Modernity management:

1920s cinema, mass culture and the film serial

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The 1920s were an era of pervasive cinematic solidification in the USA. The period saw the consolidation of the Hollywood studio system into integrated conglomerates, the emergence of the blockbuster, the transformation of film theatres and nickelodeons into spectacular movie palaces, the mushrooming of the star system and the industrialization of the very process of filmmaking. As the movies became big business, films became goods that were serially churned out by a factory employing a mix of highly specialized personnel, unskilled labourers and sophisticated machinery, and were then distributed throughout the country via an intricate network of exhibition and exploitation. Alongside these economic and material changes, a process of formal refinement honed the conventions of continuity editing and the formation of distinct genres.[1]

This, at least, is one way to tell the (hi)story of American film, and it has been told with all sorts of inflections – as a story of the relentless perfecting and maturing of an ingenious narrative and formal style (mapped by film narratologists such as David Bordwell), or as the story of the capitalist cooptation of a burgeoning art form by a remorseless culture industry (evoked by Frankfurt School critical theory). As different as these evaluations of the historical development may be, however, all of the accounts read the impact of processes of standardization and serialization on modern film in terms of an increasing professionalization and systemic sophistication. This registers most particularly in filmic

[1] See David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960 (New York, NY: Routledge, 1985), and Robert Sklar, Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1994).

gestures of measured cinematic self-reflection, well-crafted realistic representation and audience immersion that characterize the melodramatic feature film as the centrepiece of contemporaneous cinematic production. Although film historians such as Richard Maltby have rightly argued that the transformation of the feature film towards the classical model is far less consistent than the reference to a particular Hollywood 'style' might suggest,[2] production notes, handbooks and the writings of the trade press still indicate that the format of the feature film was neither arbitrary nor uncalculated.

Ironically it is the most serialized of filmic forms of the period – the film serial – that offers an alternative perspective on the standardized cinematic core operations of the 1920s. The serial of the 1920s is the melodramatic feature film's other: cheap, fast, sprawling and messy. In this respect it resembles other 'small' formats of the day, such as the slapstick film or the newsreel. There is self-reflection at work in the serials, too, but it is definitely not measured, while their ambitions to achieve realism and immersion are perfunctory, to put it mildly. By the 1920s the serials had already been around for a decade. They developed their own narrative traditions, cinematic language, formulae and icons, their own set of stars and genre conventions; and the practices, venues and circuits of serial production and reception were by now firmly established alongside the feature film industry.[3] Serials were shown as part of variety programmes as well as before the evening features, especially in smaller venues. They typically contained between twelve
and twenty two-reel episodes connected by means of action cliffhangers, with one episode starting immediately where the previous one left off, repeating the cliffhanger at the outset. While the film serials of the 1920s were no less popular than their predecessors of the 1910s, and drew upon the serial memory of that decade, they also developed stylistic, narrative and formal characteristics that distinguished them from earlier techniques of storytelling in the film serial and from the contemporaneous feature film.[4]

Although the serial-queen melodramas of the 1910s and the sound serial thrill-rides of the 1930s have both been subject to serious research,[5] the development of the format in the 1920s has attracted little scholarly attention other than occasional references to the survival of the serial-queen genre into the early 1920s.[6] Indeed the examples produced after World War I, such as The Trail of the Octopus (Duke Worne, 1919), A Woman in Grey (James Vincent, 1920), The Hope Diamond Mystery (Stuart Paton, 1921), The Power God (Francis Ford and Ben F. Wilson, 1925) or Officer 444 (Francis Ford, 1926), retained successful elements of form and story from their precursors, while employing them for new purposes and experimenting with entertainment formats and modes of address that would gain preeminence in the sound era. The 1920s were a decade marked by the establishment of the major players of the Hollywood studio system. The big studios aimed for vertical integration, extending their reach beyond the mere production of

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[2] Richard Maltby, Hollywood Cinema, 2nd edn (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003). See also Miriam Hansen, 'The mass production of the senses: classical cinema as vernacular modernism', Modernism/modernity, vol. 6, no. 2
(1999), pp. 59–77, and Ben Singer, Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2001).

[3] For a detailed account on film serials of the 1910s, see Singer, Melodrama and Modernity, and Shelley Stamp, Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). For exhibition and distribution practices, see Rudmer Canjels, Distributing Silent Film Serials: Local Practices, Changing Forms, Cultural Transformation (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), and Marina Dahlquist (ed.), Exporting Perilous Pauline: Pearl White and the Serial Film Craze (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

[4] Ben Singer, 'Feature films, variety programs, and the crisis of the small exhibitor', in Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp (eds), American Cinema's Transitional Era (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press,
2004), pp. 76–102; Rob King, The Fun Factory: The Keystone Film Company and the Emergence of Mass Culture (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2008); Rob King, 'The art of diddling: slapstick, science and antimodernism in the films of Charley Bowers', in Daniel Goldmark and Charlie Keil (eds), Funny Pictures: Animation and Comedy in Studio-Era Hollywood (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 191–210; Ilka Brasch, 'Narrative, technology, and the operational aesthetic in film serials of the 1910s', Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht, vol. 47, nos 1/2 (2014), pp. 11–24; Hilde D'haeyere, 'Slapstick on slapstick: Mack Sennett's metamovies revisit the Keystone film', Film History, vol. 26, no. 2 (2014), pp. 82–111; Ruth Mayer, 'Early/post-cinema: the short form, 1900/2000', in Shane Denson and Julia Leyda (eds), Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film (Falmer: Reframe Books, 2016 [online]), <http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/post-cinema/5-2-mayer/>accessed 9 July 2016.

