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Going Serial

Fu Manchu, the Yellow Peril, and the Machinic Momentum of Ideology

> The spread of the thing is phenomenal.
> —**Sax Rohmer**, *The Mask of Fu-Manchu* (1932)

There was a time when Fu Manchu was everywhere and everybody seemed to know him. Those days are over. Today, the Chinese master criminal who emblematized the yellow peril from 1913 to the 1970s is almost forgotten. Like his popular cultural counterpart Charlie Chan, the embarrassingly harmless Chinese detective, Fu Manchu lost his powerful position in transatlantic popular culture; at best, people recall the mustache. Some may have vague memories of Christopher Lee reruns on TV, and film buffs sometimes remember Boris Karloff and his oriental gear, but mostly the figure of Fu Manchu seems to have disappeared without much of a trace from Western popular culture and its collective memory. When *The Fiendish Plot of Dr. Fu Manchu*, Peter Sellers's weak parody of the Fu Manchu films, appeared in 1980, Fu Manchu's fate had already been sealed: Pop cultural villains thrive on the narrative modes of horror and mystery, so once ridicule and irony overtake their representation, they are usually finished.

The Fu Manchu replicants and clones who did not too obviously share the figure's foregrounded Asianness fared slightly better than their blueprint. Thus, Dr. No, James Bond's opponent with the prosthetic arm in the eponymous thriller (Khoo 2007: 78; Black 2000: 32), is still remembered. Dr. No is of Chinese ancestry, but he is also half-German. Ming the Merciless of the Flash Gordon series may have survived because he is as much an alien as an Asian (Ma 2000: 7–10). Moreover, in the 1986–1987 and 1996 TV series, Ming turned from yellow to green, and the most recent TV serialization of the material to date, running from 2007

to 2008, turned him into a blond Caucasian to be altogether on the safe side. The same happened to Batman's serial opponent Ra's al Ghul, who was originally clearly cast in the mold of Fu Manchu but survived because he never was completely Chinese, veering between different ethnic ascriptions until he finally morphed into a Caucasian in Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy starting in 2005 (Darius 2005: 30–31). Fu Manchu, however, is first and foremost Chinese, or, to be more precise, he is nothing but a yellow peril figure. If you take the Chineseness away, there is nothing left of him.

Of course, Fu Manchu's demise was not Sellers's doing. The figure's disappearance has many causes, among them the vehement battle over cultural representation waged by activists and scholars in the second half of the twentieth century, who spoke as representatives or on behalf of aggrieved communities and marginalized groups. Frank Chin's derisive correlation of Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu as mutually enforcing stereotypes of Asian masculinity demarcates this line of reasoning exemplarily when it culminates in the admonition not to underestimate the political impact of popular culture:

> Devil and angel, the Chinese is a sexual joke, glorifying white power: Dr. Fu, a man wearing a long dress, batting his eyelashes, surrounded by muscular black servants in loin-cloths, and with his bad habit of caressingly touching white men on the leg, wrist, and face with his long fingernails, is not so much a threat as he is a frivolous offense to white manhood. Chan's gestures are the same, except he doesn't touch and, instead of being graceful like Fu in flowing robes, he is awkward in a baggy suit and clumsy. (1998: 95–96)

This critique of Fu Manchu's (and Charlie Chan's) stereotyped Asianness has been flanked, substantiated, and amended by more analytic approaches to the figure's ideological work and political effectivity (Wu 1982: 164–182; R. Lee 1999; Hevia 1998; Chen 2005; Knapp 2010; Tchen 2010). But the waning of the figures' cultural impact also brought about attempts at rehabilitation or recuperation: For Charlie Chan, Yunte Huang recently goes as far as to propound the character's secret subversive spirit by reading him as an ethnic trickster figure: "He reminds me of Monkey King. In Chinese folk myth, Monkey King is an invincible trickster. . . . But he is also the African American Signifying Monkey, or the Native American Coyote" (2010: 287). I would not go that far regarding Charlie Chan (for an interesting alternative, see R. J. Williams 2011), and I certainly do not intend to propose a similar reading for Fu Manchu in this book. But neither am I interested in a mere reiteration of

