Distributing Silent Film Serials

Local Practices, Changing Forms, Cultural Transformation

Rudmer Canjels

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Introduction

SERIALITY IN MANY FORMS

In June 1911 French artist Édouard Vuillard finished for the young American expatriate Marguerite Chapin a painted view of Place Vintimille in springtime. Vuillard had made previous paintings of this lovely Parisian square that could be seen from Vuillard's fifth floor apartment window and would produce more of these views for many years to come.[1] However, this one was rather unique as it was a five-panel decorative screen whose image would change with each movement or different reconfiguration, as it took on a different function in a different setting. The square itself, shown from a bird's-eye view, covers four of the five panels of the screen while at the bottom and on the left-most panel the rue de Calais can be seen with carts, a horse tram, and many passers-by. At the end of the street the shops on the Rue de Bruxelles can be seen. In the park that covers more than half the work, the trees are glimmering with spring freshness while children are playing on the lawn. Vuillard only produced three such decorative screens, and *Place Vintimille* was his last. Nowadays, these folding screens no longer function in the same way as they have become precious works of arts and as a result are rarely reconfigured.[2]

The phenomenon witnessed here is characteristic for a very specific film form that is researched in this study. This example demonstrates that an object is always connected to its surroundings and that the object itself, and thus the way it is viewed, can be transformed when it is placed in a different setting or given a different function. Films are also consumed in specific locally developed contexts and conditions, something that becomes most clear when films are imported and "translated" into a country's film culture. Most commonly, when reviewing such local appropriations, only one or a few films are researched in their different surroundings. However, as I am researching a unique and important film form, one that was different from the feature, I will go beyond the scope of the singular film product. In order to research this film form, however, a specific research method is needed.

Like the decorative screen, this film form is constantly adapted and restructured in response to local film cultures as well as cultural contexts.

This special transformative quality can only be unearthed if it is viewed in a comparative framework, thus not from any one country's perspective but from a transnational one. It is through distribution (call it the act of movement of Vuillard's screen) that this unique film form is transformed in a complex process of translation and reconfiguration. As the film form that will be discussed constituted itself in several countries that also produced their own versions which were subsequently exported to other countries as well, an underlying pattern becomes clear that is not sufficiently taken into account in film historical research. Of course, here also the analogy with Vuillard's screen breaks down because the films of this research are much stronger reworked, recut, reconfigured, and imitated.

The film form from which all these reactions can be seen emanating is still known today, but this study will focus on the silent film period, as it was in the period of the 1910s and 1920s that this film form was most influential and widespread, though little researched until now: the film serial.

SERIAL FORMS AND DISCOURSES

Seriality, when a work appears in successive parts, is a phenomenon that has been around for centuries, in oral form and in writing. However, a mass form of seriality only could come into being within an industrial society and a mass culture through which production and distribution of serial narrations could be regularized on a large scale. In the 19th century, when the mechanical printing press, new ink, and new paper had made production easier, many monthly, weekly, and daily periodicals appeared. Serial novels soon became regular features and proved immensely effective as a means of attracting and keeping readers. Serialization was adapted for several fictional genres and eventually crossed media boundaries. The serial novel in newspapers and magazines is nowadays less visible, but it is still used in many countries. For instance, it still pops up every now then, in America with Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) in *Rolling Stone* magazine or John Grisham's *A Painted House* (2000) in *Oxford American*, or in the United Kingdom with Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) in *The Guardian*. Other forms are still used as well. Stephen King's *The Green Mile* (1996) consisted of six short novels, each released a month apart in the supermarket. Independently released novels that use seriality in continuing form are not to be forgotten either, witness Stephen King's *The Dark Tower* (1982–), J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* (1997–2007), or Stieg Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy* (2005–2007). Comics (appearing in newspapers and separately) with ongoing storylines are also still popular.

Serial structures are also found in other media. Some toes are dipped in the digital water, often with very mixed results, like serial novels on the internet or serialized Twitter literature by Rick Moody.[3] But more popular, on television, soaps, series, and miniseries all exhibit serial traits, successfully attracting and keeping an audiences, witness *Lost* (2005–2010)

or *24* (2001–2010). Lately, a new spurt of films with a serial structure have come out, new episodes of *Star Wars* (1977–2005), of Harry Potter's life at Hogwart (2001–2011), or the Twilight saga (2008–2010), trilogies like *The Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003) and *The Matrix* (1999–2003), the two-part *Kill Bill* (2003–2004) and *Chi Bi* (*Red Cliff*, 2008–2009), or in a media-combination like *La Meglio Gioventù* (*The Best of Youth*, 2003), the six-hour Italian television miniseries that internationally was screened in cinemas in two parts.

