Machinic Fu Manchu.

Popular Seriality and the Logic of Spread

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Abstract:
This paper explores the processes of serial narration in view of the serial enactment of Fu Manchu. Its contention is that seriality is a principle rather than a technique and that this principle cannot be deduced to one author, author collective, or instigator. It gains a 'machinic' momentum of its own in the course of its unfolding. It is no mere circumstance that the most successful serial narratives—like the Fu Manchu narratives—were initiated in the 'long' 19th century with its expansionist ambitions regarding the spread of global capitalism and the modern nation state, and then were propelled by the engines of 20th-century media modernity. The Fu Manchu narratives lend themselves to an investigation of the principle of seriality because they vent the serial logic of expansion, excrescence, and spread both on a thematical and a formal level and tightly interweave structural and ideological functions. In consequence, the narratives have to be seen as serial performances or enactments, rather than representations, of the yellow peril theme. They do not so much express politico-social fears and cultural anxieties from the vantage point of an author or individual text, but work as engines in the serial machinery which generates and spreads ideological certainties.

> My attention fixed itself on the spinning roulette wheel and the little white ball whirling inside it. I experienced the sensation that I was the whizzing roulette ball, that the numbers I passed in my spin where the faces of all those I had known at Land's End, and before: that I was myself and Petrie, that Smith and Fu Manchu were the same imago, and that the spin would never stop, the ball that was me would never come to rest on red or white, on 7 or 24, but rotate for eternity on that clicketing wheel. (Indiana 204)

This is how the narrator of Gary Indiana's *The Shanghai Gesture* (2009), which is arguably the most recent literary take on the subject matter of Fu Manchu, envisions himself at the end of the novel. By then, the fact that Fu Manchu is a cultural construct has been thoroughly driven home in the text. Fu Manchu is of interest to Indiana precisely because he has been of interest to so many other people before. *The Shanghai Gesture* approaches Fu Manchu as formula fiction, correlating its references to the figure of the Chinese master criminal with allusions to many other popular yellow peril fictions, such as the 1941 film from which the novel gleaned its title. Indiana's narrative thus relishes in quotation, exaggeration, parody, and ironic inversion, while—for large stretches, at least—taking its material seriously enough to trust in its inherent potential, most notably the dynamics of serial narration. Or perhaps the material itself brings to bear its potential on Indiana's novel? We'll see that the answer to this question depends heavily on how we conceptualize the phenomenon of seriality.

At the time when Indiana's narrator Petrie, who happens to share the last name with the narrator figure of the first Fu Manchu narratives, identifies with a roulette ball, things have already become quite convoluted. The novel's many narrative threads and layers have turned out to be complicatedly looped. Toward the end of Indiana's novel the principle of seriality is no longer associated with the idea of a chronological evolution, in the sense of a sequence of past, present, and future. Edmund Husserl's concept of a "field of sensuous data" (Indiana 204) is called up to suggest the idea of a time-space-continuum in which episodes and figures pertaining to different historical circumstances, distinct conceptual spheres, and di verse narrative enactments are tightly tangled. With this turn, the novel insists that, particularly as a narrative mode, seriality relies as much on the

dynamics of the loop as it draws upon the logic of consecutivity. High lighting the intricate processes of dissemination and the workings of a 'serial memory' as a means of negotiating the contents and forms of serial narration, *The Shanghai Gesture* discloses an idea of seriality based on the patterns of a maze or tangle rather than a line or arrow (cf. Eco; Hagedorn; Hayward; Kelleter, "Populärkultur"/"Toto").

This procedurality has been made out as a basic principle of narration in general. "[T]he reader, in establishing [. . .] interrelations between past, present, and future, actually causes the text to reveal its potential multiplicity of connections," writes Wolfgang Iser in his phenomenological reflection on the reading process (278), concluding that "the activity of reading can be characterized as a sort of kaleidoscope of perspectives, preintentions, recollections" (279), and thus assuming a 'flow' of associations which moves, as it were, within and in between texts of different historical and cultural provenance. Iser, following Husserl (and thus paving the way for Indiana), is interested in the analogies between subjectivities and experiences. In what follows, moving beyond Iser and Indiana, I would like to complement this phenomenological focus on reception with a focus on textual production, or, to be more precise, the productivity of texts. I claim that popular serial narration lends itself particularly well to an analysis of this phenomenon, since it exemplifies how texts work with texts, generating images and ideas which are negotiated not by means of increasingly more complex subjective engagements with texts but rather by means of the very principles of serial concatenation and variation. These principles, I argue, are determined to a large extent by the self-propelling momentum of the material with which they work. It is no accident that the lexicon of the serial mode in popular culture is replete with terms suggesting spread, growth, and excrescence rather than linear evolution, careful design and microstructural complexity.

Popular seriality invites us to reflect upon the workings of narration without "the traditional recourse to digression, indirection, or the overtly self-referential," as Michael Chabon (49) wrote about the popular appeal of Sherlock Holmes narratives (which had a trigger effect on the Fu Manchu series): "Conan Doyle found a way to fold several stories, and the proper means of telling them, over and over into a tightly compacted frame, with a proportionate gain in narrative power. 'The Speckled Band' and 'The Adventure of the Dancing Men' are storytelling engines, steam

driven, brass-fitted, but among them the most efficient narrative apparatuses the world has ever seen" (47). Storytelling engines: what a felicitous formulation! This paper will try to probe deeper into the narrative arrangements constituted by seriality, examining how the serial figure of Fu Manchu is driven by the same motor which propelled the Sherlock Holmes stories and other machines of popular seriality.

1. Loops and Déjà-vus: Serial Configurations

The serial mode has long been an eminently popular mode of narration. Arguably because of its popularity "in the history of narrative, the serial has been (with television a notable exception) a consistent loser," as Roger Hagedorn contends. Hagedorn deplores the "failure on the part of scholars to recognize that since the 19th century the serial has been a dominant mode of narrative presentation in western culture—if not in fact the dominant mode" (5). This neglect (and current rediscovery) of the serial mode may also have to do with a certain academic intangibility of popular seriality. Serial narration eludes the scholarly impulse of distanced classification, because it is so strongly marked by the material, somatic, physical, concrete conditions of its actualization. Seriality is informed with the aesthetics of the momentary and the momentous:

> Seriality [...] is perfectly suited to the principle of somatic presence. [The serial mode] is so attractive to popular culture, because it promises a perpetual renewal of the same moment. [...] serial figures are back again with every new installment, and they experience with great reliability the same situations and conflicts as in the first place: a potentially endless stream of innovation and repetition, of forget ting and an actualization which cannot really be called recollection. (Kelleter, "Populärkultur," 60, my translation, see also Eco)[1]

I started my reflections with Gary Indiana's take on the Fu Manchu phenomenon, but it is my contention that what Indiana displays is already an intrinsic feature of the popular narratives on which he draws—and that it manifests itself much more radically in these earlier enactments than in the postmodern novel. Indiana merely highlights a dimension of Fu

Manchu which was always there. It is on the same grounds that other post modern artists such as Thomas Pynchon or Alan Moore took up the figure of Fu Manchu earlier on. This is what I mean when I speculate that the effects disclosed in *The Shanghai Gesture* might not really be due to its writer's deconstructive skills or critical discrimination, but rather contingent on the dynamics of seriality in general and the dynamics of narrating a serial figure[2] in particular. In fact, we will see that Indiana's novel is both pulled along by the serial flow, and marked by the effort to rein in these dynamics—to get them under control against all odds.