the insight that Fu Manchu is a racist stereotype and offensive ideological construction—this point has been made before, and it has been made well. Instead, I explore why this figure was so immensely popular from the 1910s onward. Where did it come from? Where did it go? And, most importantly, how precisely did it work? As the title of this study already indicates, it is my contention that the figure's successful cultural and ideological work hinges on its seriality. But before I go into technicalities, I present the subject matter of the book: Fu Manchu in his serial unfolding.

Chin's vilification, which foregrounds Fu Manchu's dubious sexuality and morals, inadvertently highlights one important aspect of the figure's persistent popularity over so many decades: its camp appeal. If one glances at the phenomenon through a less homophobic lens than Chin's, one might, after all, find reason to speculate about motives beyond racism in being attracted to the figure of an Asian drag queen. More importantly, however, Chin's description does not really give credit to the heterogeneity and multifariousness of the Fu Manchu phenomenon. Many Fu Manchus existed, and only some of them (most notably Boris Karloff's interpretation of the figure) showed the flamboyant hypersexuality that Chin finds so offensive. There is a literary Fu Manchu and a filmic Fu Manchu, a Fu Manchu of the comics, of radio, and of television. An Argentinian magician toured the country during the first half of the twentieth century using the stage name Fu Manchu. There is a rock band by that name (by now perhaps the most vital remnant of the craze), and there used to be merchandise, such as Fu Manchu candy and a Fu Manchu board game. There is even a Fu Manchu computer virus that, once a certain combination of keys is pressed, unleashes the message "The world will hear from me again" (an echo of the famous line delivered at the end of every one of Christopher Lee's Fu Manchu films of the 1960s). On his website *The Page of Fu Manchu*, Lawrence Knapp has done an excellent job bringing all these and many other ramifications and emanations of the figure together, collecting and unearthing, linking and cross-referencing the many appearances and masks of the master villain over the course of the twentieth century (2010).

At first, Fu Manchu was a literary figure. He was invented—or perhaps introduced—in Great Britain by Arthur Henry Ward, who gained international fame on the grounds of his yellow peril fiction written under a pen name that suggested Anglo-Saxon purity and manly rigor: Sax Rohmer. At this time, the villain's name was still written with a hyphen, which disappeared after 1917 and is not used in this book. The first Fu Manchu story was published in 1912, and the narrative was serialized in 1913, when it ran in the British literary periodical *The Story-Teller* and in the American magazine *Collier's Weekly*, both thoroughly established middlebrow journals catering to the expanding mass market of the day.

The stories were quickly republished as chapters of a Fu Manchu trilogy appearing simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic (in the United Kingdom with Methuen and in the United States with McBride and Nast). This novel series spawned sequels of its own, both in stand-alone and serial form, until 1959, the year of Rohmer's death, after which other pulp writers took the baton. The books were translated "into at least a dozen languages, including Icelandic and Japanese" (Rudolph 2003), and they keep circulating to this day—most of them are still in print.

Early on, Fu Manchu spread into other medial formats. He first entered the cinematic screen in 1923, in the fifteen-chapter serial *The Mystery of Fu Manchu*. The serial was propelled by a spectacular marketing campaign in which the production company "plastered London's Underground stations with enormous posters featuring the devil doctor's malevolent face and boasting that more than 100,000 Fu-Manchu novels had been sold" (Seshagiri 2006: 163). In the late 1920s, Hollywood discovered the yellow peril figure. Its first American impersonator, ironically, was Warner Oland, the very actor who later came to fame as Charlie Chan. Fu Manchu became iconic through Karloff's interpretation in 1932, which established the Fu Manchu look and style that would henceforth circulate through visual popular culture. Numerous other filmic productions centered on the figure after the 1930s; comic strips, books, and graphic novels were released; and Fu Manchu took over radio shows and television programs. The serial figure's career was complicated through Rohmer's and (later) his estate's tight handling of matters of copyright—which provoked the appearance of a vast array of clones and doubles with (slightly) different names yet recognizably similar features and stories. The first serialized versions of the Fu Manchu narrative make use of a detective plot. Soon, however, the narrative branched into other genres: horror, science fiction, fantasy, and, finally, comedy.