Besides functioning as films and television series, several of these serial productions are part of a transmedia experience that is consumed in large numbers. Through interconnected texts the extending story realm can be followed, for instance from novels, film, and television, into websites, computer games, comics, or alternate reality games. Consumers of these storyworlds can be confronted more than ever at any time during their daily life with different connected media, as recent research by Henry Jenkins or Jonathan Gray shows us.[4] With it, the private viewing and consumption practice is extended into a more public one, where also diegetic and non-diegtic distinctions can become blurred. Such differences in serial structures and the various adjustments, as well as proliferating transmedia circulations and consumption that responded to daily life, were also present in the silent-film era, as will become clear with this research.

It should not cause any surprise that seriality since the advent of mass reproduction especially has provoked resentment for its economically calculated form. Fear of cultural shallowness caused by standardization and production in series is rather old and can already be found in the 19th century in discussions by cultural critics on the printing of serial novels and cheap dime novels. Seriality has been seen as part of the culture industry, where products according to Theodor W. Adorno "are tailored for consumption by masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufactured more or less according to plan."[5] Its standardization was not only part of production, but can be explained as an effect of distribution.[6] Serials seem to perfectly fit this angst of mass culture in the debate on high versus low culture. Can an intellectually stimulating product ever be produced, if a serial and repetitive structure is at its base? According to Antonio Gramsci this was possible as the popular cultural form could be "raised" to "artistic" literature again.[7] He saw Fyodor Dostoyevsky using forms of the serial in order to write artistic fiction and thought more such authors were needed to create a large audience drawn from those who were once serial readers.[8] Such different appreciations can also be seen in film where serial forms connect to rather negative cultural opinions on seriality, whereas some thought the form could also function to connect to a larger audience while maintaining artistic worth.

As Gramsci correctly indicated, there indeed was seriality not only in popular culture, but also in different forms for the cultural elite. This can also be seen in the present day where serialism can be found in visual artist Sol LeWitt's *Serial Project #1* and his *Incomplete Open Cubes* projects.[9]

Or perhaps more appealing to one's serial imagination are the already mentioned views of Place Vintimille in Paris (1909–1928) by Vuillard or Claude Monet's series of haystacks (1891), his façades of the Rouen Cathedral (1892–1894), or his water lilies (1900–1919) that create a story of the passing of time. Though Adorno might think that seriality was part of a well-structured mechanism of mass production, seriality was not just a simple form that is used universally in the same way; audiences are not captivated passively just because there is a serial structure. Roger Hagedorn seems to suggest this when he claims that "as new media technology is introduced commercial exploiters have consistently turned to the serial form of narrative presentation precisely in order to cultivate a dependable audience of consumers."[10] Hagedorn sums up various examples that support his point: serialized novels, film serials, comic strips, and soap operas all appeared at or near the launch of their respective medium, and all were used explicitly to increase its consumption. However, in his study there is no space for the different national practices surrounding distribution and consumption of serial texts. The different media are not compared to each other, nor the different forms within one medium.

Seriality, in other words, is not a fixed form within one medium, as there appear to have been many different forms of seriality, some more successful than others. Unfortunately, in research that has been conducted on serial forms in different media, the advantages of comparative research have not been applied. Research on serial literature in England has for instance resulted in many studies focusing on 18th-century book series or the Victorian serial publishing schemes of Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Anthony Trollope.[11] Nevertheless, there has been little comparison of serial texts from different cultural and national backgrounds. Thus, although it is often stated that passengers arriving in New York from Europe in January 1841 were asked whether little Nell was still alive or had passed away, this fact is only cited as an example of the success of Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop*, but not, for instance, as an example of how Dickens's worldwide success in using the serial had shaped international publishing methods. While the novel in installments was very popular in England, in France serial novels (*feuilletons*) were the craze. Stories of Honoré de Balzac (*La Vieille Fille*) and Eugène Sue (*Les Mystères de Paris* and *Le Juif Errant*) were first published as daily serial novels in the newspapers.[12] As a result the circulation of these newspapers skyrocketed. Different serial patterns, distribution methods, and local transformations from other countries have not, however, been studied comparatively, with the result that the cultural and economic logics of these serial forms remain hidden.[13]

The field where it seems at least a view on local serial productions can be had is in the research on television soap operas that has been going on since the mid-1980s. At first the research focused on American daytime and prime-time soap operas like *As the World Turns* (1956–2010) and *Dallas* (1978–1991) at home and abroad; later interest refocused on forms of domestically produced soaps. British soaps, Latin American

Telenovelas, French Canadian *Téléromans*, and European re-soapings of Australian formats were researched and added to a view of a successful global soap structure, while at the same time unsuccessful soap exports were also mapped.[14] However, what is often still missing in this research, mostly focused on textual analysis and cultural influences, is an international comparative view on distribution patterns of both imported and locally produced soaps as here also both the serial form and the reception are likely to be influenced by these patterns.