[5] Work on sound serials includes: Guy Barefoot, 'Who watched that masked man? Hollywood's serial audiences in the 1930s', Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, vol. 31, no. 2 (2011), pp. 167–90; Scott Higgins, Matinee Melodrama: Playing
With Formula in the Sound Serial (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016); Phyll Smith, '"Poisoning their daydreams": American serial cinema, moral panic and the British children's cinema movement', Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht, vol. 47, nos 1/2 (2014), pp. 39–54.

[6] Shelley Stamp, Movie-Struck Girls, and Singer, Melodrama and Modernity.

films towards the control of distribution and exhibition venues. Mergers such as Famous Players-Lasky, Warner Bros.-First National and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer brought about a further contraction of power and capital in an already tightly controlled market.[7] In consequence, the pressures increased on both independent exhibitors and independent producers to join major studios and corporations. This was not an option in the exclusively independent film serial business, however, since none of the big studios produced serials.[8] As a result, serials were not screened in the prestigious movie palaces but in independent neighbourhood theatres, and their producers were forced to work with much smaller budgets. Nevertheless, the production of film serials hardly decreased in the 1920s. Companies like Pathe´ and Universal, which specialized in film serials, doubled the number they produced each year: 'By early 1926', writes Rafael Vela, 'Pathe estimated that its chapterplays were booked in forty percent of American theaters.'[9] The conditions of production, release and screening affected the circumstances of reception for the film serials, which easily fitted into the flow of a weekly routine. Serials could be watched in neighbourhood theatres without the high ticket price and 'special event' character of a grander venue. To a greater extent than the feature film, the serial was part of the weekly schedule – one module among others such as work, commuting or sleep. Its narrative and formal patterns seem to reflect this integrative function, as we shall show. The serial needs to be seen as a part of the similarly modular system of cinema programming. By the 1920s the American film industry had expanded into a complicated network of segments, markets, formats and niches.

The film serial had evolved into a hybrid form, which was at odds with the prevalent conditions of filmmaking and the dominant grammar of the cinematic language. It offered alternatives to the very principles of cinematic meaning-making as they were laid out by the big studios, and it accordingly failed to be integrated into their production and exhibition routines.

Straddling the conditions of the long and the short,[10] the film serial drew upon modes of both contraction and expansion, using spectacular effects and long-winded narration, thrills, melodrama and slapstick. It was thus no less involved with the 'invention of modern life' and its management than the feature film of the period,[11] though it steered a different course in its endeavour to navigate modernity. Whereas the feature film tends to seek the big picture and aims to effect identification, orientation and organization, the serial pursues a different aesthetic, skipping across the surface and diving into spectacular effects, presenting an assortment of perspectives, modalities and vantage points all as potential entries into the narrative. The serial revels in the aesthetics of options, as it were. It manages contingency by arranging a recurring selection of narrative, formal or generic modules according to an operating logic that differs radically from the feature film's aesthetics of narrative closure. The serial engages in a practice similar to the one Tom Gunning ascribed to early twentieth-century 'actualities' or street scenes, which

[7] Sklar, Movie-Made America, pp. 146–48.

[8] The only company producing serials that did eventually integrate was Universal, which is also the only studio from the early days of serial filmmaking that continued to produce serials after the sound transition.

[9] Rafael Vela, 'With the parents' consent: film serials, consumerism and the creation of the youth audience, 1913–1938' (Dissertation: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2000), pp. 162, 210, 221–22.

[10] The trade press of the 1920s identified serials as short subjects because their individual episodes usually lasted no longer than twenty minutes, although the combined length of a serial's ten to fifteen two-reel instalments exceeded the length of many features. For evidence that film serials were considered part of short film production, see, for example, 'Serial heads Pathe releases', Motion Picture News, 5 December 1925, no. 2679, which states that 'Pathe promises a number of interesting subjects on its short feature release schedule for the week of Dec. 6th'.

[11] Miriam Hansen, Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (eds), Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1995); Hansen, 'The mass production of the senses'; Singer, Melodrama and Modernity; Maltby, Hollywood Cinema. Mark Garrett Cooper shows how the stardom of the serial queens of the 1910s served to manage heterogeneous groups of fans, in 'Pearl White and Grace Cunard: the serial queen's volatile present', in Jennifer Bean (ed.), Flickers of Desire: Movie Stars of the 1910s (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 2011), pp. 174–95. See also Jennifer Bean, 'Technologies of early stardom and the extraordinary body', Camera Obscura, vol. 16, no. 3 (2001), pp. 9–58.

'moved from scientifically controlled recording to aesthetic contingency',[12] filming a variety of action in the street for repeated viewing rather than focusing a spectator's attention on a particular set of actions within the frame. It adapts this visual display of contingency to a narrative charting of options, thus offering a storytelling approach that differs radically from the one familiar to 'the classically constructed spectator'.[13] By foregrounding this operational logic, serials moreover demonstrate to their audiences how modernity's increasingly manifold options can be managed, as they urge viewers to continuously reconfigure their understanding of the story. A close engagement with the film serial's cinematic form will help us to identify this largely forgotten facet of the complicated arrangement of American cinematic modernity.

