

Image Power: Seriality, Iconicity and The Mask of Fu Manchu

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For a figure to be 'serial', my defining criteria are that it is flat, immediately recognizable, iconic, and fated to execute a stock repertoire of actions and attitudes in ever changing settings and contexts, against a backdrop of increasingly complex scenarios and devices. More than a narrative character, the serial figure extends outside the diegesis into various forms of public discourse and circulation.

Fu Manchu is just such a serial perpetrator. He entered the world of global entertainment in 1912 and has been active ever since, although he has lost much of his popular appeal in recent decades. The figure was first introduced to the UK by way of Sax Rohmer's serially published novels, which then spawned numerous sequels (both in stand-alone and serialized format) up until 1959.¹ Soon Fu Manchu spread into other media, featuring in radio shows, films, television programmes, comic books and pop music. From the beginning, Rohmer's novels appeared simultaneously in British and US periodicals and then in print editions with different titles, and from the 1930s onward the author acknowledged the power of the American market by anchoring Fu Manchu in a US context. After World War II, Rohmer himself moved permanently to the USA. Fu Manchu's almost instantaneous international popularity suggested omnipresence and evanescence, a phenomenon in constant flux and yet unchanging. Soon thereafter a Chinese malefactor of a particular type did not even need to be named Fu Manchu (and often was not identified by that name due to licensing restrictions) in order to invoke his blueprint: 'Generations will pass', concluded Sax Rohmer's biographer,

¹ For a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon, see Shane Denson and Ruth Mayer, 'Grenzgänger. Serielle Figuren im Medienwechsel', in Frank Kelleter (ed.), *Populäre Serialität. Narration-Evolution-Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jahrhundert* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012), pp. 185–203; Ruth Mayer, 'Machinic Fu Manchu: popular seriality, and the logic of spread', *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol. 43 no. 3 (forthcoming 2013); Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu: The Yellow Peril, Popular Iconicity, and the Logic of Ideological Spread* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, forthcoming 2013).

Cay van Ash, 'before even the most conscientious of authors can write of a Chinese villain without evoking echoes of Fu Manchu'.²

From the beginning, Fu Manchu's career evidenced its serial nature.³ The title of the US edition of Rohmer's second Fu Manchu novel, *The Return of Dr Fu Manchu*, is almost programmatic in this respect; indeed, this could be the title of any Fu Manchu narrative, including the very first volume of the literary series. Almost all these stories, regardless of their format – literary, cinematic or graphical – introduce their protagonist with reference to his earlier serial manifestations, and end with his apparent or imminent death. There is no doubt that 'the world will hear from [him] again' – to use the catchphrase concluding all of the Fu Manchu films starring Christopher Lee in the 1960s. Sherlock Holmes, whose fictional universe clearly provided the model for Fu Manchu's empire, has to be resurrected only once; Fu Manchu, by contrast, displays a zombie-like resilience, a supernatural staying power which merits mentioning only in the first instalments of the literary narrative. Ever after, the fact that Fu Manchu has risen from the dead and is once more up to his old tricks is mostly addressed with a tone of weary resignation. In characteristic fashion, the very first dialogue in the 1940 film serial *Drums of Fu Manchu* takes note of the villain's ineluctable resurgence, presumably to get the issue out of the way: 'Fu Manchu is here, in California', states Dr Petrie, a stock character of the Fu Manchu universe, then adds dutifully, but somewhat distractedly, 'This is incredible'.⁴

Indeed, Fu Manchu seems to have been around throughout the twentieth century – always the same and immediately recognizable. The most often quoted passage from Rohmer's novels is probably the description of Fu Manchu given by the devil doctor's key opponent, Sir Nayland Smith, in the first volume of the series:

Imagine a person, tall, lean and feline, high-shouldered, with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan, a close-shaven skull, and long, magnetic eyes of the true cat-green. Invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources, if you will of a wealthy government. ... Imagine that awful being, and you have a mental picture of Dr Fu-Manchu, the yellow peril incarnate in one man.⁵

'A brow like Shakespeare', a 'close-shaven skull', 'cat-green' eyes and, as we learn later, a 'smooth, hairless countenance' and 'a wicked, hairless face'⁶ – this is not the mental picture which anyone after 1932 would conjure up when thinking of Fu Manchu. After that date, Fu Manchu would always summon an image of Boris Karloff, made up by Cecil Holland to portray the evil Chinaman in *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (Charles Brabin, 1932).⁷ The film fixed the iconic image of Fu Manchu with boldly accentuated eyebrows, dark-rimmed and taped eyes, long fingernails and, most importantly, the kind of moustache still known as a 'Fu Manchu'. Indeed, this is exactly the look sported by Fu Manchu on the cover of the

² Cay van Ash, with Elizabeth Sax Rohmer, *Master of Villainy: a Biography of Sax Rohmer*, ed. Robert E. Briney (London: Tom Stacey, 1972), p. 242. On Fu Manchu's multimedial career, see also Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1999), p. 114; William Wu, *The Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Fiction, 1850–1940* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1982); James L. Hevia, 'The archive state and the fear of pollution: from the opium wars to Fu-Manchu', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 12 no. 2 (1998), pp. 234–64; Tina Yih Ting Chen, 'Dissecting the "devil doctor": stereotype and sensationalism in Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu', in *Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 35–59.

³ On the logic of narrative seriality see, among many other sources, Kelleter (ed.), *Populäre Serialität*; Ruth Mayer, 'Die Logik der Serie: Fu Manchu, Fantômas und die serielle Produktion ideologischen Wissens', in *Pop: Kultur und Kritik*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2012), pp. 136–54; Frank Kelleter, 'Populärkultur und Kanonisierung: Wie(so) erinnern wir uns an Tony Soprano?', in Matthias Freise and Claudia Stockinger (eds), *Wertung und Kanon* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2010), pp. 55–76; Roger Hagedorn, 'Technology and economic exploitation: the serial as a form of narrative presentation', *Wide Angle*, vol. 10, no. 4 (1988), pp. 4–12; Jennifer Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1997); Umberto Eco, 'Interpreting serials', in *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 83–100.

⁴ *Drums of Fu Manchu*, 15 chapters (William Witney and John English, 1940).

⁵ Sax Rohmer, *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu* (1913) (New York: Dover, 1997), p. 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 129

⁷ Hereafter I will refer to this film as *The Mask*.

1990s paperback edition of Rohmer's first novel, regardless of the seminal description of the Chinese evildoer presented within.

In contrast to the effect which many Hollywood adaptations had on their pulp literary blueprints, *The Mask* did not efface Rohmer's writing. Rohmer continued to be a bestselling author in the 1930s and 1940s, and if anything the film contributed to his international literary success. But in iconographic and serial terms, *The Mask* did something to its title figure – and by extension to the 'yellow peril' myth at large – which the literary texts could not take back. In this essay I shall take a closer look at this particularly filmic contribution to the Fu Manchu series, and to the yellow peril theme – and situate it in a larger context of contemporary (cinematic) orientalism. The Orient envisaged in *The Mask* may have much in common with the phenomenon described by Edward Saïd in largely transhistorical terms as 'a theatrical stage affixed to Europe, [displaying] a prodigious cultural repertoire whose individual terms evoke a fabulously rich world: ... settings ... half-imagined, half-known; monsters, devils, heroes, terrors, pleasures, desires'.⁸ But the filmic orientalism of the 1930s and 1940s zoomed in on one particular facet of the larger picture by relying heavily on a fetishistic celebration of the visible and the material. Oriental objects and oriental sights take centre stage in Hollywood's depictions of China in the 1930s, as 'Hollywood's China offers the depression-weary audience the possibility of escape into a distant, opulent, and beautiful world, which is also even more desperately poor and turbulent than the economically ruined United States'.⁹

Rohmer's novels tried to establish an overarching continuity and chronological coherence for the Fu Manchu narrative, but most other media representations of the figure from the 1920s onward abandoned this effort. In comics, films, and film and radio serials revolving around the evil Chinaman's activities all over the world, continuity is deemphasized in favour of different serial principles, such as loops, twists, convolutions and double takes. The tenuous diegetic coherence of the serial figure's narrative universe is counterbalanced at a formal level; coherence is provided by the reiteration of storylines, motifs or character constellations, by means of repetitions and repercussions which often are self-reflexively highlighted.