Gary Indiana's text does not address a classically educated reader so much as a dedicated fan (albeit a learned one), an aficionado—if not of Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu series than at least of similar popular narratives driven by fast-paced action, fantastic plot twists, and endowed with stock characters pursuing their fantasies of world rule and reality control. The ideal approach to a text like *The Shanghai Gesture*—and by extension to serial figures in general—is not to read for the plot, or rather, not to read for the plot alone. Yet the text does not foster analytical detachment either, it is all about the pleasures of recognition, actualization, reiteration, and appropriation.

Indiana's narrative invites us to focus on its structural qualities, throwing into relief the subtle twists and turns which manifest themselves once the same story is told over and over again, or a familiar figure is taken up in a new context or different medium: almost the same but not quite; a déjà-vu effect. In self-referential acknowledgement of this logic, the novel revolves around the recognition that Fu Manchu's most powerful weapon is a 'loop needle' inducing déjà-vu experiences: "If you notice the same thing happening twice, chances are you've been zapped with a loop needle" (Indiana 34). With this, *The Shanghai Gesture* riffs on the motif of Fu Manchu's manipulative agency which informs numerous earlier Fu Manchu narratives, most notably *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1933). In this novel, which came out at the height of the Fu Manchu craze, Fu Manchu fatally controls the I-narrator's memory, instigating strange moments of obfuscated recognition and deferred recollection in a manner that induces strong doubts in the narrator's reliability ("Memory began to return—or what I thought then to be memory [. . .]," "I did not know then, but I knew later, the real character of a kind of wave of remorse which swept over me," "I know now, of course, that [certain words spoken] were my cue for

final forgetfulness" [Rohmer, *Mask*, 100-101). The second time around, the impact of this manipulation is described in terms of a déjà-vu:

> A definite conviction claimed my mind that I had been in this room before. But—perhaps the most remarkable feature of the experience—it reached my brain in just the same way that such impressions reach us in everyday life. I thought, 'This has all happened before.' The only difference was that my prophetic anticipations lasted much longer than is normally the case. [. . .] That everything in this room, every word spoken by the Chinese doctor, seemed familiar, was natural enough; since I had seen those things and heard those words before. (Rohmer, *Mask*, 196)

In close analogy to the predicament of Indiana's narrator, this narrator's condition is especially frightening because it cannot be attributed to a momentary trick of the brain, but seems to be more complicatedly entangled in the novel's material reality and Fu Manchu's schemes to engineer his victims' perceptions. In both cases, popular installment and postmodern reiteration, one can read the references to déjà-vu experiences as metatextual references to the workings of serial narration, which is replete with ghostly correspondences, distorted echoes, obscured recollections. The déjà-vu episodes are never completely integrated into the texts' narrative flow. They stand out in their tangled quality and draw our attention to the serial unfolding of the serial figures and their worlds.

Serial fiction relies upon its readers' recollection, but it also profits from the familiarity that derives from prior reading experiences. One of the two narrators of *The Shanghai Gesture* registers at the end of the story that "when you've seen the same movie a certain number of times, you stop paying much attention to what's going on in the narration. You see the furniture, the ornamentation of the sets. [. . .]" (200). This also captures well the workings of serial reading: recurring figures, character constellations, and themes invariably allow for a focus on the 'ornamentation of the sets.'

With this focus on the proceedings and devices of serial narration, I do not mean to embark on an enterprise in mere formal analysis, although formal features quite obviously play a very important role for my ap-

proach. Yet I do not consider the figure of Fu Manchu—or the larger themes of yellow peril and sinophobia—as mere placeholders in a formal study on the workings of seriality. In my paper, I would like to approach the formal principles of seriality very much along the lines of what David Palumbo-Liu in reference to Marjorie Levinson and others has called New Formalism; an analytical approach which regards a text's aesthetic and social functions in close conjunction in order to "account for the longevity or transitoriness of certain agreed upon Forms" (832). From this vantage point, a formal analysis would not deflect from a text's or series' ideological work, but rather allow to assess this ideological performance in a sys tematic sense without losing sight of a narrative's or figure's specificities. In line with this reasoning, I hold that Fu Manchu's big project—his quest for world domination—is intricately interwoven with the modes of representing this project: with the expansive scope of popular seriality. The series resonates in content and in form with a larger socio-political 'serial logic' surrounding it.

When one is concerned with the form of the serial and with the feature of the serial figure in particular, I argue, formal aesthetic issues need to be scrutinized in close reference to their ideological and material bearings. To get a grip on these arrangements, the temporal logic of narrative seriality needs to be complemented with the spatial logic of spread. Serial narratives reach out, take over, invade, and impose, and the concurrence of these terms with the lexicon of the industrial revolution and of imperialism is far from accidental. Michael Chabon identified the convergence of popular serial narration with a very specific historical background—the background of the 'long' 19th Century with its expansionist ambitions regarding both industrial and colonial ventures. Like Sherlock Holmes, Fu Manchu (and by extension, Frankenstein, Dracula, and Tarzan, to name just the most obvious serial figures harking back to these beginnings) are marked by the ideology of technological feasibility, by the "Cape-to-Cairo spirit" of the British Empire, and by the contemporaneous insight that the "blank places on the map" were disappearing (Joseph Conrad, qutd. in Chabon 49). All of these characters responded to the spirit of expansion by going serial; if they were not conceived as serial figures in the very first place, they jumped from medium to medium, adapted, shapeshifted, mutated and yet stayed always recognizably the same.

Yet, the expansive gestures of serial fiction are more intricately imbri-

cated with the spirit of political and economic spread than a mere thematical analysis discloses. The formation of industrialized and mediatized nation states the world over was predicated on what Benedict Anderson has called "a logic of the series" inspiring a "new grammar of representation" which he then considers "a precondition for imagining the nation" (*Spectre*, 34). This logic was based on the conditions of "infinite reproducibility, a reproducibility made technically possible by print and photography" (*Imagined Communities*, 182)—the conditions of media modernity which also provided the means for the workings of popular seriality (Hagedorn). For Anderson, the logic of the series promulgated a 'modular' vision of the "world [. . .] as one, so that no matter how many different social and political systems, languages, cultures, religions, and economies it contained, there was a common activity—'politics'—that was self-evidently going on *everywhere*" (*Spectre*, 32).