Gertrude Stein highlighted the collation of modern film, seriality and mass production when she proclaimed retrospectively in 1934: 'I cannot repeat this too often any one is of one's period and this our period was undoubtedly the period of the cinema and series production'.[14] In this revision the film serial seems to become the default mode of cinematic production in the first half of the twentieth century. Of course Stein's statement takes a much wider view of the cinematic output of her time, as her reference to 'series production' gestures to the professionalization and industrialization of the cinematic venture at large. By the 1920s the film industry in general was thoroughly 'up-to-date with Fordist-Taylorist methods of industrial production and mass consumption', as Miriam Hansen points out.[15]

The principles and procedures of serialization shaped the history of modernity on many counts. Serialization impacted on the modes and mechanisms of industrial production, distribution and dissemination of wares and knowledge. From the realms of labour, commerce and management, the techniques and tropes of serialization spread out to inform the ways in which entertainment and leisure were conceived, designed and practised. Serial forms affected the entirety of the modern experience, serving as seminal tools of interlinkage and mediation between work and leisure, the public and the private, the global and the local.[16] The history of industrial and social serialization runs parallel to reflections on the optimization of labour processes, the maximization of profits and the efficient coordination of resources, people and technologies into complex 'machines' of production and distribution. Society is conceptualized as a complex circuit of humans and machines, interconnected through institutional and technological structures that facilitate a continuous fine-tuning of transmission processes. Both production and consumption figure as serial processes in this nexus. They intersect in never-ending feedback loops of supply and demand that are progressively rendered more structured and functional so that they can be executed and utilized by as many diverse agents as possible.[17]

Processes of serialization are instrumental in forging the very idea of mass culture and the masses (as opposed to the 'people' or the 'public' and in close contiguity with the concept of the 'crowd'). There is

[12] Tom Gunning, 'From the kaleidoscope to the X-Ray: urban spectatorship, Poe, Benjamin and Traffic in Souls (1913)', Wide Angle, vol. 19, no. 4 (1997), p. 35.
[13] Ibid., p. 36.
[14] Qtd in Susan McCabe, '"Delight in dislocation": the cinematic modernism of Stein, Chaplin and Man Ray', Modernism/modernity, vol. 8, no. 3 (2001), p. 429; see also Hansen, 'The mass production of the senses'.
[15] Hansen, 'The mass production of the senses', pp. 64–65; see also Jonathan Crary, Suspension of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), and Mary Anne Doane, The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
[16] Frank Kelleter, 'Populäre Serialität: Eine Einführung', in Kelleter (ed.) Populäre Serialität: Narration – Evolution – Distinktion (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012), pp. 11–48; Ruth Mayer, Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2014); Felix Brinker, 'On the political economy of the contemporary (superhero) blockbuster series', in Denson and Leyda (eds), Post-Cinema.
[17] John M. Jordan, Machine Age Ideology: Social Engineering and American Liberalism, 1911–1939 (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Thomas Etzemüller (ed.), Die Ordnung der Moderne: Social Engineering im 20. Jahrhundert (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009); Kerstin Brückweh, Dirk Schumann, Richard L. Wetzell et al. (eds), Engineering Society: The Role of the Human and Social Sciences in Modern Societies, 1880–1980 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Ruth Mayer, '"Never twice the same": Fantomas' early seriality', Modernism/modernity, vol. 23, no. 2 (2016), pp. 341–64.

something physical and concrete to the mass, especially in the representations of the early twentieth century: masses are felt and experienced, they are made up of breathing, smelling, feeling bodies in contact. In their interaction and enmeshment, these entities are more than the sum of the individual presences constituting them: the mass is surplus, excess, sprawl.[18] The implication of super-abundance played a vital role at the outset of the twentieth century in the discourses of statistics, criminology, urban planning and organizational psychology, all of which are concerned with efforts to chart, assess, survey and control large numbers – most notably large numbers of people. The technical media of registration, computing and recording are eminently relevant in this context – and photography and film in particular are deeply significant to discussions concerning mass surveillance and industrialization.[19]

But films enter this nexus of serialization and mass address as more than just tools to facilitate the operations of social management; they also take active part in affecting these discourses and shaping the techniques of mass management. While only a few major Hollywood films of the period openly address and thematize the serialized and serializing procedures of American modernity, many of them draw upon formal structures of serialization, repetition and iteration, and operate on the grounds of an aesthetics of mass address and the mass ornament.[20] The depiction of mass society, mass production and mass entertainment in the feature films of the 1920s is often heavily informed by contemporaneous apprehensions: films like Greed (Erich von Stroheim, 1924), It (Clarence Badger, 1926), The Crowd (King Vidor, 1928), Lonesome (Paul Fejos, 1928), The Docks of New York (Josef von Sternberg, 1928), Street Angel (Frank Borzage, 1928) and many more present modern America as an assortment of apparatuses and institutions that rein in the individual who struggles against the pull of the mass. These films make out the big challenge of modernity to be a problem of being seen, of 'recognition' in spite of the overarching forces of economic and social standardization that do not allow for personal deviation and specificity. This individual visibility, however, must not stand in the way of the overall system.

One film that captures these dynamics exemplarily, and that has been often discussed as a succinct engagement of Hollywood with modernity, is King Vidor's The Crowd. Employing 'patterns of seriality [which] are not limited to spatial simultaneity, but also take the form of temporal repetition',[21] the film ascribes large assemblies of people with an industrializing and serializing quality that shaves off individual differences while accentuating a 'machine' aesthetic of concerted, large-scale agency and synchronized action. At the same time The Crowd forges the idea of a (cinematic) audience that is markedly not a mass: a mindful, sophisticated, engaged 'public' rather than a messy, physical, emotional 'crowd'.[22] This ideal cinematic 'public' is not represented in the film, where mass audiences and mass-cultural entertainment of a non-cinematic character tend to be seen negatively (as when the 'Tunnel of Love' on Coney Island produces courting couples through a mechanism

[18] Michael Gamper, Masse lesen, Masse schreiben. Eine Diskurs- und Imaginationsgeschichte der Menschenmenge 1765–1930 (München: Fink, 2007); Sabine Hake, Topographies of Class: Modern Architecture and Mass Society in Weimar Berlin (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008); Michael Makropoulos, Theorie der Massenkultur (München: Fink, 2008).