Although Fu Manchu's looks change, other characteristics remain stable throughout his career: From the 1910s onward, "the Doctor" is an ingenious scientist and linguist, with a commanding knowledge base that encompasses obscure necromantic traditions and cutting-edge biochemical research and an intimate familiarity with innovations in military and communication technologies. From the beginning, he is determined to rule the world, but he is always also strangely disinterested in political or economic power. His incentives are never entirely clear. Fu Manchu is the head of a huge and intricate secret oriental organization, the Si-Fan, whose agenda is equally obscure. In many versions of the story, the villain has a beautiful and corrupt daughter, Fah lo Suee, who sometimes proves to be susceptible to reform and falls for one of his opponents. However, she never falls for Sir Denis Nayland Smith, who is as single as Fu Manchu and who acts as his principal antagonist in most versions of the storyline. Nay-

Card used as part of all-out media campaign launched by Stoll Film Company to promote the fifteen-chapter serial *The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Manchu,* with Harry Agar Lyons (dir. A. E. Coleby, Stoll Film Company, 1923).

land Smith wears British tweed while Fu Manchu wears ornate gowns and rarely trims his fingernails, as Chin points out. Outward appearances aside, however, the two figures turn out to be amazingly similar, inverted images of the same pattern whose corresponding features and character traits become foregrounded particularly in the literary approaches to Fu Manchu from the 1930s onward. Yet the sort of mustache called "a Fu Manchu" becomes an indispensible part of Fu Manchu's visual repertory only after Karloff sports one in *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932).

From the beginning, Rohmer's novels appeared simultaneously on both side of the Atlantic, and from the 1930s onward, Rohmer acknowledged the power of the American entertainment market by anchoring Fu Manchu's and then his own career primarily in an American context. After World War II, he moved permanently to the United States. Fu Manchu's almost instantaneous international popularity augmented the effects of omnipresence and evanescence around the figure, suggesting a phenomenon in constant flux and yet unchanging. Soon, a Chinese malefactor of a particular type did not even need to be named Fu Manchu (and often enough was not identified by that name due to licensing restrictions) to invoke his blueprint: "Generations will pass," concludes Cay van Ash, Rohmer's biographer, "before even the most conscientious of authors can write of a Chinese villain without evoking echoes of Fu Manchu" (Van Ash and Rohmer 1972: 242; see also R. Lee 1999: 114).

Fu Manchu expresses the spirit of expansion in a manner that signals far beyond the plot level of the narratives. These narratives are obviously replete with thematic allusions to the concept of expansion: Their plots revolve around imperial maneuvers, terrorist takeovers, and infectious outbreaks, reiterating the thrilling and frightening stories of spread with ever-new inflections. But in addition to these explicit references,

the narratives operate by means of what could be called a semantics of spread—that is, through techniques and imageries of expansion, takeover, and appropriation that defy textual, generic, and medial boundaries. This semantics may find its most salient actualization in the features of Fu Manchu's volatility and intangibility—his expertise at masquerade, make-believe, infiltration, and impersonation, which renders him at the same time impossible to locate and ubiquitous. In the novel *The Mask of Fu-Manchu* (1932), Fu Manchu's archenemy Nayland Smith once remarks in exasperation, "The spread of the thing is phenomenal" (Rohmer 1967: 38). He is referring to a movement of fanatics, steered underground by Fu Manchu. But his remark also insinuates that spread is Fu Manchu's predominant modus operandi. Whatever the master criminal instigates is geared toward and subject to spread and expansion. And, more generally speaking, so is the figure itself—it spreads, it mutates, it shapeshifts its way through twentieth-century mass culture, epitomizing and emblematizing the ideology of the yellow peril. Fu Manchu's seriality is no mere concomitant effect of the figure's popular and ideological appeal: It constitutes a core feature of the yellow peril's success story.