With Partha Chatterjee I would like to emphasize the Utopian, abstracted quality of Anderson's idea of seriality. Anderson assumes a logic of the serial which either correlates and contains (bound and negative) or reaches out and propels (unbound and positive). Yet these two features are dialectically intertwined, they determine the serial mode on a very basic level, as becomes clear once one returns to the arena of narration. Transferred to the realm of serial fiction and serial narration, Anderson's model of seriality complies with the ambition of so many serial narratives to correlate the discordant, to process the random, and to create conceptual units, while simultaneously catering to the desire for variety, novelty, thrill. Against this backdrop, it is of interest that so many serial figures are made out as liminal—located at the borderline between different states, conditions, or concepts. The serial enactment of recurrent figures, character constellations, or plot lines allows for an apparent resolution of fundamental conceptual or ideological inconsistencies—although in fact it would be more appropriate to think of a rehearsal or reiteration of such in consistencies than assume their suspension. Fu Manchu's hyperbolized Chineseness which is both associated with primitivism and seen as the spearhead of technological modernity is a case in point, as is the balancing act between detection and criminality which Sherlock Holmes engages in, the animal/aristocrat-dichotomy that characterizes Tarzan or, as the most basic instance of serial boundary crossing, the oscillation between monstrosity and manhood of figures such as Frankenstein's creature or Drac-

ula, to give just a few examples (cf. Krüger/Mayer/Sommer; Denson, "Tarzan"; Denson, "Incorporations"). On a structural level the figures' conceptual liminality and indeterminacy corresponds to their flatness, their disposability. They are types, not individuals; figures instead of characters—and they are marked by the very same properties which Benedict Anderson associated with the global spread of political and economic patterns: "emptiness, contextlessness, visual memorableness, and infinite reproducibility in every direction" (*Imagined Communities*, 185). It is a reproducible, 'modular' quality that makes these figures particularly attractive for serial narration and the dissemination of ideological 'knowledge,' but on the other hand the very same quality also allows for an intriguing narrative and ideological flexibility—the figures' vibrancy and their capacity for reinscription, inversion, appropriation. All of these aspects can be exemplarily unfolded with regard to Fu Manchu.

2. Serial Fu Manchu

> [. . .] Chenery [the editor of *Collier's Weekly* from 1925-1931] tells of calling on President Coolidge at the White House and being pleased to have him say that he had recently been reading *Collier's* with great attention; indeed, he had been sending a White House messenger out to a dealer on the avenue to get advance copies each week. The magazine was then running an important series by Shepherd and Chenery ventured to ask the President's opinion on those articles, only to find that all he was reading in the weekly was the current Sax Rohmer mystery; he just could not wait each week to learn whether the hero would foil Fu Manchu and how. (Mott 1957: 471)

Anybody who has ever as much as looked at a Fu Manchu narrative will know that Fu Manchu embodies expansion. Most obviously, the themes of expansion and spread surface time and again whenever Fu Manchu's quest for world domination is being addressed. In addition, what might be called a semantics of spread—that is, the concatenation of multiple imageries of expansion, takeover, and annexation—manifests itself more indirectly and figuratively in the narratives around the master criminal. It may find its most salient actualization in the features of Fu Manchu's volatility and in

tangibility—his expertise at masquerade, make-belief, infiltration, and impersonation, which renders him at the same time impossible to locate and omnipresent (Mayer, "Fu-Manchu").

Fu Manchu was first conceived by Sax Rohmer in 1913, in the course of serially published novels, which then spawned sequels (published both in book and serial form) until 1959. But Sax Rohmer quickly lost control over his brainchild. Fu Manchu has a richly variegated media history, he became the hero of radio shows, films, TV programs, and comic books. In addition, the fact that Rohmer's novels appeared simultaneously in British and American magazines and print editions with different titles marks the transatlantic character of Fu Manchu's career. The figure's almost instantaneous international popularity augmented the effects of omnipresence and evanescence, suggesting a phenomenon in constant flux and yet unchanging. In many instances, a Chinese malefactor of a particular type did not even need to be named Fu Manchu (and often enough was not identified by that name due to copyright restrictions) in order to invoke his blueprint: "Fu Manchu," writes Robert G. Lee, "was the first universally recognized Oriental and became the archetype of villainy" (114, see also Marchetti; Wu; Hevia; Chen).

Fu Manchu's success in the transatlantic world has been attributed to the serial form of his appearances and actions before. Clive Bloom unfolds what could be called a standard explanation for the popularity of formula fiction when he associates the Fu Manchu phenomenon with its heavy reliance on the effects of repetition and standardization:

> Having been a journalist who serviced [the] commuter trade, Arthur Ward [Sax Rohmer] then wrote thrillers for the same audience. This commuter mentality, combined with a mentality used to standardization and repetition, allowed the work of Sax Rohmer to translate easily into the technological world of the radio and cinema. The repetitiveness of the form of the Fu Manchu tales was part of the internalized need of people whose daily routine was itself formally repetitive, the expected escapism of the tales being a blind for the formula repetition of the genre's conformity to stock patterns which were easily reproduced and duplicated. (180)

Obviously, I would like to suggest a somewhat more complicated approach to reading Fu Manchu. First of all, the easy identifiability of the characters, the circulatory arrangement of the figures, and perhaps most importantly the tie in which Fu Manchu and his nemesis, commissioner Sir Denis Nayland Smith, are caught, need to be seen in close conjunction with certain functions of serial narration which go beyond the confines of standardization and repetition. The fact that the narrative layout is familiar allows us to focus on other things—"the furniture [and] the ornamentation of the set" in Gary Indiana's terms.

The characters of these narratives are undoubtedly stock figures, they do not draw our attention to psychological shadings, moral ambiguities, motivational conundrums, or intricate constellations of conflict or desire. All of them are immediately readable (especially when they are made out as inscrutable or mysterious). The same quality of immediate readability applies to Fu Manchu's Chineseness—there is little subtlety and little surprise in the phobic iterations on the yellow peril theme in all sorts of Fu Manchu narratives from Rohmer to Indiana.[3] However, while the markers of Chineseness or Orientalism may be laid out in bold strokes in the Fu Manchu narratives, the idea of Chineseness still eludes full narrative control because it is so complicatedly entangled in and mangled by the material arrangements which constitute the universe(s) of Fu Manchu. One could argue that Fu Manchu can figure as the epitome of the yellow peril precisely because the figure does not express a political conviction—it is not even indicative of an ideological common place. Its popularity and success hinge upon its capacity to simultaneously suggest and defer such certainties. The narratives around Fu Manchu project a hallucinatory knowledge of 'Chineseness' which need never be fully explicated because it signals alternately to what has already been expressed 'at some point,' and what is 'about to' be spelled out. Fu Manchu thus embodies, one might say, the very logic of the serial which Benedict Anderson identified as a principal characteristics of processes of political and economic spread, "the notion that the world was made up of replicable plurals" (*Imagined Communities*, 184). Just as "the colonial state imagined a Chinese series before any Chinese, and a nationalist series before the appearance of any nationalists" (184), the serial fiction of the yellow peril relies upon and is constituted by modular figures such as Fu Manchu, it both thrives on them and makes them possible. The discrete serial figure, then,

acts as a hinge or connective between the formerly disconnected and disparate, and thus 'performs' the serial concatenation of the world 'as one.'