In the case of Fu Manchu's cinematic representation, these loops create what I call his fetishistic image power: that is, the figure's capacity to establish intense and iconic moments of signification within a narrative, soaring free above narrative plausibility and diegetic framing. These moments serve as exemplary points of reference for serial ramifications which dissolve the frame of the individual narrative. Due to its subject matter and its formal characteristics, the case of Fu Manchu is particularly well suited to an investigation of the mechanisms of seriality; it constitutes, as it were, an exceptionally forceful machine driven by the engine of serial narration.

The Mask, the film which gave a boost to Fu Manchu's visual career after his literary career had already gained its own momentum, will serve

⁸ Edward Saïd, *Orientalism* (1978) (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 63.

⁹ Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the 'Yellow Peril': Race, Sex and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), p. 49. On the larger cinematic context of this interest in oriental objecthood, see Ruth Mayer, 'The glittering machine of modernity: the Chinatown in American silent film', *Modernism/Modernity*, vol. 16, no. 4 (2009), pp. 661–84; Homa King, *Lost in Translation: Orientalism, Cinema and the Enigmatic Signifier* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). See also the contributions of Antonia Lant, Gaylyn Studlar and Marina Heung, in Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar (eds), *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

as my focal point of reference here, but I will turn to the film serial *Drums of Fu Manchu* (1940) towards the end of my essay. This immensely popular serial improvizes freely on *The Mask*, drawing not only on the plotline mapped out almost ten years before, but especially on its fetishistic moments. Riffing on the feature film's suspense management and narrative structure, and on the iconic features of its protagonist, the film serial recharges *Fu Manchu's* image power, spinning another thread in the web of *Fu Manchu* narratives.

The Mask draws on the template of Rohmer's *Fu Manchu* series, but one cannot speak of a literary adaptation, even if *The Mask of Fu Manchu* is also the title of this series' fifth volume. Film and novel are only loosely connected, and while Rohmer's novels are not exactly paragons of careful composition or structural and stylistic refinement, the film's bizarre and perfunctory storyline manages to make Rohmer's writing appear sophisticated and subtle.

The novel appeared in serial form in the year the film was released, and came out as a book only after shooting had started in early August. At first Charles Vidor was to direct the film, and the screenplay adaptation was to be undertaken by Courtenay Terrett. By September, both Vidor and Terrett had been replaced with a new director, Charles Brabin, and with a new set of scriptwriters.¹⁰ The chaotic circumstances of production¹¹ are manifest in the film's slapdash approach to plot plausibility and coherence. Instead of focusing on storytelling, *The Mask* indulges in a spectacular display of ever more intricate technologies of infiltration, torture, exploitation and control, and in the exhibition of opulent costumes and exotic stage sets – in other words, the film prioritizes the ornamental dimension of cinema over narrative function and logic.

In a bizarre mix of references to the plotlines of Rohmer's *Fu Manchu* stories as well as earlier film adaptations (such as the 1923 and 1924 film serials with Henry Agar Lyons in the title role, and the Paramount films of 1930 and 1931 with Warner Oland), *The Mask* narrates the quest for various oriental artefacts by several parties with different objectives. A group of British scientists sets out to find Genghis Khan's grave with its treasure of a mask, a sword and a shield, in order to 'bring these pretty things back to England', as Nayland Smith (Lewis Stone) puts it when attempting to enlist the archaeologist Sir Lionel Barton (Lawrence Grant) to his cause. The expedition's urgency derives from the fact that *Fu Manchu* and his minions are also searching for the artefacts as part of a plan to forge a pan-Asian counter-imperialist movement to bring down the West, to which end *Fu Manchu* uses his sinister skills of hypnosis and mind control throughout the film. The representatives of the British Empire ultimately massacre their Asian antagonists and retrieve the coveted objects. On board ship back to England, however, they decide that the artefacts are too dangerous to be exhibited in the British Museum, as originally planned, and instead throw them into the sea.

Revelling in its depiction of teeming Asian hordes and scenes of oriental depravity and cunning, the film follows closely the familiar

¹⁰ James Steffen, 'The Mask of Fu Manchu', TCM: Turner Classic Movies, 2010, <<http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article/548%7C0/The-Mask-of-Fu-Manchu.html>> accessed 11 September 2012; Lawrence Knapp, 'The Mask', The Page of Fu Manchu, 26 December 2006, <<http://www.njedge.net/~knapp/Mask.htm>> accessed 11 September 2012. Knapp's website on *Fu Manchu* is a meticulous collection of material, relating to the entire universe of the *Fu Manchu* figure.

¹¹ See Scott Allen Nollen, *Boris Karloff: a Critical Account of his Screen, Stage, Radio, Television and Recording Work* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1991), p. 68; Gregory William Mank, 'The Mask of Fu Manchu', in *Hollywood Cauldron: 13 Horror Films from the Genre's Golden Age* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), pp. 53–88, 64–65.

yellow-peril scenarios of the time with an almost hysterical condensation. It is worth noting here that *The Mask* was produced by the MGM subsidiary Cosmopolitan, owned by William Randolph Hearst, whose media empire was principally responsible for keeping the spectre of the yellow peril in constant circulation throughout the USA, advocating rigorous immigration restrictions against Asians.¹² Although *The Mask* was arguably too narratively confused to function as propaganda, the film uses the theme of the depraved Chinese criminal not only to justify its appetite for sex, violence, ornamental excess and decadence, but also to gesture strategically to 'British notions of white supremacy'.¹³ It spins a sinophobic tale about the illicit quest for global expansion in defiance of the British Empire's own expansive thrust.

The theme of territorial expansion lends itself particularly well to the format of serial narration. I would like to approach the formal principles of seriality along the lines of the new formalism, as mapped out by David Palumbo-Liu and others for whom a text's aesthetic and social functions need to be analyzed in close correlation in order to 'account for the longevity or transitoriness of certain agreed upon forms'.¹⁴ In this respect, formal analysis does not deflect from the ideological work of a text or series as it unfolds in the interaction between texts and readers (or audiences), but rather allows for assessment of ideological performance in a systematic way, without losing sight of a narrative's or figure's specificities. Accordingly, I hold Fu Manchu's big project – his quest for world domination – as being intricately interwoven with the modes of representing it: the expansive scope of popular seriality.