[19] Allan Sekula, 'The body and the archive', October, no. 39 (1986), pp. 3–64; John Torpey, The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Peter Becker, 'The standardized gaze: the standardization of the search warrant in nineteenth-century Germany', in Jane Caplan and John Torpey (eds), Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 139–63; Stefan Rieger, Die Individualität der Medien: Eine Geschichte der Wissenschaften vom Menschen (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001); Nicolas Pethes, Spektakuläre Experimente: Allianzen zwischen Massenmedien und Sozialpsychologie im 20. Jahrhundert (Weimar: Vdg, 2004); Shane Denson, 'Between technology and art: functions of film in transitional-era cinema', in Daniel Martin Feige, Tilmann Köppe and Gesa zur Nieden (eds), Funktionen von Kunst (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 127–42; Lee Grieveson, 'The work of film in the age of Fordist mechanization', Cinema Journal, vol. 51, no. 3 (2012), pp. 25–51.

[20] Siegfried Kracauer, 'The mass ornament', in Weimar Essays, ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), <http://monoskop.org/images/0/0f/Kracauer_Siegfried_The_Mass_Ornament_Weimar_Essays.pdf>accessed 9 July 2016; Tom Gunning, 'Tracing the individual body: photography, detectives, early cinema and the body of modernity', in Charney and Schwartz (eds), Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life, pp. 15–45; Hansen, 'The mass production of the senses'; Miriam Hansen, Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2011); Singer, Melodrama and Modernity; Angela Dalle Vacche, 'Movies, social conformity and imminent traumas', in Lucy Fisher (ed.), American Cinema of the 1920s: Themes and Variations (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), pp. 211–33; Michael Tratner, Crowd Scenes: Movies and Mass Politics (Bronx: Fordham, 2009).

[21] Miriam Hansen, 'Ambivalences of the "mass ornament": King Vidor's The Crowd', Qui Parle, vol. 5, no. 2 (1992), p. 104.

[22] In the sense of Gabriel Tarde, as delineated in Michael Gamper, 'Massenkultur: Ein interatlantisches Projekt', in Georg Gerber, Robert Leucht and Karl Wagner (eds), Transatlantische Verwerfungen – Transatlantische Verdichtungen: Kulturtransfer in Literatur und Wissenschaft, 1945–1989 (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012), pp. 323–47, 331–32; Hansen, Babel and Babylon, pp. 60–89; Hansen, Cinema and Experience; Mayer, '"Never twice the same"'.

that calls to mind an assembly line; or when the Vaudeville audience at the end of the film appears like a mindless robotic machine). The film's critical perspective on modernity and mass culture 'reveals itself only to the spectator: there is no indication of any understanding, recognition and self-awareness on the part of the character', as Hansen surmises.[23] This stark narrative disjunction between spectator and character may be unique, but The Crowd's strategy of distinguishing between a 'mass' in the film and a 'public' in the theatre is in keeping with a larger aesthetic of the day.

While equally as involved in the depiction of masses and the fashioning of audiences as the feature film, serials disclose a different agenda for the cinematic imagination and carve out different ideas of cinema's social role, charting alternative modes of managing modernity. This difference comes to the fore most notably in strategies of audience address and in moments of medial self-reflection, as we shall demonstrate in our reading of a film serial from 1926, Officer 444.

Directed by Francis Ford and starring Neva Gerber and Ben Wilson, Officer 444 is a film serial, but in some ways is also part of a series that originated in 1917, when Wilson and Gerber had first appeared together in the serial The Voice on the Wire (Stuart Paton, 1917). In the following decade the two actors contracted a loyal fan base and produced six more 'Wilson/Gerber' serials, culminating with Officer 444 in 1926.[24] The latter's format and plot is typical of the action-oriented detective serial genre, and draws heavily on a pattern exploited by the earlier Wilson/Gerber productions. It also shares with these and other serials of the day the two-reel length, the combination of character introductions and story recaps in each episode's beginning, the mid-episode climaxes and the cliffhanger endings, as well as narrative conventions such as the masked villain, the genius inventor, the mysterious scientist, the brilliant criminologist, spectacular technologies, exotic femmes fatales, and complicated plots and conspiracies. In Officer 444 the quest for a secret formula is the device that propels the action. The serial proceeds through a fusion of crime plot, police procedural and comedy, taking up cinematic conventions – particularly those of the film serials and shorts of the previous decade – in ever-changing combinations and constellations. Although a similar operating logic is at work in most serials of the decade, Officer 444 epitomizes this modular organization in its own – counterintuitive – insistence on efficiency and its unusually straightforward incorporation of slapstick elements.

Officer 444, played by Ben Wilson, is part of the 'Flying Squadron', a special motorized force of policemen who rush off to a crime site in every episode, piled high in a convertible car. The shots of the high-speed police operations, as well as later frames of the Flying Squadron in their headquarters, are near-direct reenactments of scenes from the popular Keystone Kop shorts, which the audience would remember from the previous decade. But whereas the latter highlighted the grotesque inefficiency of its policemen, the frame narrative of Officer 444 insists on

[23] Hansen, 'Ambivalences of the "mass ornament"', p. 111.