The Fu Manchu storyline was initially closely modeled after the formula of the Sherlock Holmes narrative. It revolved around the efforts of the ingenuous police commissioner Smith ("Sir Denis"), equipped by Scotland Yard with a sheer endless range of licenses and privileges, to retrace the evil schemes of the Chinese master criminal. In the first installments of the series, Smith is accompanied by a faithful sidekick, Dr. Petrie, who acts as the narrator of the stories and pursues Smith's intellectual feasts with avid admiration. Like Dr. Watson, Dr. Petrie insists time and again on the complicatedly convoluted chronology of action and literary recording. Developments spin out of control and are breathlessly documented, event and publication take place almost simultaneously and this simultaneity of action and representation is addressed in references which regularly explode the confines of the closed text, the short story or novel. More than the Sherlock Holmes narratives, the Fu Manchu narratives are about writing, albeit not so much in the sense of a reflection upon the process of recording, but rather by constantly drawing attention to the constraints of representation or the conditions of (serial) narration, as the concluding notes to *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu* exemplify:

> I come to the close of my chronicle, and feel that I betray a trust—the trust of my reader. For having limned in the colors at my command the fiendish Chinese doctor, I am unable to conclude my task as I should desire, unable, with any consciousness of finality, to write Finis to the end of my narrative.
>
> It seems to me sometimes that my pen is but temporarily idle—that I have but dealt with a single phase of a movement having a hundred phases. [.. .]
>
> With intent, I have rushed you from the chambers of Professor Jenner Monde to that closing episode at the deserted cottage; I have made the pace hot in order to impart to these last pages of my account something of the breathless scurry which characterized those happenings.
>
> My canvas may seem sketchy: it is my impression of the reality. No hard details remain in my mind of the dealings of that night. Fu-Manchu arrested—Fu-Manchu, man-

> acled, entering the cottage on his mission of his healing; Weymouth, miraculously rendered sane, coming forth; the place in flames. (192-93)

The references to the reality effect are standard lore in this kind of popular fiction, but here they convey not so much a sense of authenticity, but first and foremost a sense of speed—there is simply no time to go into more detail because the dynamics of the development overtake the act of recording. Where Dr. Watson tends to take some time out to write—looking back, pondering and reflecting on what happened—Dr. Petrie is almost always in the gist of the action. On the level of reception, such a narrative stance creates the impression of a blur, it effects a suspension of temporal succession, and brings about a sense of collapsing categories—of narration and event, of past and future, of sequels and the whole story. Dr. Petrie as an ordering instance can only record his failure.

This might be the reason why Dr. Petrie was discarded altogether as a narrator after the first three volumes of the series. The disappearance of the sidekick (together with the hyphen in Fu Manchu's name) entailed a change of focus (away from London's Chinatown). This move also brought about an incisive transformation of the narrative style and format of the Fu Manchu stories. In the wake of its geographical relocation, it seems, the narrative admits to the fact that the world it depicts defies the very idea of distanced recording. More than ever before, the Fu Manchu narratives now seem to be inscribed with the serial format of the module.

In the 1930s, there is no longer even a pretense to regard the open-endedness of the serial narration as a deficit. The open ending has been accepted as the central drive of the narrative progression. This insight may be predicated on the fact that 1932 was the date in which Metro-Goldwyn Mayer's *The Mask of Fu Manchu* appeared. Boris Karloff's enactment of Fu Manchu as calm, cruel, and controlled madman, together with his trademark makeup and styling rendered the figure iconic. The pre-code film relied upon elaborate sets and ornate costumes between art-deco and futurism, and it became widely known for its state-of-the-art special effects, spectacularly displaying Fu Manchu's sophisticated machineries of torture, indoctrination, experimentation, and infiltration (cf. Doherty 267-74; Goldman 53-60; Mayer, "Image Power"). In the early Fu Manchu novels, such effects and machineries are ascribed with a certain

function, but they never take center stage. In the novels appearing after the film, spectacular effects and the machinic arrangements gain an unprecedented importance, they become pivotal elements—or engines—of the narration, easily competing with the lead figures in terms of significance and plot relevance.

This narrative refocusing goes along with a reorganization of the material conditions of narration from the late 1920s onward. For decades, Rohmer resided in Great Britain while getting more and more involved in an American literary market. In 1928, enthusiastic reader responses to a yellow peril story published in *Collier's Weekly*, "The Emperor of America" (the "editors were [. . .] snowed under with letters asking for more," writes Rohmer's biographer Cay Van Ash (1972: 182)) induced the magazine's fiction editor, Kenneth Littauer, to travel from New York to London to seek out Rohmer. The editors wanted a serialized novel closely modeled after the Fu Manchu stories, and were prepared to pay for it with the highest commission ever offered for a serial story at the time. A frantic cycle of writing and publication ensued, which Rohmer's biographer captures in terms which do not accidentally call to mind the mechanics of industrialized serial production:

> Sax worked rapidly, but the magazine was in a fever of impatience to feature the resumed series, and the close deadline required left no margin for delays in the post. When the first episode was completed, he and Littauer [Collier's fiction editor] took the six-thousand-word manuscript to the Western Union office, and sat there all night while the entire thing, including paragraphs and punctuation, was sent out over the Atlantic cable. It cost Collier's a further £130 in cable charges, but the publicity which they obtained was probably worth it. Such a thing had never been done in the history of either fiction or the telegraph. I should also imagine that it was never done again. (Van Ash 183)

The anecdote reveals an interesting insight into the ways in which serialization affected conceptions of global time and space. First of all, it pulls together the Trans-Atlantic world into a tight community of fans, publishers and writers, with all parties impacting significantly on the material

which is being produced, communicating to this purpose in ever faster feedback loops (the telephone and the telegraph replacing the fan letters and occasional epistolary author's or publisher's responses). To keep up with the demand of the readers does not carry the taint of selling out here, but rather corresponds with a serial dynamics which seems to inhere in the narrative material itself, forcing its way regardless of momentary obstacles or circumstances. Van Ash was anxious to retain an idea of ingenious literary creativity, insisting that Rohmer was "going hell-for-leather to get something on paper, to keep up with the rapid pace of his imagination" (293), but his phrasing here and elsewhere does not really manage to steer clear of the semantic fields of mechanical production and modern business efficiency. Clearly, the writing process is no longer 'pure'—it is propelled by extraneous forces which may be conceptualized as social (the fans, the editor), economic (the publisher's checkbook), technical (the telegraph) or rather manifest themselves as a diffuse mix of all of these. In consequence we may also ask who is doing the writing here—Sax Rohmer? His fans who come up with suggestions on how the material could be taken further? His editor who is anxiously monitoring his progress? Or the telegraph which transmits the material to United States? The anecdote's fascination derives from the glitchless interaction of all of these factors. This is where the category of the 'machinic' in the sense of Deleuze & Guattari comes into play. In scenarios such as the above, living beings and technological apparatuses enter into intricately layered arrangements of interaction—seriality fosters the dissolution of seemingly stable categories of distinction and identification (Massumi 192N45; cf. also Deleuze/Guattari 283-89). As we shall see, in the 1930s the Fu Manchu narratives themselves draw attention to their 'machinic' quality in a manner which the earlier Fu Manchu narratives were reluctant to endorse. Little surprisingly, this self-reflexivity reaches its peak in postmodern Fu Manchu reprises, which is why I shall briefly turn back to the postmodern phase, before finishing with a glance at the material from the 1930s, in particular the novel *The Drums of Fu Manchu* of 1939.