In film studies, a refocusing on the different local productions of seriality has not yet taken place. In addition to being discussed as a side note in relation to the feature in whose shadow it is placed, the serial film form is usually seen as conforming to the standard of the American two-reel serial. Recent studies treat film serials and their audiences with the complexity they deserve, but mostly remain centered on the American use of the serial.[15] Ben Singer connects the American silent serial to forms of stage melodrama and discusses audiences' reactions to these forms, and Shelley Stamp discusses economic relations and the female audience infatuation with the plucky heroines of the silent serials.[16] Film seriality includes, however, not only action-packed American serials with their serial queens. Seriality was present in a range of heterogeneous forms. If one looks closely this can be seen in America, but it is in Europe that a varied palette of seriality existed on a large scale, used in several genres in several lengths. Additionally, by comparing serials across different countries, the transformative character of seriality in a local setting is directly connected with distribution. This research thus proposes, through a comparative study, a new interpretation: within the international film industry of the silent-film period, seriality was influenced by distribution as this was the most important factor in creating film forms and local serial transformations.

SOURCES OF SERIALITY

Since the advent of the revisionist paradigm in film historiography, the so-called "new film history," interest has grown in locally customized films. Films are seen not as a constant product fit for each country, but also as a product that can be manipulated for a local market.[17] As Andrew Higson writes, "when films do travel, there is no certainty that audiences will receive them in the same way in different cultural context. Some films of course are physically altered for different export markets, whether in terms of subtitling, dubbing, re-editing or censorship. But even where they are not altered, audiences can still take them up in novel ways."[18] Indeed films are often changed for export reasons, and there are even more ways of alteration than Higson quickly sums up, such as adjusting the length, ending, or music.[19]

A vital and important part of film seriality is that through cultural circulation it is transformed into a different form. This phenomenon is hardly

noticeable when one researches seriality from the viewpoint of a single country; it can only become clear by looking at several countries. Comparison of how national and international serial films were distributed in several different countries reveals how seriality functioned on an international level as well as on national and local levels, corresponding with differences in regulation, taste, and tradition. Through its comparative approach this study goes beyond the already well-known forms of seriality, such as the American two-reel form, and presents a much larger and more varied palette. It also provides a new focus on international film development, especially on distribution.[20]

For this study on film seriality, I will compare how the two biggest European producers of serials, France and Germany, both developed and transformed seriality in their distribution patterns. As a comparison where different sets of needs and views can be seen, I have also chosen to research seriality in the Netherlands, a country with only a very small film production (only one serial was produced), thus having a film culture mostly consisting of imported productions. I will also research the impact of American serials on the European countries as well as how European serial productions were released in America. This will exemplify the differences between American and European seriality and show the different viewpoints on seriality, the importance of alternating film forms, as well as cultural discourses. The four countries in this study have been chosen, with specific reasons but to the exclusion of several other serial-producing countries, for two reasons: each of these four countries is important in the history of European serial production and/or offers crucial evidence of distribution and exhibition networks.

During the period of the 1910s and 1920s of the silent-film period, various other European countries also produced film serials, including Italy, Denmark, England, and Spain. Apart from Italy, these countries, however, never maintained serial productions as a significant part of their film production for more than a few years in the 1910s and none of them to the extent that France or Germany did. However, because several of their products were released in the countries of my main focus, some of these productions will be noted as well to avoid an unbalanced view of European film seriality.

Studying film seriality in various countries is not an easy task, as there was an abundance of seriality in the silent period. For instance, in America around 280 serials (each with around 12 to 15 two-reel episodes) were produced, in France around 100 serials of both short and long length, and in Germany around 35 feature serials (not counting the around 100 feature serial productions of only two parts). Because each of these countries' productions are exported, the number of serials or episodes and the number of meters or feet that were present in a country can be even many times greater than national production figures would suggest. Apart from the laborious task of identifying the original production of these serial products in each country, one also has to be aware of the fact that serial productions often appeared in different (serial) forms and sometimes their seriality

was no longer present. Additionally, there are, though indeed rarely, those productions that originally did not have any seriality at all, but were given it upon local showing.

