10. 4, 1988. 4-12.

Hayward, Jennifer, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera,* Lexington : University Press of Kentucky, 1997.

Higgins, Scott. *Matinee Melodrama: Play and the Art of Formula in the Sound Serial*. New York: Rutgers UP, 2016.

Iser, Wolfgang. "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader,* in David Lodge, ed. London: Longman, 2000. 188-205.

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide.* New York: New York UP, 2006.

---. "Revenge of the Origami Unicorn: The Remaining Four Principles of Transmedia Storytelling." *Confessions of an AcaFan. The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, 12 Dec. 2009. http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2009/12/the_revenge_of_the_origami_uni.html (accessed 29 Jan. 2019)

---. *What Made Pistachio Nuts: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*. New York: Columbia UP, 1992.

Johnson, Derek. “Learning to Share: The Relational Logics of Media Franchising.” *FOE. Futures of Entertainment Conference. MIT Convergence Culture Consortium*, 29. Jun. 2010. http://www.convergenceculture.org/weblog/spreadable_media/ (accessed 7 Jan. 2019)

---. *Media Franchising. Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries.* New York: New York UP, 2013.

Kelleter, Frank, ed. *Populäre Serialität: Narration, Evolution, Distinktion*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012.

Kelleter, Frank. “Populäre Serialität. Eine Einführung.” In Frank Kelleter, ed. *Populäre Serialität. Narration, Evolution, Distinktion*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012. 11-46.

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

Kelleter, Frank, and Kathleen Loock. “Hollywood Remaking as Second-Order Serialization.” In Frank Kelleter, ed. *Media of Serial Narrative.* Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2017.

Klein, Amanda Ann, and R. Barton Palmer. *Cycles, Sequels, Spin-offs, Remakes, and Reboots. Multiplicities in Film and Television.* Austin: U of Texas P, 2016.

Lambert, Josh. “’Wait for the Next Pictures’: Intertextuality and Cliffhanger Continuity in Early Cinema and Comic Strips.” *Cinema Journal* 48. 2, 2009. 3-25.

Loock, Kathleen. “The Sequel Paradox: Repetition, Innovation, and and Hollywood’s Hit Film Formula.” *Film Studies*, 17. 1, 2017. 92-110.

Loock, Kathleen, and Constantine Verevis. “Introduction: Remake | Remodel.” In Kathleen Loock and Constantine Verevis, eds. *Film Remakes, Adaptations, and Fan Productions: Remake | Remodel*. London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012. 1-15.

Manovich, Lev. “What is Digital Cinema?” in Shane Denson and Julia Leyda, eds. *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film*. Falmer: Reframe, 2016.

Mason, Chris. “EXCLUSIVE – Alex Ross Spider-Man 2 Art.” *SuperHeroHype*, 01 Jul. 2004.

www.superherohype.com (accessed 10 Nov. 2018)

Mayer, Ruth. *Serial Fu Manchu. The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2014.

Meier, Stefan. *Superman Transmedial. Eine Pop-Ikone im Spannungsfeld von Medienwandel und Serialität.* Blielefeld: Transcript, 2015.

Miller, Frank. "The Customer Is Always Right." *Booze, Broads, Bullets: Eleven Sin City Yarns.* Milwaukie: Dark Horse Comics, 1998: 29-33.

Radio Patrol. Directed by Ford Beebe and Clifford Smith, performances by Catherine Hughes, Mickey Rentschler, and Grant Withers, Universal, 1937.

Round, Julia. *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels: A Critical Approach.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2014.

Sin City. Directed by Robert Rodriguez, performances by Mickey Rourke, Clive Owen, and Bruce Willis, Troublemaker Studios, Dimension Films, 2005.

Spider-Man. Directed by Sam Raimi, performances by Tobey Maguire, Kirsten Dunst, and Willem Dafoe, Columbia, Marvel Enterprises, 2002.

Spider-Man 2. Directed by Sam Raimi, performances by Tobey Maguire, Kirsten Dunst, and Alfred Molina, Columbia, Marvel Enterprises, 2004.

Superman. Directed by Richard Donner, performances by Christopher Reeve, Margot Kidder, and Gene Hackman, Warner Bros., 1978.

Taylor, Aaron. "Avengers dissemble! Transmedia Superhero Franchises and Cultic Management." *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance* 7. 2, 2014. 181-194.

The Incredible Hulk. Directed by Louis Leterrier, performances by Edward Norton, Liv Tyler, and Tim Roth, Universal, Marvel Enterprises, 2008.