3. Postmodern Fu Manchu

The Shanghai Gesture adopts the cast of characters and the plotlines of the fictional universe of Fu Manchu with much exaggeration and ironic re-

vision. But still, the novel engages in an intertextual enterprise which goes beyond what most novels of classical postmodernism practiced when dropping names, mixing references, and juxtaposing bits and pieces of popular narratives rather than taking one particular text or figure as their focus. With this experiment, Gary Indiana seems to follow in the footsteps of other writers whose work is clearly affected by the spirit of classical postmodernism yet cannot be fully captured in these terms. Like Chuck Palahniuk, Stewart O'Nan, or Mark Danielewski, Indiana undertakes literary reprises of formula fiction which testify to a fanlike fascination with the material at hand. The spirit of fandom is then complicated by philosophical reflections, elements of political or cultural critique, and the gestures of metafiction—the legacy of postmodernism. Yet in order to come to terms with the particular mix of deconstructive parody and tongue-in-cheek reverence which Gary Indiana invests in his cultural material, the (post)postmodern novel might really not present the most adequate con text. It may help to look to a fictional precedent stemming from a slightly different context of narration—the comic series. This genre of writing lends itself to my purposes because it managed to steer clear of the complicated boundary disputes over the high and the low, the complex and the trivial which marked or marred the 20th-century novel and still register in the fiction writing of our days (Stein/Ditschke/Kroucheva; Kelleter/Stein).

What's more, Fu Manchu also made a relatively recent appearance in Allan Moore's and Kevin O'Neill's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, a comic series which has been published from 1999 onward. The first volume of *The League* comprises six issues of the comic, it is set in 1898, although the series works heavily with jumps, breaks, ellipses, and finally loops in its representation of history, and it revolves around the struggles of five figures of popular literary fame (H. Rider Haggard's Allan Quatermain, Jules Verne's Captain Nemo, H.G. Wells' Invisible Man, Robert Louis Stephenson's Dr. Jekyll, and Mina from Bram Stoker's *Dracula*) against a master villain, "the Lord of Limehouse" (n.p.) who remains anonymous to the end and whose features are always partially hidden, shadowed or otherwise obscured. The figure is clearly modeled after Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu—and it is unclear whether it was due to copyright restrictions or due to the comic's narrative logic that Fu Manchu is not named in all six issues. In any case, the aura of anonymity emanating from

the unnamed and unseen figure correlates neatly with Fu Manchu's established renown of intangibility and masquerade.

Volume one of *The League* is of interest to me here because it can be seen as a go-between interlinking Gary Indiana's experimental text with the serial figure of Fu Manchu as it was established in the first half of the 20th Century. In all of these texts, the politico-economic concepts of spread and takeover and the aesthetics of popular seriality are systematically interlinked. The comic's technique of concatenation is exemplified when Fu Manchu is first introduced (which is also the only instance in which the iconicity of his features becomes sketched out). The location is Limehouse, the site of the old London Chinatown, which has always been a site of fantasy and of speculation. In keeping with the serial structure of prefigurement and reiteration, the 'Lord of Limehouse' is first presented in a full-page panel which shows a darkish Victorian cityscape with crowded multi-storied buildings with wooden galleries and a tangle of open stair cases displaying scenes of depravity and vice (fig. 1). The scene is peopled with a throng of shadowy presences, half of them 'respectable' and obviously pleasure-seeking citizens, the other half 'orientals' engaging in all sorts of criminal activities. The entire panel is tinted in bluish and purple hues, and its light scheme and grid of action draw the viewer's attention to the foreground, so that the cloud formation on the darkish night sky looming over the buildings is likely to be seen only at second glance. The clouds form the features of Fu Manchu as made iconic in Boris Karloff's filmic impersonation of the figure, complete with signature moustache and sinister eyebrows. Three captions organize the panel, and provide a sense of orientation, background, and direction. The first one is located in the upper left corner and reads "'DOWN EAST'. . . , the next one is placed slightly below and to the right of the first caption, reading "'IN LIME HOUSE." The last caption is longer and demarcates the end of the page and the end of the issue. It is located in the lower right corner and runs: "The next edition of our new Boys' Picture Monthly will continue this ar resting yarn, in which the Empire's Finest are brought into conflict with the sly Chinee, accompanied by a variety of coloured illustrations from our artist that are sure to prove exciting to the manly, outwardgoing youngster of today" (n.p.).

The panel epitomizes the complicated entanglement of the patterns of expansion, takeover, and (popular) seriality, especially with regard to the

enactment of serial figures. Adventure fiction is systematically deprived of any sense of carefree thrill and harmless entertainment, and made out as highly laden with unacknowledged implications. The stock material of the Western popular imagination—most importantly, the repertory of 19th century adventure and detective fiction—is shown as caught in the dark desires of imperial, economic, and sexual domination, reaching from the 19th Century into our own times. It all turns out to revolve around the quest for power and subjugation. These impulses are identified throughout the comic series on a thematic level, but they also are delineated as the principles of narration—time and again, the drive of the narrative, the promise of more of the same and of even faster-paced, more dramatic developments is addressed in a fashion similar to the panel above, in a perverse mix of the lexicon of popular entertainment, politics, and pornography. A stock figure or a standard scenario is called up, demarcated in its staple function for a standard repertory of thrill and expansion, demystified, and then reimplemented. The comics are successful because they work on all these levels—they provide the self-reflection and critique, yet they also tell a thrilling story which gets increasingly fraught with sensationalist and disturbing displays of pornography and brutality. Fu Manchu and his minions, for instance, may be reflected ironically, but the racist iconography of oriental depravity and robotic partisanship remains unchallenged. On these grounds, one might argue, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* does not really deviate principally from the material it takes on, especially since critique and demystification have always been an integral part of the process of serial production as we shall see.