In order to map the logic of serial narration, it may be less productive to conceive of patterns of linear unfolding or evolutionary progression than to think of this logic in terms of spatial semantics: serial narratives reach out, take over, invade and impose, they gain ground and claim territory. The concurrence of such terms with the vocabularies of imperialism and nation formation is far from coincidental. Michael Chabon sketches a similar parallelism with respect to the Sherlock Holmes stories, on which the initial Fu Manchu storyline is modelled.¹⁵ Like Sherlock Holmes, Fu Manchu responded – along with Frankenstein's creature, Dracula, Tarzan and other seminal literary creations signalling to these beginnings – to a contemporaneous spirit of expansion by going serial; if they were not conceived as serial figures in the first place, they jumped from medium to medium, adapted, shape-shifted, mutated and yet always stayed recognizably the same.

By the 1930s, the 'anxieties of Empire' had in many respects been replaced by other, more immediate and pressing issues in a world hit by economic depression. The long nineteenth century, which had determined the horizon of the initial Fu Manchu narratives, was over for good. The films and pulp fiction of the 1930s and 1940s thrived on colonial storylines, but unlike Rohmer's trilogy of the 1910s were no longer concerned with 'England's loss of epistemological supremacy'.¹⁶ While the classical colonial novel struggled with the (doomed) effort to

¹² Ian Mugridge, *The View from Xanadu: William Randolph Hearst and United States Foreign Policy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), pp. 46–59. On the particular context of the production of *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, see Karla Rae Fuller, *Hollywood Goes Oriental: CaucAsian Performance in American Film* (Detroit, IL: Wayne State University Press, 2010), pp. 36–40.

¹³ On Hollywood's policy vis-a-vis the representation of colonialism and territories under colonial rule, see Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918–1939* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), pp. 150–51

¹⁴ David Palumbo-Liu, 'The occupation of form: (re)theorizing literary history', *American Literary History*, vol. 20, no. 4 (2008), p. 823; Marjorie Levinson, 'What is new formalism?', *PMLA*, vol. 122, no. 2 (2007), pp. 558–69.

¹⁵ Michael Chabon, 'Fan fictions: on Sherlock Holmes', in *Maps and Legends. Reading and Writing along the Borderlands* (San Francisco, CA: McSweeney's, 2008), p. 49. On narrative and conceptual cross-references in the enactment of these serial figures (particularly Frankenstein's creature and Tarzan, but also Sherlock Holmes) which manifest themselves in the 1932 stylization of Fu Manchu, see Fuller, *Hollywood Goes Oriental*, pp. 36–37; on the seriality of Frankenstein, see Shane Denson, 'Marvel Comics' Frankenstein: a case study in the media of serial figures', *Amerikastudien*, vol. 56, no. 4 (2012), pp. 531–53; on the serial enactment of Tarzan, see Ruth Mayer, 'Monkey business: of ape-men and man-apes', in *Artificial Africas: Colonial Images in the Times of Globalization* (Hanover: UPNE, 2002), pp. 48–75.

¹⁶ Urmila Seshagiri, 'Modernity's (yellow) perils: Dr Fu-Manchu and English race paranoia', *Cultural Critique*, no. 62 (2006), p. 168.

distinguish between periphery and centre, and between the heart of darkness and the enlightened metropolis, and the first Fu Manchu narratives gave 'expression to the cultural anxieties and dislocations that high modernist authors negotiate in better-known or canonical texts',¹⁷ in the 1930s, especially in Hollywood, the pathos of colonialism had become a cliché.

Following in the footsteps of the colonial logic of 'serialization' and its 'assumption that the world was made up of replicable plurals',¹⁸ as Benedict Anderson has suggested, the ideas of the political collective in its global spread continued to be expressed through the semantics of the serial, illustrating 'how basic seriality always is to the modern imagining of collectivity'.¹⁹ To obfuscate the evidence of a 'modular'²⁰ quality to the rhetoric and pathos of the national, nationalist projects of the 1930s increasingly resorted to fetishism, according to Hartmut Böhme. This resulted in what Walter Benjamin called 'an aestheticizing of political life',²¹ a fetishization of the political which again could be described in terms of a serializing move or expansive thrust, as an implementation of 'scenic symbols [which] bewitch, impress, fascinate, attract, or suck in, overwhelm and enchant'.²² Such fetishizing tendencies were evident in the totalitarian systems in Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union, and can also be observed in the USA under Roosevelt.²³ At the outset of the decade, the absorbing and expanding force of fetishism expressed itself in an almost frantic rehearsal of the visible and visual, one specific manifestation of which was the orientalist craze for spectacular objects and bizarre arrangements. The process eventually drained all significance and actuality from the political, rendering it a mere image, an icon; this is precisely what happens to the iconography of the yellow peril in *The Mask*.

The Mask was not the first film based on Rohmer's writing, but it was arguably the most influential. This is partly due to Karloff's iconic performance, but it is also closely connected to the film's emergence during a transitional time in Hollywood's history, the so-called pre-Code phase. *The Mask* appeared just before the implementation of the Motion Pictures Production Code in 1934, but at a time when the Code had been already formulated and agreed upon by the major studio representatives; its impact is looming on the horizon of the film's production. In keeping with the aesthetics of pre-Code Hollywood, the film obsessively forces things and people into ambiguous arrangements, with people figuring as props or ornaments, and objects taking on a considerable degree of agency. It hovers, so to speak, on the brink of an emergent narrative order. In this very momentum, *The Mask* releases 'some of the worst images and impulses, nakedly revealing an America twisted by racism, exposing the fears and desires deliriously with no subtextual subtlety or textured nuances', as Thomas Doherty argues about the period in general.²⁴ In doing so, the film adopts a larger logic of deferral and disavowal, engaging in an aesthetics of melodramatic excess and fetishistic condensation which calls to mind other 'China-films' of the period 'in

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 184.

¹⁹ Benedict Anderson, 'Nationalism, identity and the world-in-motion: on the logics of seriality', in Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (eds), *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 127. See also Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Collectives', in *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume I*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith, ed. Jonathan Rée (London: Verso, 2004), pp. 256–342.

²⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 4.

²¹ Walter Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility: second version', in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 41. See also Hartmut Böhme, *Fetischismus und Kultur: Eine andere Theorie der Moderne* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2006), p. 260.

²² Böhme, *Fetischismus und Kultur*, p. 257 (my translation).

²³ On the analogies in the aesthetics and political modes of communication between fascism, national socialism and the New Deal, see Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Three New Deals: Reflections on Roosevelt's America, Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany, 1933–1939* (London: Picador, 2007).

²⁴ Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood. Sex, Immorality and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930–1934* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 256. Doherty's focus on B-movies and productions aimed at a national market tends to blank out a larger tendency in the Hollywood industry at the time to monitor a film's racial or political overtones in close regard to foreign markets and the sensibilities of foreign nations. See Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood*, pp. 127–57.

which the foreign becomes not only part of [a] film's stylistic virtuosity but part of the ideological working of the film itself', as Gina Marchetti puts it.²⁵

In line with the orientalist vogue of the time, *The Mask* envisions a world infused with the spirit of 'dreams, nightmares, fantasies, and the unconscious'.²⁶ It emphasizes an 'artificial and theatrical quality', epitomized in the starkly exaggerated makeup and fantasy outfits by means of which Caucasian actors are 'Asianized'.²⁷ Acting contributes to this process of stylization, exaggeration and excess, but cinematography and mise-en-scene also play a major part, and point emphatically to a non-narrative level of signification, which affords Fu Manchu his characteristic image power. *The Mask* relies on what John Ellis calls, in another context, 'fetishistic moments', in which 'the fiction is suspended in favour of the pure performance'.²⁸ These moments function as anchoring points for the audience, conveying intuitive and immediate certainties, and thus can be regarded as major tools in the unfolding of the film's ideological work.