Tomasovic, Dick. "The Hollywood Cobweb: New Laws of Attraction." in Wanda Strauven, eds. *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2006. 309-320.

Yockey, Matt. “Somewhere in Time: Utopia and the Return of Superman.” *The Velvet Light Trap* 61. 1, 2008. 26-37.

Ziegenhagen, Sandra. *Zuschauer-Engagement. Die neue Währung der Fernsehindustrie am Beispiel der Serie* Lost. Konstanz: UVK, 2009.

---

[1] This article draws strongly on our work in the context of the German Research Foundation’s research unit “Popular Seriality—Aesthetics and Practice” (2010-2016) led by Frank Kelleter. We would like to thank research unit members Nathalie Knöhr, Britta Lesniak, Julia Leyda, Bettina Soller, and Maria Sulimma for providing useful feedback on an early version of the talk on which this article is based. We also would like to thank the participants of the 2016 SERCIA conference on “Cinema & Seriality” at Paris Diderot University for their helpful commentary on our work.

[2] Loock and Verevis list, for instance, Horten and McDougal's *Play It Again Sam: Retakes on Remakes* (1998), Mazdon's *Encore Hollywood: Remaking French Cinema* (2000), Forrest and Koos' *Dead Ringers: The Remake in Theory and Practice* (2002), Verevis' own *Film Remakes* (2006), Jess-Cooke's *Film Sequels: Theory and Practice from Hollywood to Bollywood* (2009), and Forrest's *The Legend Returns and Dies Harder Another Day: Essays on Film Series* (2008). For recent work on adaption and media franchising as a serial practice, see Johnson 2010 and 2013, and for a collection on film cycles that addresses the question of seriality, see Klein and Palmer 2016. For transmedia storytelling, see Jenkins 2006, as well as 2009, which explicitly discusses transmedia storytelling as a serial phenomenon.

[3] We here follow Frank Kelleter, who defines serial narratives as “mass-addressed continuing narratives with a constant set of characters, which are produced commercially in an economically efficient and standardized fashion—i.e. by industrial means, with a specialized division of labor, and a high degree of narrative schematization” [“Es geht um Fortsetzungsgeschichten mit Figurenkonstanz, die produktionsökonomisch standardisiert, d.h. in der Regel arbeitsteilig und mit industriellen Mitteln, sowie narrativ hochgradig schematisiert für ein Massenpublikum hergestellt werden.”-translation ours] (Kelleter 2012, 18). Along similar lines, Jennifer Hayward defines “serial narrative” as “an ongoing narrative released in successive parts. ... [S]erial narratives ... include refusal of closure; intertwined subplots; large casts of characters [...]; interaction with current political, social, or cultural issues; dependence on profit; and acknowledgement of audience response” (Hayward 1997, 3). Serial narratives in this sense, as Kelleter (2012) points out, have occupied a prominent place within modern commercial popular culture at least since the first three decades of the 19th century; Hagedorn similarly suggests that serial narratives have been a “dominant mode of narrative presentation in Western culture” since the 19th century (1988, 5).

[4] Freeman 2015 historicizes transmedia storytelling in the United States based on the example of Superman in the 1940s and 1950s.

[5] For Denson and Ruth Mayer, non-linear serialization is most obviously on display in what they term “serial figures”—i.e. in immediately recognizable “cultural icon[s]” like Frankenstein’s Monster, Dracula, James Bond, or the Chinese supervillain Fu Manchu, all of which have “move[d] across media and medial forms” throughout their careers (Mayer 2014, 9; see also Denson 2011, 536-539; Denson and Mayer 2012, 185-194). Superman also belongs to this group of serial figures. While Denson and Mayer connect the concept to their discussion of serial figures, non-linear seriality is not necessarily restricted to the proliferation of iconic characters.

[6] In what follows, our discussion of the opening sequences of our examples follows Denson’s discussion of similarly medially self-reflexive moments in various iterations of Marvel comics’ Frankenstein titles (which he also connects to the notion of non-linear seriality). Like Denson, we understand medial self-reflexivity as a gesture that “directs attention towards the processes of medial construction at the same time that it serves a constructive medial purpose” (Denson 2011, 547-48; see also Denson and Mayer 2012).

[7] The “group style” of classical Hollywood was defined famously by Bordwell, Thompson, and

Staiger (1985). For a discussion of the number of texts arguing for particular American film cultures to exist outside the scopes of classical Hollywood, see Jenkins' introduction to *What Made Pistachio Nuts* (1992).