The same could be said about Gary Indiana's *The Shanghai Gesture* which capitalizes on the figure of Fu Manchu rather than making him only one protagonist among many. The novel sets out at Land's End, a sleepy (or, as it turns out, narcoleptic) British shipping town, and like in *The League* (especially its later volumes) its historical time frame is unclear or rather, warped. Indiana's novel has a cast of stock characters stemming from the Fu Manchu universe, although their names are slightly mangled (Dr. Obregon Petrie and Inspector Weymouth Smith figuring as its main protagonists, the latter character merging Rohmer's stock figures Nayland Smith and Superintendent Weymouth) and their characterization is not al together consistent with earlier enactments. Although the novel's temporal setting is vaguely futuristic (at one point Petrie remembers a trip to a place

which "had once been called Pakistan: Obamaland" [40]), much of what happens seems to be steeped in the spirit of the late Empire, which forms the backdrop to Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu novels of the 1910s. Past and future seem to have merged into a sort of continuum here. The novel features a retrofitted world, whose contours are no longer determined by the fascination with the radically new but rather "the new and the very, very used," as Scott Bukatman wrote about Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (21)—another narrative which enacts the future and the past as tightly entangled structures and which is ironically acknowledged in *The Shanghai Gesture* as an "antique" source of inspiration (33).

1980s cyberpunk is mixed up with a rundown 1990s dotcom glamour which then reverberates in the theme of the decline of the British Empire. In line with this associative pattern, Fu Manchu's secret organization is made out as a link between the old days when "traffics in opium, in gunpowder, in counterfeit coin and bogus currency, in pleasure girls and slavery" determined the global underground market, and a current era of illegal trade focusing on "nuclear materials and almost any other valuable and controlled substance you care to name" in conjunction with a flourishing gambling industry (120). In the end, however, the intersections and repercussions between the British Empire and the global corporate world order are shown to be even more profound—Land's End with its population of old world originals turns out to have been fashioned for nostalgic purposes by the new world of Asia: "There is no Land's End [. . .], as we now realize. The village, the brothels, the fallow shipping waterfront, the harbor, the ships: why and how you slipped into the illusion of it I cannot say, but the Council of Those That Know thought it best in their wisdom [. . .] to conjure it from bits and pieces of what remained of the Industrial Revolution" (202). But then, the postmodern Asian present is by no means more substantial than the 'colonial theme park' of Land's End. Both are fantasy sites—blown-up bubbles of a global capitalist system which has long left the parameters of material manifestations and somatic incorporations behind: "Digitized capital flowed through these new jerry-built erections, all of it invisible, numerical, what used to be called 'virtual,' meaning 'virtually nothing,' a shell game played on small fluctuations of stock prices and rapid flow of money based on no tangible productive goods. Money that 'floated free' of any moorings in the reality of products or services" (159).

The economy of corporate capitalism has created a virtual reality that

acts as a forcefield enveloping everything and blotting out the possibility of individual agency—nothing ever stands out as solid and unique in this world. Everything merges, everything is convertible. In view of this horror vision, the disappearance of a criminal master mind does not bring about relief but fear. After all, if there is no Fu Manchu but only a faceless and unidentifiable amorphous system of capital flow, then the very idea of counteraction or resolution becomes futile. Gary Indiana engages with these implications on a predominantly conceptual level—he is mainly interested in the effect of collapsing dichotomies, most notably the merging of distinct subjectivities and oppositional categories. Thus, the dichotomy of active agent and admiring chronicler which is so important for the workings of the early detective fiction is exposed as an arbitrary construction of mutually dependent poles, when Weymouth Smith snarls at Petrie: "There isn't any you, Petrie. There isn't any *I*, either. Not in this day or age, if ever there were. [. . .] Once you've been looped, the you you think is 'you' starts cancelling like a postage stamp" (35).

In many respects, *The Shanghai Gesture* probes the limits of seriality, disclosing a system which has already stretched to its extremes. The material basis of this system, in particular, turns out to have disappeared. There is nothing solid left; the fabrications and machinations of serial fantasy a mere bubble—of economics, but more importantly, of story-telling. It does not really come as a surprise when we learn at the end of the novel that Weymouth Smith and Fu Manchu are one and the same person, and that their existences hinge upon each other, since both are equally obsessed with the dream of individual control and domination where abstract forces have long taken over. The Smith/Fu-nexus is developed in sly reference to one of many side actions in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*—the yellow peril fantasies of a character who dreams of not only becoming Nayland Smith, but also "at the same time, get to be *Fu Manchu!* [. . .] Protagonist and antagonist in one" (278, cf. also Seed, 27). But Indiana focuses on the narrative implications of such a collusion. We may read *The Shanghai Gesture* as a reflection on the fate of both criminals and persecutors in a world order in which individual agency and control are under attack. The cash flows of global capitalism lend themselves to this thought experiment because they are without substance and entirely self-propelled, they take the serial figure up into their folds and render it one of many

other figures, numerical or narrative—replaceable, arbitrary, empty, and serially unfolding.

The Shanghai Gesture ends with an idea of seriality that is circular and self-contained. Random ideas, figures, and events are concatenated in a manner that does not suggest an endless process of variation, but rather a tightly woven arrangement: "everything that occurs, has already occurred. And, will occur again. Somewhat differently, yet forever the same" (203). With this final reorientation—away from open-ended seriality and its logic of spread to the circularity of the loop—*The Shanghai Gesture* disavows the power of change, of accident, of breaks, and the momentum of the serial, whose loops do not always lead back into the system but spiral up to propel the material which they convey inadvertently into new directions or onto new levels of conception or expression. This negativity may have much to do with the serial figure which Gary Indiana takes on: Fu Manchu does seem dated, he has left the limelight of popular storytelling since the 1970s and retreated into the shade.

This retreat may be linked to the embarrassing subject matter of xenophobia and racism. But it may also be connected with the very figurality of Fu Manchu which is hard to activate in a serious manner in an era that foregrounds the villainy of global financial speculations, shady stock market maneuvers, and high risk business ventures. This would, then, also affect the way in which the specter of the yellow peril is being transcribed in our days. At any rate, *The Shanghai Gesture* shows a world in which abstract forces and intangible dynamics have taken over for good. *The Drums of Fu Manchu*, the Rohmer novel of 1939 which I would like discuss in conclusion, is set against the backdrop of the economic and political crises of the 1930s and depicts a world in which the idea of a global order superseding the system of the nation state is just beginning to evolve—as a Utopian possibility and horror vision likewise. One last loop: *The Drums of Fu Manchu*.

3. Machinic Fu Manchu

In *The League*, Fu Manchu's iconic and fantastic quality was emphasized in his first appearance as a cloud formation. In *The Shanghai Gesture*, we are faced with the uneasy insight "that Fu Manchu's schemes for world rule might not be half as malignant as those of our indigenous

politicians and corporate magi, who are indistinguishable" (Indiana 154). In both cases, the representations seem to insinuate that things were different before. Originally, this insinuation goes, Fu Manchu was identified as real and concrete and evil, to be battled by equally real and concrete, though good, counterparts. But the narratives were never as naïve as they now tend to be made out. In fact, the postmodern revisions may lay bare a dimension which is not immediately visible. But it was always necessary for the narratives' working—it has always been there.