[24] Wilson's career corresponds with wide stretches of the early film serial's development. He had acted in film serials as early as 1913, when he appeared in Who Will Marry Mary?, the sequel to what is considered the first American film serial, What Happened to Mary (1912). One of the first sound serials, The Voice from the Sky (1930), was also Wilson's final serial. For many of his serials he also acted as producer.

their professionalism, even though its plot gives little evidence thereof. They are time and again, and seemingly without irony, praised as the efficient 'machinery' of the Berkeley Chief of Police August Vollmer, who played himself in cameo appearances in the serial. At the time Vollmer was known throughout the USA for his relentless commitment to the idea of 'scientific policing' and his implementation of a professional police force dubbed the 'college cops'.[25]

By referencing Keystone's comedies of the previous decade, Officer 444 draws on earlier modes of cinematic entertainment in addition to a narrative that does not necessarily harmonize or integrate with this subtext. Instead the serial places its Keystone references and the discourse of police efficiency side by side in rather blunt juxtaposition. While 1920s feature films like The Crowd, It or Lonesome take care to distance themselves (albeit often in nostalgic fashion) from putatively inappropriate earlier or parallel forms of mass entertainment, characterizing them as elements of a bygone and surpassed media ecology,[26] the serial pulls in and piles up its references, regardless of continuity or compatibility. In particular, analogies to the successful traditions of vaudeville and slapstick are planted abundantly, as is underscored by the fact that 'Officer 444' appears to have been the name of a vaudeville sketch in the previous decade,[27] and also a character who appears in the 1912 Essanay comedy A Mistaken Calling.[28] Such references to earlier stage or screen representations are mostly lost on later audiences, but for viewers in the 1920s they must still have worked well.

In addition, the serial's narrative itself seems heavily indebted to past traditions of storytelling. On the grounds of a mere plot summary one could gain the impression that Officer 444 seamlessly (and shamelessly) continues in the tradition of the previous decade's successful serials. A closer look, however, reveals a complicated and layered pattern of serial meaning-making rather than mere repetition or imitation. Like the vaudeville references, the plot conventions, formulae and stereotypes offer an entry into the serial's story that can, but need not, be taken, and they are not necessarily in unison with the serial's larger plot logic. This dynamics of divergence becomes particularly pertinent in the depiction of group activities and scenes of mass action.

The explicit and much-stated concern of Officer 444 is the documentation of modern-day policework, especially with regard to new methods of surveillance and the monitoring of large groups of people. Its programmatic self-fashioning as a representation of cutting-edge investigative methods and technologies is reinforced by the cameo appearances from Vollmer, who is routinely introduced by title cards emphasizing his credentials in social engineering and his 'real-life' celebrity status. Vollmer is depicted in a series of poses and scenes that show him in conversation with leading officers, at his desk or on the phone, emphasizing his position at the very hub of the police machine. In the first six episodes of the serial, title cards invoke the work of the police in

[25] Qtd in Simon A. Cole, Suspect Identities: History of Fingerprinting and Criminal Identification (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 200.
[26] Hansen, 'Ambivalences of the "mass ornament"', p. 112.
[27] Variety lists 'Officer 444' on the vaudeville bill at Cohen's in Poughkeepsie, NY, in the week commencing 4 January 1915. It is also mentioned in Variety in April 1918.
[28] According to a summary of A Mistaken Calling from Moving Picture World, vol. 14, no. 3 (1912), p. 254.

terms of a smoothly running mechanism or well-oiled 'machinery in full swing'. This agenda also informs the presentation of the protagonist: although Officer 444 is initially introduced as the classic rugged individualist, after he is seen saving a small child and a gangster from a burning building, against the advice of the fire service, he quickly loses his prominence and singularity. His proper name – Robert Preston Brownley, 'called "Uncle Bob" by the children in the street' – is mentioned only once; from then on the character is identified exclusively by his badge number.[29] '444' is a figure in a larger system, a cog in the police machine.

This numerical manner of identification concurs with the serial's visual aesthetic, which is increasingly determined by the large number of extras used, particularly for a film serial. Both the police and the villains are represented as masses, and their actions seem intuitive, physical and reactive rather than carefully calculated, as older conventions of detective narration would have demanded. Replacing the processes of deduction with physical action was already a strategy of the 1910s serial, but at that point the serial heroes were still criminologists and detectives – investigators whose profession at least affected to stand in the tradition of the self-reliant genius exemplified by Sherlock Holmes.[30] In Officer 444 most action is group action. Explicitly, at least, the serial wholeheartedly endorses an agenda of social engineering, in which successful policework is portrayed as structured, synchronized and coordinated.

The serial thus seems to function as a promotional campaign for Vollmer's concept of 'scientific policing', realized through standardized training and the integration of advanced technologies of transportation, communication and surveillance. Vollmer introduced completely mobile patrols along the lines of the Flying Squadron to the Berkeley police force in the 1910s, and also established a police signal system, a 'bureau of criminal records', a scientific forensic laboratory and the department's first lie detector.[31] Officer 444 depicts all of these devices and emphasizes their efficiency, although their particular modus operandi remains as obscure as their actual value to the investigative process. Throughout the serial, in fact, the plot runs counter to the narrative agenda and the putative cause of narration.

This inconsistency becomes particularly evident in scenes that unfold principles of large-scale coordination, cooperation and surveillance on both sides of the law. In Episode 5, 'Missing', for instance, the Flying Squadron sets out to chart the criminal activities in Chinatown. One officer monitors the streets from atop a power pole, communicating through knocking signals and a telephonic contraption. The entire scene revolves around aspects of observation, visibility, exposure and communication. In a self-reflexive move, the camera appears as the most prominent surveillance mechanism here, granting the audience alternating views of an observing policeman and an observing crook, each hiding from the other.