Continuity, consecutivity, repeatability, standardization – all of these terms associated with serial production and serial consumption in the industrial age are pivotal to the establishment of the modern Hollywood system, and while they do not necessarily require an implementation of narrative seriality, they often accompany these principles of narration.²⁹

The Mask also addresses the serial character of modernity in its very plot, since it is obsessively concerned with the distinction between the original and the copy, the unique and the reproduced. The film contrasts Asian and British interests: Fu Manchu wants Genghis Khan's artefacts for cultish purposes and believes in their mythical and magical energy. The British, conversely, are driven by historical and scientific interests and aim to exhibit the artefacts in the British Museum. From the beginning, the British project is conceived as a counter-project to Fu Manchu's propagandist scheme. This quest is complicated for all parties by the fact that copies are in circulation and that it is often unclear what is real and what is just a replica. Much is made, in this context, of the power of distinction. Distinction not only implies the skill of telling the authentic from the fake, but also demarcates a right attitude towards things from a wrong one. When Fu Manchu finally gets hold of the coveted objects, he lifts the sword in an enraptured pose that calls to mind the earlier religious reverence that the Chinese workers had shown when Genghis Khan's grave was opened. 'They believe in a bauble like that? Will we ever understand these eastern races? Will we ever learn anything?', muses Nayland Smith at one point.

The British chase the workers away with gunfire, the combination of aesthetic appreciation with the relentless enforcement of power characterizing their approach to the artefacts in general. It is the British party, after all, which puts Genghis Khan's sword to its actual purpose as a deathly weapon by using it to kill Fu Manchu, and earlier in the film the British quest is shown to be far from neutral. The close contiguity of aesthetic and material interests, of the collectors' spirit and the spirit of

²⁵ Marchetti, *Romance and the 'Yellow Peril'*, p. 59. See also Frank Krutnik, 'The Shanghai Gesture: the exotic and the melodrama', *Wide Angle*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1980), pp. 36–42.

²⁶ Fuller, *Hollywood Goes Oriental*, p. 30.

²⁷ On this technique of 'yellowface' representation and its history in US popular culture, see Fuller, *Hollywood Goes Oriental*, and Krystyn R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

²⁸ John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 98.

²⁹ On the particular format of the film serial and its relevance to this serial history of film, see Kalton Lahue, *Continued Next Week: a History of the Moving Picture Serial* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969); Raymond William Stedman, *The Serials: Suspense and Drama by Installment* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977); Rudmer Canjels, *Distributing Silent Film Serials: Local Practices, Changing Forms, Cultural Transformation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011).

exploitation, surfaces repeatedly in the film, never more so than when the archaeologist Von Berg (Jean Hersholt), who takes over as leader of the expedition after Sir Lionel's disappearance, muses in front of Genghis Khan's grave, 'I don't like to mar the beauty of these doors', then quickly pulls himself together: 'But I have my orders, it's got to be done. Now give me the axe.'

This juxtaposition is, of course, part of a long tradition in the history of colonialism, in which the complicity of institutions such as the British Museum in ventures of global exploitation and imperialism has been systematically obfuscated.³⁰ In a similar gesture, the film renders the British quest as legitimate and modern while Fu Manchu's project is marked as criminal and atavistic. Yet it should be stressed that the film is not really concerned with the maintenance or restitution of British imperialism. At a structural level the film's flimsy ideological agenda comes unstuck. Once one focuses on the film's image logic and its reliance on fetishism, the narrative preoccupations with the distinction of original and copy, of uniqueness and reproduction, appear contrived. The Mask does not make use of these distinctions in order to stabilize its ideological value system (of the good westerners versus the corrupt East). Instead the ideology of the yellow peril is most effectively conveyed in those moments when dichotomies give way to an all-encompassing 'spectacular visibility'.

Fu Manchu may embody a premodern and cultish attitude towards the artefact, while Nayland Smith and his allies may represent scientific detachment and aesthetic appreciation, but through their filmic representation both attitudes merge, testifying to what Böhme calls the larger 'paradigms of a media-modernity' which suspend the 'contradictions between modernity and atavism, so that the so-called atavistic, that is, image-fetishism, turns out to be a structural part of modernity'.³¹ Benjamin famously traced this effect in his reflections on the impact of mechanical reproduction on the work of art; it is important to note that he associates the collapse of a cultish and an aesthetic approach to the work of art with the anaesthetizing of the political and with a fetishizing move, the merging of subjects and objects into a fetishistic assemblage:

If the actor thus becomes a prop, the prop, in its turn, not infrequently functions as actor. At any rate, it is not unusual for films to allocate a role to a prop. ... From here it is but a step to Pudovkin's principle, which states that 'to connect the performance of an actor with an object, and to build that performance around the object ... is always one of the most powerful methods of cinematic construction'.³²

The Mask seems to have taken this to heart, since the film's mise-en-scene, lighting and cinematography revolve around props or objects with agency status. The film systematically defies the modes of detached appreciation and rational apperception which the plot extols. The strategy of affording agency to props and objects is particularly pertinent in The

³⁰ See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 178–85; Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1989); Annie E. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).

³¹ Böhme, *Fetischismus and Kultur*, p. 479 (my translation).

³² Benjamin, 'The work of art', p. 47, n. 22.

Mask's enactment of electricity as a force which links all material substances.

The Mask was not unique in its functionalization and aestheticization of electricity. James Whale's *Frankenstein* in particular can be seen as a prototype here – it was released by Universal Studios in 1931, a year before *The Mask*, featuring Karloff in the role of the monster and thus generating the very star status which made MGM 'borrow' him the following year. *Frankenstein* is quoted several times in *The Mask* – most obviously when Fu Manchu conducts a perverse experiment on a hapless victim on an operating table, and later when the victim has become one of Fu Manchu's mind-controlled creatures and appears in silhouette against a semi-transparent screen with an awkward lumbering walk. Most importantly the two films are linked by the involvement of special effects wizard Kenneth Strickfaden, whose designs were first used in *Frankenstein* and then in the laboratory scenes in *The Mask*.³³ The visual references to the earlier film release the crosscurrents by which people and things are fused in *The Mask*, although this film is not, at least not in the immediate sense of *Frankenstein*, a film about monstrosity and animation.

In *The Mask*, the Tesla coil which was used in *Frankenstein* to enact the animation of a dead body is employed to distinguish the real from the fake. In two scenes laid out in parallel fashion, Fu Manchu subjects first a fake and then the real sword of Genghis Khan to the power of the electric current. While one sword goes up in flames and the other endures the shock of the electricity, what both scenes show is that the film really could not care less about distinguishing the authentic from the fake, as long as it broadcasts its central protagonist's fetishistic image power (figure 1). At the level of the image, what counts is effect and not essence. A sword going up in flames is at least as impressive as one that withstands the force of the electric current, especially if it is put to the test by a diabolical experimenter who uses the overlong nail of his index finger to conduct the current to the object under scrutiny.

Both scenes flaunt what in the Fu Manchu novels is time and again addressed as a 'force' or 'nervous energy ... emanat[ing] from Dr. Fu Manchu', 'vibrat[ing] with an intensity which was uncanny'³⁴ – his image power. In view of the filmic Fu Manchu's performance in front of Tesla coil, spark wheel or Van de Graaff generator, not only is the matter of authenticity or fakery in question, but the distinction between science and cult is suspended, with Fu Manchu in his ornate robes, in his sophisticated laboratory, figuring as the ultimate scientist–magician, or actor–conjurer.