It is my contention that this correspondence between the serial figure, its operative principles, and its larger ideological parameters not only is grounded in a set of recognizable narrative features and motifs but also is "serial" in a wider sense. Its investigation requires a set of instruments that is missing from the toolbox of popular culture studies. In this book, I draw on theories of seriality formulated in the realm of political philosophy and social theory by critics as diverse as Jean-Paul Sartre, Benedict Anderson, and Iris Marion Young in my discussion of processes of ideological-meaning making and community formation. I investigate episodes that are part of the transnational serial unfolding of Fu Manchu between 1913 and the present, with a strong focus on the 1930s, which I consider the figure's "Golden Age." The scope of this study is transmedial—it examines serial novels, films and film serials, comics and graphic novels—and it pays particular attention to the impact of media changes on the serial flow of Fu Manchu's transnational career.

In its transmedial gestation, the figure of Fu Manchu serves to illustrate the thesis that seriality is a principle rather than a technique and that this principle cannot be traced back to one author, author collective, or instigator. It gains a "machinic" momentum of its own in the course of its unfolding, propelled by the varying media and medial formats of choice; by the technological, political, and cultural contours of these media environments; and by the complex and uneven interactions of authors, audiences, and larger institutional configurations. I use the term "machinic" here in close reference to Deleuze and Guattari (1983), indicating an intermediate and indeterminate state between the subject and

the object world, between bodies and things, between the "organic" and the "mechanic." The machine in this sense is a contraption or ensemble that conjoins living beings and technological apparatuses into intricately layered arrangements of interaction. In the course of this merge, categories of distinction and identification that seemed stable before dissolve and collapse (Massumi 1992: 192n45; see also Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 283–289).[1] Conceiving of Fu Manchu as a "machinic" constellation also means approaching the medially diverse Fu Manchu narratives as serial performances or enactments instead of representations of the yellow peril theme, as generators rather than as mere reverberators of the ideological knowledge that is being disseminated.

Serial Figures

If one engages with contemporary theories of popular seriality and serial culture, it quickly transpires that seriality is no longer associated primarily with the idea of chronological sequence, in the sense of a chain of past, present, and future, neatly aligned consecutive episodes or operations. For the last twenty years, at least, scholars have emphasized the "looped" quality of serial phenomena in general and serial narration in particular—its semantics of spread (see Eco 1990; Hagedorn 1988, 1998; Hayward 1997; Engell 2001; Kelleter 2012a; Denson and Mayer 2012b; Mayer 2012; Gardner 2012). It is no accident that the lexicon of the serial mode in popular culture is replete with such terms as sprawl, growth, dispersion, and excrescence rather than exclusively relying on associations of linear unraveling, careful design, or microstructural complexity.

Against this backdrop, it is particularly noteworthy that the current serial turn taps into a spatial imaginary, or rather spatializes the temporal logic on which the notion of the series and the serial rely more immediately. In the case of Fu Manchu's serial unfolding throughout the

1. "Deleuze and Guattari's frequent use of the terms 'machine' and 'machinic' (as in 'desiring machine') are often misinterpreted as a metaphor between the body as organism and the machine as technological apparatus. Deleuze and Guattari, however, make a basic distinction between the 'machinic' and the 'mechanical.' Both the organic and the mechanical belong to the molar, as does representation. The MECHANICAL refers to a structural interrelating of discrete parts working harmoniously together to perform work; the ORGANIC is the same organizational model applied to a living body. . . . By MACHINIC [Deleuze and Guattari] mean functioning immanently and pragmatically, by contagion rather than by comparison, unsubordinated either to the laws of resemblance or utility. . . . Living beings and technological apparatuses are machinic when they are in becoming, organic or mechanical when they are functioning in a state of stable equilibrium" (Massumi 1992: 192n45; see also Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 283–289).