[8] Reader-response theory, as outlined by Wolfgang Iser (2000), suggests that reading any texts, in his case literature, entails processes of gap filling, which account for each reader's individual understanding of the text.

[9] Notably, the comic book featured in the opening sequence is not the historical 1938 issue of *Action Comics* that included the first printed *Superman* story, but a mock-up (with a different cover image and content) created specifically for the film. The mock-up's title and date nonetheless reference the first mass-circulated incarnation of the Superman figure, whose 40th anniversary preceded the release of Donner's film by a few months. The dissolve that connects the last shot of the comic panel that depicts the Daily Planet building with the brief shot of the building that follows could also be taken as a reference to similar establishing shots in the first season of *The Adventures of Superman*, the first TV series featuring the figure—if only obliquely so.

[10] This impression also informs the public reception of the film. In a review published on the day of the film's premiere, Roger Ebert, for example, foregrounds "the tremendous advantage that almost everyone in the audience knows the Superman saga from youth" (Ebert 1978). Much of the film's appeal, Ebert suggests, would draw on the viewers' "common memory of hundreds of comic books and radio and TV shows."

[11] Ian Gordon notes that the curious absence of the three Kryptonian villains from the rest of the film was the result of last minute-changes to the plot, whose final moments were originally intended to set up the release of "Zod, Ursa, and Non […] from their imprisonment [which occurs] at the beginning of *Superman II*" (Gordon 2015, 12). Since the final act of *Superman*'s theatrical cut—which was produced under considerable pressure and rushed to theatres before the end of 1978 to capitalize on the 40th anniversary of the Superman figure—does not refer back to the film's opening moments, the theatrical cut of the 1980 sequel first repeats the scenes that chronicle the villains' banishment from Krypton and then sets up a new chain of events that lead to their arrival on Earth (cf. Gordon 2015, 12). The *Superman* example demonstrates how external pressures like deadlines impact on the production process and narrative form of serial narratives—which are frequently made according to carefully timed schedules, and therefore more prone to be impacted by unforeseen or contingent factors than self-contained and non-serialized narrative forms.

[12] For a collection that engages with the trend of comic book adaptations, see Gordon, Jancovich, and McAllister 2007; on superhero movies, see Gilmore and Stork 2014; for a discussion of comic book movies in the context of recent trends towards film franchising, see Balio 2013. See also Brinker 2016.

[13] Dick Tomasovic points out that subtle differences in the coloring of the sequence and the images included serve to differentiate Marvel films and series from one another—the logo is tinted "red in *Spider-Man*, green in *The Hulk* […], [and] black in *The Punisher*," for example (2006, 313). In recent years, the animated logo has undergone several changes and increased differentiation pertaining to studios. As a result, Marvel superhero films produced by 20th Century Fox, for example, continue to feature logos that resemble the one discussed above, while the Disney-produced Marvel movies released after 2015 feature a new sequence that has replaced the abstract comics imagery with stylized depictions of heroes like Iron Man and Captain America. The changed Disney sequence reflects an economic shift in the corporate structure of Marvel Entertainment, which has been part of the Disney conglomerate since 2011 and has become more profitably engaged in filmmaking and licensing operations than in the publication of superhero comics (which now represent a small fraction of the company's business).

[14] The web motif echoes the rectangular grids of Saul Bass' opening titles for Hitchcock's *North By Northwest*.

[15] Arguably, *Spider-Man* 2's evocation of comics aesthetics and simultaneous effacing of the comics medium is related to what Lev Manovich has described as digital cinema's "new kind of realism" i.e. a filmmaking practice based in digital technologies that allows for a seamless blending of computer-generated and live-action footage (cf. Manovich 2016). 21st-century superhero blockbusters rely heavily on digital animation and motion capture processes to render the superhuman feats and abilities of their central figures in a photographically realistic fashion, and generally employ these technologies

to approximate the aesthetics of superhero comic books. Since recent entries of the genre have thus overcome technological constraints that limited the filmic depiction of superheroic feats during preceding decades, the spectacular action presented by films of the genre can now compete with, and perhaps outperform, equivalent scenes in superhero comics. Accordingly, superhero comic books cease to be the yardstick for what superheroes can do.

[16] For a more detailed discussion of *The Incredible Hulk*'s opening titles in relation to the preceding cinematic incarnations of the figure and the film's operation in the context of Disney's 'Marvel Cinematic Universe' franchise, see Brinker 2017, 221-22.