The Mask's narrative and aesthetic enactment of electricity calls to mind a diagnosis of cinematic aesthetics which was formulated six years prior to the film's release, in reference to a different mode of film production. In 1926, Siegfried Kracauer captured the fetishistic and electrifying implications of the amalgamation of things and people in his description of a movie set at the Ufa film studios in Babelsberg near Berlin:

³³ Harry Goldman, Kenneth Strickfaden: *Dr Frankenstein's Electrician* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005), p. 57.

³⁴ Rohmer, *The Mask*, p. 135.



Fig. 1. Subjecting the swords to the electric current, in *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (Charles Brabin, 1932).

[In the Babelsberg studios] [t]he world's elements are produced on the spot in immense laboratories. ... Certain preparatory measures are necessary in order to integrate things and people. If both remained in their traditional state, they would stand apart like rare museum pieces and their spectators. Light – whose source is the huge electric power plant [Elektrozentrale] providing the energy for the entire undertaking – melts them together. The actors are groomed in the makeup room. This is not a workroom like any other but a studio full of skilled artistry. The physiognomies formed here from the raw material of the human face reveal their secrets only under the beams of the spotlights. The masters of their discipline preside over makeup tables filled with cosmetics of every shade. A chart shows the degree of luminosity that the colors attain when photographed; but when subsequently forced into the black-and-white scale, their color values vanish. This makes the preparatory stage all the more seductive – the degenerate garishness of the wigs in glass cases. Portrait-like masks hang on the walls, fireproof creations that are custom-made for the main actors of whatever film is currently being produced. In certain scenes, these make it unnecessary for the actor to appear in person: other actors transform themselves into the stars by wearing their masks. These disguised figures are stiff and move about like the dead.³⁵

In Kracauer's Marxist reading of cinema's fetishism, the effect of reification, which forms a constitutive element of the filmic machinery, is seen as largely negative even if imbued with fascination. Actors' bodies become fetishes, while objects gain the semblance of life through a complex process of fusion enforced by means of the 'electric power plant' – which in the German original is called more aptly *Elektrozentrale*

³⁵ Siegfried Kracauer, 'Calico world: the UFA city in Neubabelsberg', in Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins (eds), *The Object Reader* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 329.

suggesting a form of centralized 'electro-management' aimed at the realignment of the fragmented experience in the modern world. The intangible electric process of fusion is concretized in the cinematic employment of makeup and masquerade. The 'deathlike' masks undergo a process of animation on the screen, facilitated by the cinematic alchemy of lighting:

Instead of leaving the world in its fragmented state, one reconstitutes a world out of these pieces. The objects that have been liberated from the larger context are now reinserted into it, their isolation effaced and their grimace smoothed over. Out of graves not meant to be taken seriously, these objects wake to an illusion of life.³⁶

Electricity and masquerade in their alternately reifying and animating power can also be identified as a major engine of the cinematic machines on the other side of the Atlantic. Indeed, Babelsberg's capacities could only rarely compete with Hollywood in terms of producing overwhelming effects and spectacular sensations which draw the attention without necessarily disrupting spectatorial immersion. In *The Mask*, just as in other pre-Code films and in horror films of the period more particularly, such effects abound, and hinge upon the fact that electricity and makeup are implemented at both extradiegetic and intradiegetic levels. Fu Manchu's image power conforms with this material manifestation of the power plant, suggesting a force emanating from the 'generator' of the figure which then enters intricate circuits and lines of transmission. The power of the *Elektrozentrale* is a major factor in the complex and much praised lighting techniques of *The Mask*, but also figures prominently at plot level, as we have seen, demonstrating Fu Manchu's breathtaking expertise as a scientist-engineer. At the same time, the mask is an important element of the film's plot (though by no means as important as the film's title may suggest), and it figures most centrally as a means of filmic iconization – 'making up' Fu Manchu as we have known him since.

In *Frankenstein*, the power of the *Elektrozentrale*, especially the power of the Tesla coil which charges the film's central animation scene, has rightfully been associated with the power of filmmaking itself. Dr Frankenstein's operating theatre resembles a cinema in its arrangement of 'audience' and 'performers': the Tesla coil's flickering light and the presentation of the monstrous body, according to Marc Redfield, contribute to the impression of 'a primal scene readable as cinema's own',³⁷ and thus end up exposing 'Frankenstein's fantasy ... as a particularly cinematic fantasy', as Shane Denson concludes.³⁸ Likewise each of the 'sword scenes' in *The Mask* is laid out in a series of alternating shots and counter-shots between Fu Manchu's act and a group of bystanders who, illuminated and captured by the Tesla beam's flickering glow, resemble awestruck moviegoers.

People and objects in this film enter into ornamental arrangements that are openly fetishistic. These scenes are predicated on longstanding clichés of Chinese perversion, impassivity and aloofness. What all of these

³⁶ Ibid., p. 229.

³⁷ Marc Redfield, 'Frankenstein's cinematic dream', *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*, 2003, <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/frankenstein/redfield/redfield.html>> accessed 11 September 2012.

³⁸ Shane Denson, 'Postnaturalism: Frankenstein, film and the anthropotechnical interface' (Dissertation: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Universität Hannover, 2010), p. 64.

moments have in common is that they involve a suspension of action, a zooming-in which chimes with the 'at once dreamlike and photorealistic qualities' which Robert Spadoni, in reference to Tom Gunning, ascribes to the medium of film, and to horror films of the 1930s in particular.³⁹ This pattern can also be noted in central scenes of the film which are set outside the laboratory: repeatedly, in order to highlight a scene's importance, its pace is slowed down, so that even high-speed plotlines (such as the rescue action on behalf of Von Berg towards the end of the film) are represented through melodramatic tableaux.

These strategies of suspense management were well known in silent cinema (particularly in silent film serials), which were heavily indebted to the stage melodrama.⁴⁰ In *The Mask*, the technique of slowing down narrative pace and freeze-framing also paradoxically emphasizes the particular serial character of the film's narration. This comes to the fore in exemplary fashion during the first encounter in the film between Nayland Smith and Fu Manchu. The opponents come across each other in caves underneath Fu Manchu's haunt, Nayland Smith having tricked his way in. As he is exploring the caves, pistol in hand, stepping gingerly over alligators and other reptiles, Fu Manchu appears behind his back. While the viewer's focus is on Nayland Smith on the screen's right, one is alerted to Fu Manchu's presence first by the sound of his voice ('The slightest move will send a bullet crashing through your stiff British spine'), as his figure emerges out of the dark on the left, to then constitute the frame's new focus – spotlighted, as so often, from below. The scene is static, yet fraught with tension, emphasizing arrangement rather than action. Like other climactic scenes in the film, it suggests Fu Manchu's omnipresence and staying power, marking him as someone who fades in and out of situations rather than being substantially affected by them. He seems to have always already been there, and his appearances are linked to the very modes and modalities of filmic representation.