Like earlier Fu Manchu narratives, *The Drums of Fu Manchu* (hereafter: *The Drums*) addresses its epistemological uncertainties in terms of narratological demands. Thus, this novel's narrator, the journalist Bart Kerrigan, inadvertently echoes his predecessor Dr. Petrie when complaining about the fast pace of action: "I sat at my desk for some time endeavouring to get my notes in order," he reports late in the novel, "to transfer to paper something of the recent amazing developments in this campaign of the Si-Fan against dictatorship. It was a story hard to believe, harder to tell; yet one that some day must be told, and one worth the telling" (282). But Kerrigan's task is so much harder than Petrie's because he has even less of an overarching perspective than his predecessor. The Fu Manchu novels of the 1930s—and *The Drums* is no exception—work with frequent changes of setting and circumstances. *The Drums* thus starts in London, and then moves to other European sites in quick succession, with Fu Manchu always a step ahead of everyone else.

In keeping with the dominant theme of the series, *The Drums* stresses a sinister goal behind Fu Manchu's omnipresence—the goal of world rule—but here as elsewhere it is unclear what he wants to achieve once his Empire has been established. Power seems to be an end in itself for Fu Manchu. In *The Drums*, Fu Manchu's secret society Si-Fan, which by then encompasses "fully twenty-five per cent of the [earth's] coloured races" (39), enters into a momentous battle against the totalitarian regimes in Europe (in particular the impending takeover of the continent by a German dictator with the ominous name Rudolf Adlon). Fu Manchu is pursuing a noble cause for once, but he does so by sinister means, so that Bart Kerrigan finds himself in a strange position, trying to safe the lives of people who plot for world domination: "in averting Armageddon, by the oddest paradox I was finding myself opposed to the one man who, alone, could save Europe from destruction" (15).

More than ever before, this sequel in the series plays with the ambiguity of the perpetrator/persecutor-scheme. Alongside its narrator Kerrigan, we are getting lost in a tangle of good intentions and bad moves, noble causes and evil schemes which eventually cannot be attributed to any party in a clear-cut manner. Hence eventually a certain geographical dislocation shall be the least of Kerrigan's problems. He is also faced with what could be called experiences of serial discontinuity and media change, which impinge much more dramatically on his sense of disorientation and drifting. At one point, Kerrigan finds himself alone in Nayland Smith's study, idly inspecting the "pictures and photographs which the room contained" (124):

> A fine photograph of a handsome grey-haired man I was able to identify as that of Dr. Petrie, Nayland Smith's old friend who had been associated with him in those early phases of his battle with Fu Manchu, of which I knew so little. Another, a grimly humorous, square-jawed, moustached face, I was unable to place, but I learned later that it represented Superintendent Weymouth, once of the Criminal Investigation Department, but now attached to the Cairo police.
>
> There were others, not so characteristic. And on a small easel on top of a bookcase I came across a water color of an ethereally beautiful woman. Upon it was written:
>
> "To our best and dearest friend from Karamaneh."
>
> I stared out of the window across the embankment to where old Father Thames moved timelessly on. [. . .] For many years, as Nayland Smith had told me, the Thames had been Dr. Fu Manchu's highway. (124-25)

Ironically, Dr. Petrie and Karamaneh, whose images are being called up here, were once caught up in triangular arrangements of love and detection which anticipated the arrangements of the novel at hand—where Kerrigan stands in for Dr. Petrie, while his lover Ardatha replicates the trials of Karamaneh. This repetition of plot structures largely remains unacknowledged but obviously registers here. The effect of a strange conjunction of belatedness (in the Freudian sense of 'Nachträglichkeit') and prospectivity

refers us back to the principle(s) of serial narration. In particular the ideological work of serial narratives relies heavily on similar signals to what 'everybody knows already' and will soon become fully aware of (even though at a closer look these certainties dissolve into mere suspicions and hunches). In *The Drums*, thus, the sense of déjà-vu has become totalized. For large parts of the novel, Kerrigan oscillates between nervous retrospection and anticipation, trying to piece together random bits of information which never really add up.

This sense of lack derives from the fact that the narrator knows less than the implied reader of the story, although his state of knowledge might very well be completely in keeping with many actual readers of the text who are not familiar with the first sequels of the series. This gesture to a narrative universe much larger than the one accessible to the narrator (and many actual readers) is then both repeated and reassuringly suspended in the evocation of the "timeless" panorama of the Thames—which calls to mind Fu Manchu's earlier maneuvers in the city, on watery but at least geographically concrete routes. However, the Fu Manchu of the 1930s has left the Chinatown and London behind and he does no longer depend on steamships or railroads as means of transportation.

In consequence, the momentary sense of timelessness and 'time out' is quickly dissolved—when Fu Manchu suddenly and surprisingly enters the scene. Or rather, enters the screen—since it is on a futuristic "radio set with a television equipment" that he makes his appearance. Earlier, Nayland Smith had explained that he had the piece installed to entertain his assistant Fey, "a pearl above price": "'Haven't much leisure for amusement, my self'" (36). Fu Manchu proceeds to politely ask Kerrigan to turn off the light before he sets out to hypnotize him in standard devil doctor fashion. The visions induced by Fu Manchu seem like an allegory of television's future potential to turn the living-room into the world—they take Kerrigan away from the rooms overlooking the Thames to China, Spain and back to London, now seen from a fantastic bird's eyes perspective. If Kerrigan tries to reassure himself at the outset of the encounter "that this was not the real Dr. Fu Manchu but merely his image" (127), he will soon learn the hard way that there is no difference between image and reality in the times of global media. Fu Manchu takes effect from the screen just like he used to take effect on Dr. Petrie and other narrators in direct physical contact. Kerrigan ends up paralyzed on the floor of the room, in a state of helpless iner-

tia, the parody of a numbed TV spectator flooded with information and in capable to act upon it, "myself already in a state of living death" (133).

Taking up the challenge of media competition which the popular Fu Manchu films of the 1930s posed, *The Drums* ups the ante, pulling the audiovisual media into its literary realm and presenting them in a perfection that was not (yet) to be found in the technical world (within the year, this challenge would be taken up by the audiovisual media in turn, when the film serial *Drums of Fu Manchu* (1940, Republic, 15 episodes) took up the theme of Fu Manchu's mediatization by equipping him and his minions with portable watch-sized cameras to both record and transmit images). The "series of extraordinary visions" (135) of global scope with which Fu Manchu presents Kerrigan calls to mind Benedict Anderson's "logic of the series" by means of which different locations and regions are synchronized through the implementation of a set of 'modular' political concepts and ideals. In both cases we are presented with the semantics of spread. Fu Manchu turns from an actual presence into a machinic 'image' and still (or, rather, more than ever before) manages to enforce his impervious and sinister will to power:

> The eyes regarding me from the screen, although the image was colourless, seemed, aided by memory, to become green . . . Then they merged together and became one contemplative eye. The eye grew enormous—it dominated the picture—it became a green lake—and a remorseless urge impelled me to plunge into its depths. (128)

It is difficult to decide what is really at stake in this scene of alien takeover and mind control: an atavistic criminal drive, a futuristic media ensemble, or the serial recollection ("aided by memory") which fuses one with the other. In any case, in this and other scenes of totalization and abstraction in which Fu Manchu is turning into a perfectly self-contained and self referential image—the image of an eye which watches and is being watched—the myth of the yellow peril spectacularly enters the narrative and is carried to a new level. Fu Manchu's green eyes cannot be 'read' racially, as Tina Yih-Ting Chen has elaborated, they obviously mark him "as a product of racial mixing" (46-47). And while it is intriguing that "despite repeated and closely detailed physical descriptions that are so un-

characteristic of Chinese ancestry," nobody in the Fu Manchu novels "ever sees him as anything other than purely Chinese" (47), it is also remarkable that this pattern of a "refusal to see" in the Fu Manchu novels (48) hinges so closely on the feature of the eye.