twentieth century, the spatial imagery of "spread" or "sprawl" suggests itself especially forcefully once the figure emancipates itself from the literary grid from which it emanates. Only Rohmer's novels try to establish an overarching continuity or chronological coherence for the Fu Manchu narrative, and even Rohmer resorts to tricks (such as granting Fu Manchu eternal life and eternal youth) to guarantee the stability of his fictional universe. In other medial approaches to Fu Manchu, continuity is backgrounded in favor of different serial principles. These enactments of the master villain relish in loops, twists, convolutions, and double takes in narrative figurations that may explain the fascination of postmodern writers, such as Thomas Pynchon, Alan Moore, or Gary Indiana, with the Fu Manchu phenomenon but predate the postmodern appropriations by several decades. The visual and audiovisual enactments of Fu Manchu are marked from early on by a strange timelessness and liminality. The villain and his opponents act like the classical figures of serial storytelling that Jane Gaines maps out in close reference to Umberto Eco:

> They learn nothing new; they neither grow nor change significantly. Superman, the ideal series character, created to fit the frames of the comic book, fights the same battles every week, and for all of his powers is unable to restore law and order or bring peace to the world. Each new story, says Umberto Eco in "The Myth of Superman," is a "virtual new beginning," which means that the character exhausts the narrative material he is given and requires more, parceled out week after week, year after year. (1990: 178–179)

Such serial figures as Superman—or Fu Manchu—are fated to execute certain stock scenarios of superherodom and villainhood in ever-changing settings and contexts and against the backdrop of ever-more-complex and intricate scenarios and devices of diegetical and extradiegetical technical sophistication. Even Rohmer's novels attest to this logic: *The Return of Dr. Fu-Manchu*[2] runs the title of the American edition of the first Fu Manchu sequel. And indeed, this could be the title of any Fu Manchu narrative. Almost all these stories, regardless of their format—literary, filmic, or graphical—end with the apparent or imminent death of the Chinese master villain. And still there is no doubt that "the world shall hear from [him] again"—to echo the famous catchphrase of the Lee films

2. In this study, I refer to the American editions of the Fu Manchu series, because they were even more popular than the British editions and, in most cases, remain in print to this day.

once more. Sherlock Holmes, whose fictional universe figures so evidently as a model for the design of Fu Manchu's empire that the Fu Manchu narrative has been said to "border on a pastiche of Conan Doyle" (Bloom 1996: 182), has had to be resurrected only once. Fu Manchu, by contrast, shows a zombielike resilience, a supernatural staying power that merits mentioning in only the first volumes of the narrative. Afterward, the fact that Fu Manchu has risen from the dead and is yet again engaging in his old games is mostly addressed in 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, another stock character of the Fu Manchu universe, and then adds, dutifully, but somewhat distractedly, "This is incredible."

By and large, Fu Manchu must be called a figure—not a character. This "figurative quality" is something that most of the successful stock figures of serial narration in the twentieth century have in common: They are flat, familiar, and iconic. "Serial figures" thus differ from what I call "series characters" (see Denson and Mayer 2012b). The latter denotes characters in a closed fictional universe, a serially ongoing narrative (such as a soap opera or serialized novel), while the former term applies to figures that are more loosely connected by means of their status as cultural icons or stereotypes yet move across media and medial forms. Characters, in contrast to figures, show a certain extent of depth, if only on the grounds of being continuously developed over long stretches of time (on the category of the character, see Eder 2010; Eder, Jannidis, and Schneider 2010; Mittell 2012). Obviously, Fu Manchu was first a series character, unfolding in what I call a "serial cluster"—that is, a (literary) series with a fictional logic and continuity of its own. Rohmer increasingly attempts to afford him with a certain ambivalence and depth that would warrant the designation of "character." But Rohmer is never in complete control of his brainchild—even at the outset of his existence in popular culture, Fu Manchu displays serial tendencies that point away from the logic of epical layering and texture and embrace a surface aesthetics. This manifests itself first on a material level, when the serial fiction around Fu Manchu evolved into novels that were then complicatedly interlinked with stand-alone stories and serial publications, and finally branched out into other story worlds of Rohmer's that feature yellow peril figures closely modeled after Fu Manchu but not bearing his name. Once other media and other authors take over, the series character retreats for good, and the serial figure tears itself loose from the constraints of narrative consecutivity and overarching story logic.