Yet this camera operation does not include the kind of panoramic wide shot or tracking shot that would enable a sense of the setting's spatial layout. Instead the audience is alerted only gradually to the scene's

[29] Officer 444 (Francis Ford, 1926), Episode 1, 'The Flying Squadron'.

[30] Brasch, 'Narrative, technology and the operational aesthetic', and Ruth Mayer, 'In the nick of time? Detective film serials, temporality, and contingency management, 1919–1926', in The Velvet Light Trap (forthcoming, 2017).

[31] Gene Carte, 'Introduction', in August Vollmer: Pioneer in Police Professionalism. Oral History Transcript and Related Material, 1972–1983, Volume II (Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, 1983), <https://archive.org/details/augustvollmer02vollrich> accessed 16 June 2016.

multiple zones of action and areas of supervision, prodded along by the camera to ever-new perspectives. The impression of a diffuse and multifocal manner of presentation becomes especially pertinent when one compares the visual aesthetic of the serial to feature films of the period, where the camera regularly exhibits its superiority as a means of observation, charting and giving the 'grand view'.[32] In films like Sunrise (F. W. Murnau, 1927), The Crowd, Hotel Imperial (Mauritz Stiller, 1927) or Noah's Ark (Michael Curtiz, 1928), the camera is tracking and traveling in a manner impossible for the human body, suggesting a power of vision that is characterized as markedly cinematic.

Officer 444's mass scenarios, by contrast, are neither monumental, orchestrated nor ornamental but instead chaotic, convoluted and messy. This certainly has something to do with the low-budget production conditions of the serials – there was no money for large or lavish sets and the time constraints during production prohibited the use of complicated cinematography or intricate effects. The film serial stays almost invariably at ground level and makes ample use of point of view, favouring medium shots and closeups over long-distance perspectives. As a consequence, Officer 444's action seems to stand in contradiction to the title cards' continual insistence that this serial is about the efficiency, professionalism and organization of Vollmer's police apparatus. In its marked discrepancy between text and image the film serial of the 1920s comes into its own, launching a unique and characteristic form of seriality.

Contrary to its self-proclaimed agenda, Officer 444 fails to implement structure and order. This affects the police as much as the perpetrators: clever stratagems regularly fall apart or drop out of sight, plans fail, intentions collide. In Episode 4, 'Gassed', for instance, we witness Officer 444 twice attempting to pass as one of the villains. On both occasions he is unmasked and his effort comes to nothing. This failure can be extrapolated to the serial's performance of investigative work, which is never successful. Each episode's action follows a set pattern: the police receive a tip-off; the Flying Squadron responds by setting off at top speed; seconds later everyone is involved in a fist-fight. Policework ostensibly amounts to nothing more than taking part in increasingly messy mass brawls, in which officers and villains eliminate each other by the dozen. While every fight results in the arrest of long lines of nameless and faceless henchmen, who are sent off in a police van or put directly in jail, these arrests do not feed into the serial memory and the number of gangsters never seems to diminish. If the fights at times recall an industrial aesthetics of efficiency, they also characterize this efficiency as entirely self-serving. It does not have an objective other than going on and on, ad infinitum.

The serial's insistence on showing the police machinery 'in full swing' is significant in ways that are not immediately manifest: the serial's plot is perpetually in mid-action and firmly in the present. Whatever happens in the serial happens right here and right now; there are no flashbacks or flashforwards, there is no recollection and no anticipation. Officer 444

[32] Kristin Thompson, 'The formulation of the classical style, 1908–28', in Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson (eds), The Classical Hollywood Cinema, p. 228.

does not aim to craft an intricately folded ornamental construction but rather launches a forceful flow. Its main and avowed narrative goal may be the identification of the master criminal, the divestment of his corrupt cartel, the retrieval of the genius scientist's secret chemical formula, or – more immediately and simply – to finally allow 444 the opportunity to kiss Nurse Gloria (played by Gerber). The presentist approach to the wording on the title cards, however, highlights that the serial's trajectory is more important than its objective: the incentive to watch derives only indirectly from the anticipated moment of gratificatory resolution, but most definitely from the momentum of the action 'in full swing'.

The tension between the serial's narrative and visuals – its insistence on investigative efficiency as opposed to its chaotic and disruptive performance – reflects the fact that serial narration in general is anything but efficient. After all, the appeal of the serial form does not lie in its capacity to reach the end as quickly as possible but rather in the resourcefulness and dexterity with which the final episode is held at bay.[33] Officer 444 unfolds in the multilayered simultaneity of parallel editing that is typical of the silent film serial.[34] By contrast, the iterations and repetitions of the feature film work to identify a central motif or theme, establishing checkpoints to facilitate narrative meaning-making. This is how the 'serial' repetitions in a film like The Crowd operate – as a means of establishing a distanced viewing position that goes beyond sympathetic identification and recognizes a larger and more abstract truth than any discernible by the film's characters. The serial, however, employs repetition to introduce variations and graduations, alternative pathways and layers of signification for different viewers. It is aiming not at closure but at proliferation.