The film's self-referential dynamics is not only related to its central figure, Fu Manchu, but closely connected to all scenes of interaction and fetishistic display. While Rohmer's novels are about communicating speed – the first volume invokes a 'breathless scurry ... characteriz[ing] [the] happenings'⁴¹ – *The Mask* is about creating intensities: image power. The static medium-long shots of constellations of control and subjugation or arrangements of bodies and props alternate regularly with closeups indicating raw feeling: lust, horror, disgust, glee. Thus the film consists of a series of cliffhangers, loosely strung together, with its ending offering only a tenuous resolution to the last-but-one scene in which Fu Manchu has been killed. This penultimate scene, which constitutes the film's final climax, points, for every viewer who is even vaguely familiar with the Fu Manchu narrative, towards its own suspension by the inevitable sequel. Apart from suggesting a serial existence stretching beyond the boundaries of the individual film, Fu Manchu's appearance (and his disappearance at the end of the film) exemplify what Spadoni calls the 'ghostliness of film': a presence not only in a film, but of film.⁴²

³⁹ Robert Spadoni, *Uncanny Bodies: the Coming of Sound Film and the Origins of the Horror Genre* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), p. 5.

⁴⁰ See Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and its Contexts* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2001). See also Frank Kelleter and Ruth Mayer, 'The melodramatic mode revisited: an introduction', in Frank Kelleter, Barbara Krah and Ruth Mayer (eds), *Melodrama! The Mode of Excess from Early America to Hollywood* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2007), pp. 7–18.

⁴¹ Sax Rohmer, *The Insidious Fu-Manchu: Being a Somewhat Detailed Account of the Amazing Adventures of Nayland Smith in his Trailing of the Sinister Chinaman* (1913) (New York, NY: Dover, 1997), p. 192. On the novelistic devices of fast-paced narration and Rohmer's incessant and breathless narrative self-reflection, see Karen Kingsbury, 'Yellow peril, dark hero: Fu Manchu and the "gothic bedevilment" of racist intent', in Ruth Bienstock Anolik and Douglas L. Howard (eds), *The Gothic Other: Racial and Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), pp. 104–19, 111–12.

⁴² Spadoni, *Uncanny Bodies*, p. 5.

The Mask is not a film about monstrosity in the immediate sense. Fu Manchu is not a being suspended between life and death like Dracula in Tod Browning's eponymous 1931 film, nor is he a manmade monster like Frankenstein's creature. Nevertheless, the film has been persistently classified as a horror film (in 2006 it was included in the Legends of Hollywood Horror Collection by Warner Home Video), and this classification makes sense in view of the film's self-reflexive demarcations of its own 'ghostly' nature and the 'uncanny' conflation of people and things it engages in. The film's gestures of alternating reification and animation call to mind Freud's definition of the 'uncanny' in 1919 in terms of an epistemological uncertainty about the status of 'things, persons, impressions, events and situations':

[In his study of the 'uncanny', Ernst] Jentsch has taken as a very good instance 'doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate'; and he refers in this connection to the impression made by waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata.⁴³

Spadoni takes this passage in Freud's seminal essay as a point of departure for his analysis of the classical horror film.⁴⁴ Like the films discussed by Spadoni, *The Mask* revolves around grotesque and incongruous arrangements, odd encounters and perverse configurations, and it is centrally concerned with a figure which is unreadable because of its liminal status between person and abstract force. 'We're fighting a thing we can't understand, with everything against us', Nayland Smith alerts his British peers in the standard diction of the horror genre at the beginning of *The Mask*. Reification and animation determine *The Mask* on many levels, but the film's correspondences with Freud's assessment manifest themselves most glaringly in the enactment of Fu Manchu as an automaton, a masked machine-man. This impression is conveyed in Karloff's styling by makeup artist Cecil Holland. After several hours in makeup, the actor's face was almost as spectacularly transformed as it was in *Frankenstein*, becoming something that sits between individual and archetype, between personal features and stylized mask. Holland's makeup totalized the effects of earlier filmic enactments of Fu Manchu, pulling into high relief the attributes of the downward-curving moustache, sharply angled eyebrows and slanted eyes which were already part of Warner Oland's filmic impersonation of the figure between 1929 and 1931. But Holland made this look iconic, drawing out the moustache and giving it a more chiselled look, straightening the eyebrows into bold lines, accentuating the eyes with dramatic makeup and framing Karloff's face with a close-fitting skullcap. The effect is of a face like a mask – theatrical, abstract, alien (figure 2).

The actor's dramatic makeup and his orientalist styling in ornate gowns and cloaks call to mind the features of the famous 'Chess Turk' (figure 3), the orientalist automaton designed by Wolfgang von Kempelen in the eighteenth century, which constitutes (via Ernst Jentsch) an important

⁴³ Sigmund Freud, 'The uncanny', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XVII, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953), p. 226.

⁴⁴ Spadoni, *Uncanny Bodies*, p. 6.



Fig. 2. Makeup designer Cecil Holland's iconic look, in *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (Charles Brabin, 1932).

point of reference for Freud's reflections on the uncanny. Like the automaton, Karloff's Fu Manchu appears static (he moves smoothly, but is mostly seen sitting or standing) and the figure's 'automatic' connotations are further highlighted through his unfathomable demeanour (Karloff's diabolical grin enhances rather than mitigates the impression of an utter lack of compassion or empathy) and his cool and calculated reasoning.

In view of the early literary representations of Fu Manchu, the figure's unreadability has been rightly ascribed to his 'precarious visibility': 'Fu Manchu's otherness often finds expression in the series of exotic weapons and mysterious assassins he deploys against the British', writes Rebecca Wingfield about Rohmer's trilogy from the 1910s.⁴⁵ In these novels, the master villain himself enters the scene of action late, and the most spectacular episodes in his literary evolution often show him taking effect on the sly, from behind the scenes. Where he personally and physically engages with others, he often does so in a masked way, disguised by false beards, costumes, accents and poses.⁴⁶

In *The Mask*, on the other hand, Karloff's 'spectacular visibility' is utterly present and utterly self-contained. A long prehistory of Fu Manchu's machinations is alluded to at the film's plot level, yet this does not really have any significance on the action. The figure itself seems ready-made, flat, ahistorical – iconic in its immediate accessibility and readability. The mechanisms, apparatuses and props which obfuscate, mask and double for Rohmer's Fu Manchu merge with the body of the filmic Fu Manchu, as exemplified so effectively in his face-mask.

The figure is first introduced visually in the film in a shot that throws its grotesque automated or robotic dimensions into high relief. Fu Manchu hovers on the right hand of the screen, his face reflected in a 'nebularium'

⁴⁵ Rebecca Wingfield, 'Gazing on Fu-Manchu: obscurity and imperial crisis in the work of Sax Rohmer', *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2008), p. 86.

⁴⁶ See *ibid.*; Seshagiri, 'Modernity's (yellow) perils'; Ruth Mayer, "'The greatest novelty of the age": Fu-Manchu, Chinatown, and the Global City', in Vanessa Künnemann and Ruth Mayer (eds), *Chinatowns in a Transnational World: Myths and Realities of an Urban Phenomenon* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), pp. 116–34.



Fig. 3. The eighteenth-century orientalist automaton, the 'Chess Turk'.