The hypnotic eyes epitomize Fu Manchu's uncanny expansive and intrusive force, his capacity to infiltrate other people's minds and take over their willpower. He transgresses (physical, geographical and medial) boundaries not so much by force but by means of a probing insistence—the power of his glance, rather than the impact of a weapon. The fact that his eyes are not racially marked ultimately tinges the very ideology of the yellow peril with a sense of intangibility and recyclability (Wingfield 92-93). This vagueness becomes more notable as Fu Manchu goes televisual. In consequence, the yellow peril is effectively totalized in this narrative universe—neither geographically nor historically nor even racially fixed. The threat is everywhere and nowhere in particular—ghostly in its diffuseness and evanescence. Forging an interface of his robotically brilliant brain and cutting edge technology, Fu Manchu becomes machinic—a man machine, indubitably modeled on the spectacular man-machine mergings showcased by Boris Karloff earlier in the decade in his impersonation of the figure on screen. And more than ever before in a literary enactment Fu Manchu is presented as a serial phenomenon—an iconic image that can be inserted and actualized in ever new settings and scenarios, blending with the tools of its implementation into a hybrid figuration.

In its serial unfolding the figure is turned into a flat image, but this very flatness also renders it disposable in an ideological sense—it is too vague to allow for a final reading and ultimate interpretation. The openness and precariousness of serial narration becomes most obvious in scenic reiterations or figurai reconfigurations, such as when Kerrigan calls up his serial predecessors, looping the narrative and thus inadvertently pointing to the modular quality of its constituent figures and themes—their secondariness to "the furniture, the ornamentation of the sets," as it were. While character constellations and plot lines repeat themselves, the paraphernalia of the narratives—and increasingly minutely described technical apparatuses or machinic constellations—turn out to be of central interest and significance. It is in the enactment of such repercussions or echoes that newness and change enter the narratives. Perhaps this particular dimension and potential of serial narration is most succinctly captured in the episodes' end

ings. I will turn back to the novel preceding *The Drums*, *President Fu Manchu* (1936), to illustrate this openness and its implications by way of a conclusion.

This novel ends like many other Fu Manchu novels, with a dutiful description of his demise, his going down the Niagara Falls, in an ironic imitation of Conan Doyle's attempt to finish off his hero for good: "Dr. Fu Manchu had been caught in the rapids; no human power nor his own superlative genius could prevent his being carried over the great fall" (223). By contrast to Conan Doyle's story, however, this ending was never meant to be an ending, even though Rohmer claimed at the time that he had no idea how to 'rescue' his protagonist from the falls. A much-told anecdote about the solution of the problem capitalizes on the difference between Conan Doyle's and Rohmer's approach to seriality. Conan Doyle reacted to his readers when he resuscitated Sherlock Holmes; Sax Rohmer, the story goes, *relied* on his readers to do the same for Fu Manchu: "[. . .] the story had scarcely appeared in print before a Canadian fan living in that area wrote triumphantly to Sax: 'I know how you are going to save him. It happened to me!' And he went on to give details of his experience" (Van Ash 210). Once more, the fact that Fu Manchu is not written by one man alone is being highlighted rather than downplayed. The figure has gained a life of its own and it has become public property by the 1930s—Sax Rohmer was clever enough to work with this dynamics rather than trying to fight it. The motorboat which carries Fu Manchu into the rapids is still a conventional vehicle, soon he will take recourse to other means of transport. But here as in the later narratives, the logic of spread prevails over the imagery of the circular loop. In *The Shanghai Gesture*, circular self-referentiality and the loops of virtuality mark the ending. The Fu Manchu narratives of the 1930s attest to different topological models. The boat, after all, is about to be propelled into space, revving up the engine once more and thus launching a new thread of a narrative that is far from told out at this point. . .

Notes

1. Here and in the following I draw heavily on the discussions and findings in the research unit "Popular Seriality—Aesthetics and Practice" at the University of Göttingen, funded by the German Research Association (2010-2013), in which I direct a sub-project on serial figures and media change. I owe particularly much to my col-

leagues Shane Denson and Frank Kelleter. My reading of Husserl and of the material logic of seriality is heavily indebted to Shane Denson's argument in his ph.d thesis "Postnaturalism: Frankenstein, Film, and the Anthropotechnical Interface" (Leibniz University of Hannover, 2010).

2. In this paper (as in the larger project from which this paper emanates) I would like to distinguish 'serial figures' from what could be called 'series characters.' The latter denote characters in a closed fictional universe, a serially ongoing narrative (such as a soap opera or serialized novel), while the former term applies to figures which are more loosely connected by means of their status as cultural icons or stereotypes, yet move across media and medial forms (Denson: Mayer, "Grenzgänger). Obviously, Fu Manchu was first a series character (the first volumes of the Fu Manchu narrative are a trilogy, which appeared first serially in the British *The Story-Teller* and in the American *Collier's Magazine*, and then in quick succession as stand-alone books), but he showed tendencies to go 'serial' already at the very beginning of his career, when novels were complicatedly interlinked with short stories around the same character. Once other media and other authors took over, the series character retreated, and the serial figure tore itself loose from the constraints of narrative consecutivity and overarching story logic.

3. Still, Sax Rohmer's representation of his master criminal does change in the course of Fu Manchu's literary career. In the novels of the 1930s, an earlier tone of repulsion is replaced with a tone of grudging admiration. Particularly the phobic descriptions of the villain's exterior, his "face [which was] more utterly repellent" than any other, and his eyes which seem to mirror "an emanation of hell, incarnate in his gaunt, high-shouldered body" (Rohmer, *Return*, 140), shift in the 1930s to descriptions which mark the satanic features as noble rather than hideous, outstanding rather than repellent: "That wonderful face, on which there rested an immutable dignity, seemed to be the face of a younger man" (Rohmer, *The Mask*, 135). In keeping with this realignment, Rohmer starts marking an inherent "greatness" (Rohmer, *Mask*, 187) of the Doctor, who may use unorthodox means but pursues an honorable cause, aiming at the establishment of world freedom. But all of these attempts at a more nuanced tone notwithstanding, the yellow peril theme remains uncontested in Rohmer's writing. If one reads Fu Manchu as a plurimedial serial phenomenon, taking into consideration not only Sax Rohmer's novels but also feature films and film serials, radio programs, and later renditions in comic strips or TV serials, the phobic dimension of the figure's dramatization becomes even more apparent.

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