It does so by relying heavily on the logic of segmentation – any piece of its narrative whole should ideally be capable of standing on its own or be reassembled into a different order, responding to varying constraints and conditions of distribution and screening. Seen in this way, the often-mentioned 'shortness' of the serial form seems to hinge closely on its modularity and adaptability. To achieve this kind of flexibility, the serial must not shy away from redundancy, and must find ways of making redundancy pleasurable to those who watch the entire sequence from beginning to end. In order to do so, Officer 444 utilizes the filmic mode that relies most heavily on the patterns of repetition and variation – slapstick.[35] However, slapstick figures not exclusively, perhaps not even predominantly, as a humorous mode, but much more generally as a basic modus operandi.

Instead of foregrounding the comedic potential of slapstick's modes of cinematography and storytelling, the serial's adaptation uses them in tight conjunction with its thrill effects. In keeping with the melodramatic mode of classical Hollywood storytelling, thrill is generated in the film serial by means of last-minute-rescue plots. In transitional-era and classical Hollywood narration this plot structure relies on narrative climaxes, typically created through the parallel editing of a character in

[33] Kelleter, 'Populäre Serialität: Eine Einführung', p. 27.
[34] Brasch, 'Narrative, technology and the operational aesthetic'.
[35] Donald Crafton, 'Pie and chase: gag, spectacle and narrative in slapstick comedy', in Wanda Strauven (ed.), The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), pp. 355–64.

distress and a simultaneous rescue action, with narrative moves that prolong time and raise suspense.[36] Officer 444 draws on this storytelling device, but does so through the lens of the Keystone Kops' slapstick routines, which rely heavily on subverting the suspense-building mechanisms of dramatic film. In particular, as Rob King shows, the Keystone comedies draw fun from thwarted or endlessly prolonged rescue scenarios enacted by clumsy policemen, with the effect of a deflation or collapse rather than a systematic buildup of narrative tension.[37] In Officer 444, slapstick elements are not used to undermine the narration of the police procedural but rather point to the complicated and multilayered character of 'action' in the serial's narrative universe. Thus in Episode 4, 'Gassed', the heroine Gloria ends up on the operating table of the villainous Dr Blakley, about to be subjected to a hideous experiment. 444, however, has already managed to overpower Blakley, donning his surgical mask and gown and taking his place in the surgery. Meanwhile the Flying Squadron rushes to a rescue for which the reason has become uncertain. Whereas the slapstick short defuses melodrama's staple formula, Officer 444 refuses to let the mode of slapstick neutralize the thrill of the melodramatic mode. The scene derives its momentum from the pace and simultaneity of the action, highlighting its presentist narrative rather than pointing to the eventual resolution of the scenario.

When the serial's comic sidekick, the journalist Snoopy, orders a gas station attendant to 'Gimme a pint of gas – I've got a lot of running around to do!',[38] he pinpoints the serial's haywire narrative logic – one which engages in the compilation of parallel 'actions' and in the display of activism rather than agency. In Officer 444, generic modalities – melodrama, thrill, suspense, slapstick – are correlated in a manner that suggests a spirit of endless proliferation. The rescue plot alone unfolds in so many variants that at times it seems as if the serial strives to lay bare its mechanics or catalogue its capacities. Time and again the serial inadvertently highlights the contrast between the melodramatic compression of action and seriality's reliance on continuation. Where the melodramatic feature film strives for an ending, the serial has to keep the action going. Narrative segments are thus piled up and spread out rather than fitted into a neat chronological order. Slapstick as an operational mode rather than a mode of address allows for the organization or management of the endless proliferation of 'occurrences' and 'coincidences' – in short, modernity's contingency – in ways that defy the more careful orchestration of events that enables the melodramatic mode.

Repetitions and reiterations occur because the serial narrative refuses to pick up from its preceding episode, although the cliffhanger ending and its subsequent resolution in the following episode might suggest otherwise. Instead of weaving a continuous narrative, individual narrative threads seem to tag on tentatively to earlier events and episodes, exploring alternative horizons of possibility for what was shown before. This is especially evident in a sequence of events in Officer 444 that

[36] Linda Williams, 'Melodrama revised', in Nick Browne (ed.), Refiguring American Film Genres (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 42–88; Frank Kelleter, Barbara Krah and Ruth Mayer (eds), Melodrama! The Mode of Excess from Early America to Hollywood (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2007).
[37] King, The Fun Factory, pp. 44–46.
[38] Officer 444, Episode 2, 'Human Rats'.

incorporates repetition to such an extent that it results in medial self- reflexivity.

In the third, fourth and fifth episodes the gangsters intercept sensitive information from the police and their informant Snoopy by monitoring phone calls to the police headquarters. A series of frantic actions and reactions ensues, all of which depend on the crooks' advance knowledge of a plan to search their hideout in Dr Blakley's office. First of all Officer 444 arrives alone at the doctor's office and the villains knock him unconscious.[39] On the second visit the squadron investigates the site and finds the office literally emptied out – nothing left but the bare walls of the set.[40] When asked to send out the police one more time, their chief at the headquarters voices his annoyance with Snoopy, which could very well reflect or foreshadow the viewers' reaction: 'If you're kidding me this time, I'll have you shot before sunrise'. Indeed the repetitive character of the plot segments, highlighted in this intertitle, has a potentially frustrating effect in its insistence on the recurring failures of policework. But the frustration, which is an integral part of serial retardation, is being converted into an element of entertainment through practices of medial self-reflection. The next episode presents an even more fantastic turn of events: while the Flying Squadron is once more on its way to Blakley's office, the gangsters convert the medical practice into a shop selling workwear, which the frustrated officers proceed to destroy in the resulting mass brawl.[41]

The evolution of this story arc across three episodes seems informed by a mix of experimental and transgressive energies. One narrative possibility after another is taken on, used and discarded, and in the course of this consecutive 'testing' the narration becomes increasingly hyperbolic and self-reflexive. The self-reflexive dimension comes to the fore in the characterization of the setting (the doctor's office) as a 'set' (a fake shop), and in the accompanying demonstration of the fact that any given set can be emptied out, refurnished and then taken apart again in serial chains of spatial reappropriation. The sequence thus foregrounds how film production very literally relies on sets and props as modular elements that can be reassembled. The serial seems to compensate for its limited budget for set design and cinematography by literally 'making the most' of what there is – using each and every set and location in as many ways as possible.