Fu Manchu's success in the transatlantic world has been attributed to the serial form of his appearances and actions before. Clive Bloom

unfolds what could be called a standard explanation for the popularity of formula fiction when he reduces the Fu Manchu phenomenon to its heavy reliance on the effects of repetition and standardization:

> Having been a journalist who serviced [the] commuter trade, Arthur Ward [Sax Rohmer] then wrote thrillers for the same audience. This commuter mentality, combined with a mentality used to standardization and repetition, allowed the work of Sax Rohmer to translate easily into the technological world of the radio and cinema. The repetitiveness of the form of the Fu Manchu tales was part of the internalized need of people whose daily routine was itself formally repetitive, the expected escapism of the tales being a blind for the formula repetition of the genre's conformity to stock patterns which were easily reproduced and duplicated. (1996: 180)

Obviously, I suggest a somewhat more complicated approach to reading Fu Manchu. The easy identifiability of the figures and the formulaic arrangements of the plot, as showcased most saliently by way of the tie in which Fu Manchu and his nemesis, commissioner Nayland Smith, are caught, need to be seen as integral elements of serial narration that go beyond the confines of formulaic repetition. The cast of these narratives consists undoubtedly of stock figures: The audience is very rarely presented with psychological shadings, moral ambiguities, motivational conundrums, or intricate constellations of conflict or desire. The recurring figures are all immediately readable (especially when they are described as inscrutable or mysterious). The same quality of immediate readability applies to Fu Manchu's Chineseness—there is little subtlety and little surprise in the phobic iterations on the yellow peril theme that appear in all sorts of Fu Manchu narratives from the 1910s to the present. But the fact that the narrative layout is familiar allows the narratives' recipients to focus on other things—the special effects and mediatized innovations, the formal particularities and iterations, the action rather than agents. At the same time, the narratives seem to disassociate themselves increasingly from their narrative content, marking it as familiar or even trite—at any rate, unremarkable. With this, however, the narratives' ideological work is not so much dismantled as rather energized.

For this purpose, the flatness and iconicity of the material under investigation is instrumental. Writing about the serial comic strip, Jared Gardner comes to a conclusion that could be easily extended to other serial formats: It "offered a space where a different kind of investment could take place, an investment made possible *by* (and not despite) the iconic, flat nature of the characterization" (Gardner 2012: loc. 1227; emphasis original). Seriality relies on iconicity, on emblematic constellations, and

on recognizable images, figures, plots, phrases, and accessories that, once established, can be rearranged, reinterpreted, recombined, and invested with new significance and thus constitute major parts of the serial memory that upholds complex serial narratives and representational networks in the first place.

Thus popular seriality invites us to reflect on the workings of narration without "the traditional recourse to digression, indirection, or the overtly self-referential," as Michael Chabon (2008: 49) writes about the popular appeal of Sherlock Holmes narratives:

> Conan Doyle found a way to fold several stories, and the proper means of telling them, over and over into a tightly compacted frame, with a proportionate gain in narrative power. "The Speckled Band" and "The Adventure of the Dancing Men" are storytelling engines, steam-driven, brass-fitted, but among them the most efficient narrative apparatuses the world has ever seen. (47; see also Hügel 2012: 69)

Storytelling engines—what a felicitous formulation! This book probes deeper into the narrative arrangements constituted by seriality, examining how the serial figure of Fu Manchu is driven by the same motor that propels the Sherlock Holmes stories and other machines of popular seriality and extricating the particularities of the case of Fu Manchu: the features that render it unique in the field of serial narration and in the field of ideological seriality.