– a huge concave mirror which produces a large and bizarrely distorted impression of his face on the screen's left. 'Sounds of crackling electricity from his experiments'⁴⁷ add to the scene's uncanny effect. The villain is engaged in a chemical experiment, whose setup reflects back on the experimenter's face, so that instead of his eyes we see a glaring bar of light – an electro-beam which spectacularly points to the figure's artificial and machinic (in the Deleuzian sense) Asianness in line with what has been described as techno-orientalism (figure 4).⁴⁸ Fu Manchu downs a bubbling concoction from a test tube and breaks into what will become his trademark grin. This scene is devoid of any plot function; it serves solely to establish Fu Manchu's uncanny status as a fiendish uber-Asian, located somewhere between man and monster, between modernity and magic. From the very beginning we are presented with a type or emblem rather than an individual, and in this respect Fu Manchu's filmic enactment corresponds with the effect that Roland Barthes captured when describing the 'mythical' face of Greta Garbo:

the make-up has the snowy thickness of a mask: it is not a painted face, but one set in plaster, protected by the surface of the colour, not by its lineaments. ... In spite of its extreme beauty, this face, not drawn but sculpted in something smooth and friable, that is, at once perfect and ephemeral, comes to resemble the flour-white complexion of Charlie Chaplin, the dark vegetation of his eyes, his totem-like countenance.⁴⁹

Both Garbo and Chaplin interest Barthes because of their sculptural, masklike screen appearances, their 'face-object[s]'.⁵⁰ Their enactment contrasts strongly with the effect of a later, 'individualized' star 'of an almost unique specification of the face', such as Audrey Hepburn.⁵¹ Like the stars of silent cinema, Karloff's Fu Manchu (and his monster figures in *Frankenstein*, *The Mask* and *The Mummy* [1932]) invokes the aura of the

⁴⁷ Fuller, *Hollywood Goes Oriental*, p. 33.

⁴⁸ See David Morley and Kevin Robins, *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries* (London: Routledge, 1995); Stephen Hong Sohn, 'Introduction: Alien/Asian: imagining the racialized future', *Melus*, vol. 33, no. 4 (2008), pp. 5–22.

⁴⁹ Roland Barthes, 'The Face of Garbo', in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 56.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.



Fig. 4. The electro-beam points to the figure's artificial and machinic Asianness, in *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (Charles Brabin, 1932).

archetype in the Barthesian sense. But whereas stars such as Garbo and Chaplin maintain the illusion of a unique and unchanging substance, paradoxically conveyed through glamorous inaccessibility and surface perfection ('[he] has created the mask of himself', wrote Gilbert Seldes of Charlie Chaplin in 1924⁵²), Karloff's iconic status derived from the impression that he was capable of disappearing completely behind the grotesque or monstrous creatures he impersonated. In keeping with the peculiar parameters of the horror genre and its stylization of its very own stars, Karloff does not manifest a stable screen persona through the layers of makeup. Instead, he epitomizes the awareness that the screen persona is a mere screen, a surface on which ever-changing masks of iconic perfection could be projected.

In this respect *The Mask* is exemplary of the horror genre, reflecting its oscillation between the exaggerations and stark contrasts of its expressionist origins and the later cinematic valorization of realistic detachment and nuanced representation. Karloff's performance in *The Mask* and elsewhere marks the survival of what Barthes has termed an 'older' aesthetics of the archetype in the era of the individualized star. In contrast to 'Garbo' or 'Charlie/the Tramp', there is no iconic 'Karloff', there are only the iconic figures which he embodied. In the case of Frankenstein's creature and Fu Manchu, this embodiment became the point of departure for endless iterations of the serial figures' iconic features in other interpretations or impersonations. In the further development of the Hollywood system, these iconic figures allow for the illusion of normality, individuality and lifelikeness of other characters on screen. At the same time they signal to the fact that features and devices of a filmic tradition may go underground, but that they are always ready to be excavated or to emerge on their own in the very midst of the 'new'.⁵³ Iconic figures function like masks which draw our attention to the practice

⁵² Gilbert Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts* (New York, NY: Dover, 2001), p. 43.

⁵³ On this argument, see Denson, 'Postnaturalism', pp. 36–51; Spadoni, *Uncanny Bodies*, pp. 93–120; Frank Kelleter, 'Toto, I think we're in Oz again (and again and again): remakes and popular seriality', in Kathleen Looock and Constantine Verevis (eds), *Remake/Remodel: Film Remakes, Adaptations and Fan Productions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 19–44.

of acting and the spectacle of enactment; not necessarily bringing about disillusionment, but rather – at least in the case of Fu Manchu – instantiating the reiteration or confirmation of ideological certainties.

Seen in this way, the 'mask' in the title of MGM's Fu Manchu film may relate to the film's star and his makeup as much as to the object addressed at plot level. This would relate to Kracauer's insight that the makeup department in the studio serves as a site of standardization that suspends the difference between filmic makeup and mask (two terms which in German are rendered synonymously as *Maske*). On the grounds of this standardization others may 'transform themselves into the stars by wearing their masks',⁵⁴ something which happens in the film when Kenneth Strickfaden stands in as a stunt double for Karloff in the dangerous scenes involving electricity, and at the level of serial expansion when countless later impersonations of the villain draw upon the spectacular visibility devised by Holland by invoking 'Karloff's Fu Manchu'. Fu Manchu's masklike makeup may well be what the film's title calls up in the first place, since in terms of its topicality the film should have been more appropriately called *The Sword of Fu Manchu*. It is true that Fu Manchu and the British are trying to locate Genghis Khan's sword and his mask, but the sword undoubtedly features in the most spectacular scenes of the film and is repeatedly referred to as the symbol of Genghis Khan's empire. The mask, by contrast, figures as a point of reference for aficionados of the film, since it evokes cross-media associations: the cover of *Collier's* magazine on 7 May 1932, announcing the first instalment of Rohmer's homonymous novel,⁵⁵ displayed the same golden half-mask which was later worn by Fu Manchu in the film. The cover was produced by the famous illustrator and maskmaker W. T. Benda, who also designed the material object which served as a prop in the film. While on *Collier's* cover the mask is held by a beautiful woman whose face is also masked, so that a double obfuscation is being performed, in the film the mask is used to emphasize Fu Manchu's fetishistic image power. It does not function as a means of disguise but highlights the idiosyncrasy and exoticism of the madeup face, accentuating rather than hiding the sculpted moustache. Karloff wears the mask in the climactic scene in which Fu Manchu is killed, and the conspicuous object raises extradiegetic associations with the figure's independent serial life – the fact that Fu Manchu was there before the film and that he will live on, regardless of what we have seen.

In contrast to his literary predecessor, the filmic Fu Manchu of 1932 refrains almost completely from masquerade and make-believe at plot level. He is always himself – indeed unmistakably so – but the film is transitional in this respect, too. Once Fu Manchu's spectacular visibility has been successfully established, serial variations can set in. In this respect, the career of the serial figure in its alternation between iconization and variation resembles the workings of cultural stereotyping. A structural affinity links serial figures and stereotypes. Both 'are constantly redefined in order to serve their function', and as Homa King writes of

⁵⁴ Kracauer, 'Calico world', p. 329.

⁵⁵ See Knapp, *The Page of Fu Manchu*, <<http://www.njedge.net/~knapp/FuFrames.htm>>, particularly 'The Mask'

stereotyping, the serial figure derives its effect from the 'degree to which it lends itself to this constant refashioning', its capacity to constitute 'a theme for endless variation'.⁵⁶ Yet, what tends to be unacknowledged in the workings of stereotyping is flaunted in the unfolding of serial narration.

This can be illustrated by means of the 1940s serial *Drums of Fu Manchu*, which echoes the 1932 film in many respects. The serial's Fu Manchu, Henry Brandon, visually resembles Karloff's earlier incarnation, although the latter's skullcap has been replaced with a shaven skull. In this new version, the master villain's most dangerous ambition is the implementation of robotic synchronicity. This evil scheme is personified and enacted by an army of 'dacoits', lobotomized minions who carry the sign of their streamlining on their forehead: a scar indicating the surgery they have undergone. In the last but one episode of the serial ('Satan's Surgeon'), Fu Manchu tries to subject even Nayland Smith to this kind of operation.