This scene emphasizes the serial nature of the plot when its reality – even within the diegetic frame – is turned into a theatrical (or cinematic) set: a site consisting of props and accessories to give credibility to a madeup story. The narrative turns into farce. These and similar scenes that pursue a structural logic of culmination or climaxing call to mind patterns of serial storytelling in the present day. In contemporary American serial television, repetition is often organized in forms of 'outbidding' – ever faster action, ever more expensive sets, ever more physical conflicts from scene to scene, episode to episode and series to series – in daring loops of cross-reference that eventually border on the

[39] Officer 444, Episode 3, 'Trapped'.
[40] Officer 444, Episode 4, 'Gassed'.
[41] Officer 444, Episode 5, 'Missing'.

socially inacceptable, especially in their representation of sex and violence. This logic, which Andreas Jahn-Sudmann and Frank Kelleter have mapped out for the medium of television, corresponds to developments and discussions of the early 1920s, when the critique of American reformists concentrated on the constant fistfights and gunfights in film serials.[42] When police and villains shred the fake film set to pieces in Officer 444, the serial presents 'signals of irony', to employ Jahn-Sudmann and Kelleter's terminology, in order to avert the risk associated with the logics of outbidding.[43] When the police have finally won the fistfight and successfully disassembled the medical practice/workwear store/film set, they take away the remaining furniture, literally making room for new storylines that will that will rely on even more hyperbolic gestures of outbidding in their ongoing serial retardation.

In contrast to the self-reflexivity of contemporaneous feature films like The Crowd, Metropolis or Greed, Officer 444 does not use self-reflexivity in order to expose a larger technological, ideological or aesthetic logic or to point to its limitations. The dichotomy between medial apparatus and diegetic, realist narrative that tends to determine the feature's self-reflexive moments is not really relevant to the serial; instead it is concerned with showcasing its own narrative operations with all of their implications, identifying them as a network or web of possibilities.[44] The self-reflexive moves of Officer 444 never threaten a diegetic integrity of the filmic representation, because this integrity was never given to begin with.

Officer 444 exhibits is own entanglement in an aesthetics of the assembly line (or multiple assembly lines) with its repetitions and iterations, its focus on modes and modalities of construction and its obsession with getting things done (and then doing them all over again). It thus employs a slapstick logic that is increasingly depleted of its comical potential, and implements core elements of melodramatic narration without any indication of peripety or catharsis. These theatrical and filmic modes are relevant to the serial of the 1920s because they allow for the rigorous implementation of serial variations and the exploration of their possibilities. In congruence with this technique, film serials like Officer 444 present the world as a tangle of options that exhilarate rather than frighten. Where the options in the filmic melodrama signal fateful and monumental choices, all of the film serial's options can (and will) be explored. They are identified, run through and discarded, as the serial narrative turns to one after the other.

Seen in this way, the 1920s film serial – regardless, or perhaps because, of its messiness and indulgence in spectacular effects – is far more didactic than the feature film of the period. Where the serial of the 1910s instructed its audiences in how to read a film,[45] the serial of the 1920s taught them how to navigate modern reality with its complicated and multilayered structure – how to manage modernity. The feature film of the period is anxious to carve up audiences into individual spectators and to distinguish the masses (on the screen) from the public in the movie

[42] Vela, 'With the parents' consent'.

[43] Andreas Jahn-Sudmann and Frank Kelleter, 'Die Dynamik serieller Überbietung: Amerikanische Fernsehserien und das Konzept des Quality-TV', in Kelleter (ed.), Populäre Serialität, p. 214. The analogies between the storytelling logic of the silent film serial and contemporary televisual seriality also come to mind in Jason Mittell's conceptualization of twenty-first-century 'complex television', which offers a 'site of tremendous genre mixing, where conventions and assumptions from a range of programming categories come together and are interwoven, merged, and reformed'. Jason Mittell, Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2015), p. 233.

[44] Thus Officer 444 in a sense continues what Shane Denson describes for The Perils of Pauline (Louis J. Gasnier, 1914), which foregrounds narrative and assigns it 'demonstrative function, as if the films are pointing out to viewers: "This is how we construct a story"'. Shane Denson, 'The logic of the line segment: continuity and discontinuity in the serial-queen melodrama', in Robert Allen and Thijs van den Berg (eds), Serialization in Popular Culture (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), p. 72.

[45] Ibid.

theatre.[46] The film serial, in contrast, is happy to address its audience as a mass. Its mode of address does not single out and particularize, but aims at fusion and immediacy. It does not share the feature film's ambition to rein in the multiplicity of references that increasingly defines modernity's popular culture; it demonstrates how to manage contingency by means other than containment and control. This idea of management applies as much to the viewers' personal realities as it does to the variety of film formats. Film serials constitute one fragment in the modular organization of cinematic programming, yet they also disclose ways in which these modules can be appropriated by the audience. The film serial may thus be one of modernity's most genuine and unabashed formats of mass culture.

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[46] Hansen, Babel and Babylon, pp. 60–89, and Cinema and Experience.