Chabon's observation also highlights that the serial mode has been so eminently successful in popular narration and is yet a heavily underresearched phenomenon. After all, the very popularity of the mode may have been the reason why "in the history of narrative, the serial has been (with television a notable exception) a consistent loser," as Roger Hagedorn put forth in 1988. Hagedorn deplores the "failure on the part of scholars to recognize that since the 19th century the serial has been a dominant mode of narrative presentation in western culture—if not in fact the dominant mode" (5). This neglect (and current rediscovery) of the serial mode probably also hinges on a certain academic intangibility of popular seriality. Serial narration eludes the scholarly impulse of distanced classification, because it is so strongly marked by the material, somatic, physical, concrete conditions of its actualization. Seriality is informed with the aesthetics of the momentary and the momentous:

> Seriality . . . is perfectly suited to the principle of somatic presence. [The serial mode] is so attractive to popular culture, because it promises a perpetual renewal of the same moment. . . . [S]erial

> figures are back again with every new installment, and they experience with great reliability the same situations and conflicts as before: a potentially endless stream of innovation and repetition, of forgetting and of an actualization which cannot really be called recollection. (Kelleter 2010: 60, my translation; see also Eco 1990; Mayer 2012; Kelleter 2012a, 2012b)

The serial sprawl does not lend itself to the traditional ways of approaching literature. The techniques of zooming in or narrowing down on self-contained and closed-off textual entities, which characterize literary analysis throughout most of the twentieth century, do not sit well with the features of serial open-endedness and the dialogic or polyvocal character of much serial production in popular culture (Looby 2004; Gardner 2012; Kelleter 2012c). Only toward the end of the twentieth century is this critical predilection for finite texts and close readings challenged: Instead of focusing on texts, many critics, especially critics interested in popular narrative formats—and here especially serial formats—now start to focus on the readers or on the acts of reception in their complicated engagement with the serial production (see also Radway 1984; Ang 1985; Fiske 1987; Lewis 1992; Jenkins 1992, 2006b; Hayward 1997; Walsh 2007; Maase and Müller 2012; Gardner 2012).

I am very much in agreement with these revisionist approaches that acknowledge the fact that popular narration is often organized collaboratively rather than produced in isolation. Still, I think that those who try to reduce or deduce the dynamics of serial proliferation to individual agents—be they authors, publishing houses, studios, scenes, readers, or fans—are already lost. Popular seriality generates itself—and to make this claim is not to engage in mysticism. This study demonstrates that the generative power of popular seriality arises from very concrete formal, material, and institutional foundations that are concatenated in a manner that makes individual agency (of authors and of recipients) only one among many factors within a larger network of cultural meaning making.

Narrative Form

In response to modernist and New Critical literary studies and their exclusive focus on such categories as aesthetic distinction, textual complexity, and stylistic exceptionality, cultural studies approaches to popular literature, especially the ones addressing serial writing, have drawn heavily on methods stemming from the social sciences or history. These methods attend to the social situatedness of their subject matter (be they comic strips or TV series, genre films or fan fiction) and are excellently suited to assess many of the facets that shape the generation of serial

material. They excel at pulling into view the institutions, collectives, and communities that conceive, receive, and string along serial stories. This attention to social context and agency is indispensible to capture seriality as a principle, but I believe that in the long run we cannot do without a reconceptualized framework of formal aesthetics to engage fully with the phenomenon. After all, it is not only the human or institutional actors and agents in the nexus of the serial that give a thrust to serial narratives; it is often the serial narratives proper that become driving forces of the serial machine, energizing it in their self-referential loops.