In Episode 6 ('Death Dials'), another project of bodysnatching is being pursued. Fu Manchu resorts to the work of an 'eminent plastic artist' in order to 'borrow' his opponent Allan Parker's (Robert Kellard) face 'for a while'. The episode dwells at length on the process of mask-making in its analogies to identity theft, when the craftsman is shown measuring Parker's face by means which curiously call to mind the craniometrical techniques of identification that were much discussed in the USA earlier in the century.⁵⁷ The scene ends with Parker's face perfectly replicated and 'worn' by Fu Manchu. Brandon's high-pitched voice emphasizes the continuity 'behind' the mask as he confronts his 'original' in an encounter which highlights the serial's up-to-date special effects. Before he dons the mask of his opponent's face, Fu Manchu's bald head is briefly lined up against the blurred silhouette of three of his zombie 'dacoits' – all of them equally bald and impassive – Fu Manchu figuring as the template for their copies (figure 5). Later, an oddly unmotivated closeup focuses on the lined-up dacoits, two of them characteristically unperturbed and motionless but the middle one squinting uneasily to the side, as if this display of serialized takeover was remarkable even for the personification of a copy.

The use of devices of masking and masquerade in this serial by no means constitutes a return to the early novels' aesthetics of Fu Manchu's 'precarious visibility'. The theme of masking at the plot level relies on the spectacular display of the mask and the makeup artistry, which emphasizes the iconicity of the masked perpetrator. This iconicity, which may be understood as a sort of hypermasking, dissolves the ties between Fu Manchu, the serial figure, and any particular actor or film. The iconic figure becomes disposable (or 'modular'), one could almost imagine one of the 'dacoits' taking over, once their automated functions have been fine-tuned a bit further.

Both the fictitious maskmaker's accomplishment in *Drums* and Benda's mask worn by Karloff at the end of *The Mask* curiously highlight

⁵⁶ King, *Lost in Translation*, p. 8.

⁵⁷ On these techniques and their cultural significance, especially with respect to Chinese immigration in the USA, see Ruth Mayer, 'Paper citizens and biometrical identification: immigration, nationality, and belonging in Chinese America during the exclusion era', in Vanessa Künemann and Ruth Mayer (eds), *Trans-Pacific Interactions: the United States and China, 1880–1950* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 85–104; Simon A. Cole, *Suspect Identities: a History of Fingerprinting and Criminal Identification* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).



Fig. 5. Fu Manchu as template for the zombie dacoits, in *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (Charles Brabin, 1932).

and distract from the other masks worn by Brandon and Karloff respectively – their ‘yellowface’. Tom Gunning speculates that the popularity of the cinematic practice of ‘yellowface’, which led to the casting of predominantly Caucasian actors in Asian parts in the 1930s and 1940s, might not only be read as displacement but also as a perhaps unconscious gesture to broader concerns with authenticity and disguise in the culture of the day: ‘One wonders if perhaps the popularity of the Oriental detective, almost always played by Caucasian actors ... partly comes from the acknowledged relation between the detective character and the art of disguise’.⁵⁸ From this vantage point, the popular Asian types of the Chinese detective and the Chinese supervillain are flipsides of the same coin, with Fu Manchu presenting not so much a counter-figure to Asian screen detectives such as Charlie Chan and Mr Moto, but rather their inverted mirror image.⁵⁹

In all these cases, whether detective stories or supervillain narratives, ethnicity constitutes a theme. For Fu Manchu, his skills at make-believe and masquerade are explicitly associated with his Chineseness – the ‘Asiatic element’⁶⁰ which the Fu Manchu novels routinely mark out as the principle behind the uniform, robotic, serialized pan-Asian conspiracy around Fu Manchu.⁶¹ In the films, Asianness is expressed through figures like the dacoits – faceless, standardized, mass produced, but invariably ‘Asian’. The semantic and visual repertory of racism and supremacism is firmly in place in both the novels and the films. But at the same time, the world and the people on display in these narratives are crude caricatures, fantastic concoctions, evidently made up. Substituting for realistic representation, the films revolve around Fu Manchu’s ‘image power’, taking the intensity of the filmic mode itself as their subject matter. This

⁵⁸ Tom Gunning, ‘Foreword’, in Fuller, *Hollywood Goes Oriental*, p. xii. See also Moon, *Yellowface*.

⁵⁹ See John R. Williams, ‘The Chinese parrot. Techné-pop culture and the oriental detective film’, *Modernism/Modernity*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2011), pp. 95–124.

⁶⁰ Rohmer, *The Drums*, p. 102.

⁶¹ On the explicit or tacit association of the Chinese and Chineseness with the practices of copying, imitation, replication and fraud, see John Kuo Wei Tchen, ‘New York after Chinatown: Canal Street and the “New World Order”’, in Vanessa Künemann and Ruth Mayer (eds), *Chinatowns in a Transnational World: Myths and Realities of an Urban Phenomenon* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), pp. 26–44.

intensity is crystallized in the attribute and aesthetics of the mask, the representation of a being both personalized and generic, spectacularly visible and immediately accessible, recognizable and instantly replicable, modular and serial. These days, Fu Manchu films' exaggerated, 'camp' aesthetics is often taken as an indication of their ideological harmlessness;⁶² they seem to be too far out in their exaggerated representations of the yellow-peril theme to work. I do think, however, that originally these narratives did work at the ideological level, and that they worked because of the intensity of their ascriptions and fetishistic condensations rather than in spite of it. But this very intensity does allow for different readings of the material. Thanks to its open-ended format, serial narration is especially good at enticing us to refocus and to speculate about possible narrative alternatives, digressions and variations, seducing us to lose ourselves in the very parts or moments of a story which 'have nothing to do with it'.

This self-propelling dynamic of the serial is best illustrated in the rearrangement of fetishism between *The Mask and Drums*. *The Mask* ends with a scene showing the disposal of Genghis Khan's sword in the sea. The last episode of *Drums*, 'Revolt!', which is set 'at the foothills of the Himalayas', also culminates in the battle for an object, in this case Genghis Khan's sceptre. But now the fetishistic appeal of the object is associated more exclusively with its mediated image; its materiality is largely irrelevant to plot logic and enactment. Fu Manchu rallies support from the local tribes by using the searchlights of a car to project a giant image of the sceptre in the night sky. This strategy almost works, until Nayland Smith and Parker destroy the projector.

Just as the iconic features of Fu Manchu gained an autonomous existence between 1932 and 1939, so too did the fetishistic objects. Now their mediated character needs no longer be obfuscated; the fascinating force of the means of projection, the *Elektrozentrale*, and of the projected image take centre stage, not the actual object. Nobody seems to care too much about what happens to the original sceptre once the projector, with its power to launch serialized representations, has been destroyed.

The destruction of the projector on screen may be successful, but the cinematic and serial image machine, which produces and disseminates iconic images the world over, continues to spin off its projections. In *The Mask*, Fu Manchu had to die. In *Drums*, he is allowed to live on, and gets the film's last scene, foreshadowing a sequel which ironically was never produced. This last cliffhanger captures the very workings of popular seriality, its ceaseless alternation between fetishistic condensation and variation, its unpredictability and self-momentum. It never ends.

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⁶² On this argumentative pattern, see also Kingsbury, 'Yellow peril, dark hero', p. 113.