When David Palumbo-Liu reviews the agenda of the most important journals of literary theory and literary studies founded during the 1980s and 1990s, he notes the fact that in all their foundational issues and programmatic pieces, these journals pointedly disengage themselves from formal analysis and formalism. In Palumbo-Liu's understanding, all these gestures of distancing express the unacknowledged hope that the methods of the social sciences or history could act as "vehicles for retrieving elements that had been effectively banished from the study of literary texts. One could legitimately call these elements individual and social history" (2008: 814). Palumbo-Liu is not alone when he asks about the drawbacks of the current strong reliance on methods of contextualization or historicization in cultural studies. His plea for an investigation of a text's aesthetic and social functions in close conjunction to "account for the longevity or transitoriness of certain agreed upon Forms" (823) chimes with the conclusions of other representatives of what has been called "activist formalism" (Wolfson 2000: 2; see also Wolfson and Brown 2007; Rooney 2000: 25). They all assume that a formal analysis need not deflect from a text's or series's ideological work as it unfolds in the interaction between texts and readers (or audiences) but rather allow the analysis to assess this ideological performance in a systematic sense.

The formal aesthetic turn manifests itself with regard to not only literary texts but also visual culture studies (Mitchell 2003). But even though scholars identifying with New Formalist principles profess to respect "all the materials that enter into today's scholarship," as Marjorie Levinson puts it (2007: 559), it is quite apparent that New Formalism is primarily interested in classical literature and in classical literary formats (562). I am convinced, however, that such a newly articulated formalist approach would also lend itself to an analysis of cultural products that do not really fit into the classical parameters of literary analysis (such as authorship, oeuvre, or genre) or do not go together with long-standing criteria of classification (such as originality, complexity, innovation, or aura). After all, formal analysis allows us to background, at least momentarily, the categories of personal intention or individual interest and to take account of the generative force of "formats," "structures," "systems," or "channels."

In so doing, we gain sight of the parameters of the very business of popular creativity and proliferation, its formal and medial contours that shape and enable cultural expression. The dimensions of cultural expressivity that disclose themselves in this process cannot be personalized, but they are not universal either. Form functions here as a "post-humanist" category, as Cary Wolfe writes in reference to Niklas Luhmann (one could also call it "machinic," to recall the terminology introduced earlier); it proves to be instrumental in the *production* of meaning—no concomitant circumstance, but the real object of the cultural analysis. To return to the logic of popular seriality, this means that the formal principles of the serial not only *give room* to ideas and models of thought (or ideologies) but also actively *give life* to them, and they then effectively determine their circulation and dissemination. The form of the serial needs to be seen in close conjunction with the media through which it is being actualized and with the ideological regimes within which these actualizations take place. In the course of this examination, not only does a distinction between form and content become moot; the distinction between figure and background or theme and horizon needs to be critically reviewed as well (see Engell 2001, 2004).

This study does not aim to be a typological assessment, a catalogue, or an all-comprising compendium of Fu Manchu manifestations throughout the twentieth century; it relies on case studies to make its point. These case studies focus on material that marks transitional moments, breaks, or disruptions in the serial flow. In particular, I am interested in instances of "rebooting" or "reconfiguration"—such as when a new medium takes over the narration, or when larger political and social circumstances necessitate a reframing or rearrangement of the ideological repertoire of meaning making. These reboots are often provoked by the implementation of new horizons of medialization (the introduction of new formats, the advent of new technologies, the emergence of new aesthetics, or the development of new techniques of representation). They all have to manage the tricky task of introducing a new Fu Manchu while keeping the familiar figure intact. The Fu Manchu narratives thus become veritable engines of translation and iteration—and with this they exemplarily serve to scrutinize the workings of ideology. To get a grip on these larger dimensions of seriality, which envelop and propel the popular narratives, one needs to first understand politics and society in their serial dimensions.