It quickly became clear during this international comparative research on serial products that the opportunity to analyze and research the serial productions on a filmic textual level is rarely available.[21] This also points to a fundamental issue: the problem of the text. Local versions of film productions (serial or not) are often not preserved by archives, especially if an original version has already been restored by an archive in the country of origin. Some archives, such as the EYE Film Institute Netherlands, have decided to preserve elements of local adjustments. In the EYE film collection are for instance sound serials, not only in their original form, but also in their cut-up localized versions, the leftovers, as well as screening clips that were shown for exhibitors that contained an accumulation of cliffhangers. However, more could be done to preserve these local adjustments, while more archives should become more aware that local adjustments formed an important part not only in their own film culture, but are linked internationally as well. Each time the serial form came in contact with different film practices and cultural contexts through local adaptation a different film was created. Thus even if there luckily still is an original silent serial version left (and most of them are gone), finding a localized version of it is an almost impossible venture.[22] The few "local" episodes of a serial I have been able to see no longer have a corresponding "original" version. This also raises the question of what an "original" exactly is. As also becomes clear in this study, changes and differences not only appear in an international setting, but also can differ region to region, theatre to theatre, as well as over time with recuts and re-releases.

From the preceding it can be deduced that it is through a comparative study of distribution that the patterns of seriality can be seen as active and changing products that are not merely passively distributed upon import. As distribution is not just an autonomous realm in the film industry and the local serial forms cannot be torn loose from their surrounding local practices, specific cultural conditions and contexts that influenced reception and further production are also examined in this research. My research will show that even if the localized film serials had been abundantly preserved and could be analyzed, distribution patterns would have remained a more important factor to research, as it was through distribution that the serial texts were constantly changed.

My primary sources to view seriality and its distribution patterns are mostly film trade journals and major newspapers, supplemented with (non-film, trade-related) cultural magazines, all from the various countries that I have studied. Reviews as well as distributor and exhibitor promotions were used to examine and extract distribution patterns that show the transformative nature of seriality. Additionally, as serials were one of the most heavily advertised film productions, other sources that are important in this research are the various publicity materials such as press books and posters

that give an indication as to how the serial productions were intended to be appreciated by audiences. The tie-in promotions of the serial narrative that appeared in newspapers, cheap booklets, and novels also will be studied to define local uses of serials as well as to give an impression of how they touched daily life. Censorship records shall also be used, especially as serials could cause national concern about sensation.

Reception and various discourses that surrounded the serial forms can be taken from reviews, articles, and industry opinions, though one has to be careful with these at times problematic sources. As Ben Singer points out, "trade journals articles and editorial usually are valuable as historical evidence less for their ostensible content than for the wishful thinking and underlying discursive agendas they betray."[23] This is indeed a fair warning, as especially with serials there often was the feeling of invasion and being overrun by the massive numbers. However, it remains important to unearth these surrounding discourses as otherwise the impact of the transformations one can observe cannot be understood. I thus carefully and critically try to be aware of continually changing contexts in which reception occurred in the different countries and the approach of these sources that often served their reading public with opinions from a specific view and desire, while the interests of the film industry itself was often not far away.

DEFINING THE SERIAL FORM

In the English language there is rather a loose use of the terms serial and series. Film productions like *Harry Potter* or *The Lord of the Rings* are often in reviews called series, but so are the James Bond films that clearly follow a rather different pattern, while *Star Wars* is a production that is often called a serial. Episodic television programs that feature returning characters are mostly called series (with the exception of soap operas), even though since the 1980s soaps, mini-series, and series have increasingly appeared in hybrid forms making more use of seriality. This vagueness of the use of the serial form and the differences between the series forms was also present during the silent-film period.[24]

In America in the early 1910s, the terms series and serial were used not very specifically, even as what today would be a fine example of a "proper" American serial, could be advertised as a series or even as "a picturized romantic novel" or "film novel."[25] It was after 1915 that most cliffhanger productions were called a serial. In France there were, with the passing of time, increasingly more names and distinctions used for the serial production, such as: *ciné-roman*, *film en série*, *film à épisodes*, *film à époques*, *film à chapitres*, and sometimes *serial* (then there are also later uses of *ciné-feuilleton* or *roman-ciné*). However, though some classification system of the different terms is made, it still was not used very strictly. In the Netherlands the most common term, covering nearly everything, was *seriefilm* (though it was once suggested to distinguish the American serial by using

the potentially confusing tag *film-serie*).[26] In Germany serial productions were called *Episodenfilm*, *Serienfilm*, or *Fortsetzungsfilm*, while they also could be classified as the less specific *Großfilm* or *Monumentalfilm*.

To complicate matters even more, there are the differences in length and use of seriality, not only between American serials and European, but also between for instance French and German serials as well as on a national level. An important part of this study is the transformative aspect of seriality: series could become serials, serials could change into features, and features into serials. With all these different, changing, and overlapping uses of seriality, it becomes clear that it is necessary to use a very basic definition of a serial, one that would include very loose forms of seriality by which it would be possible to grasp the inter-cultural changes and transformations of seriality.

In his research on American serials, Kalton C. Lahue makes the following distinction between series and serials: "a serial contained the same leading figures in the cast, and it had a plot which interconnected each episode, whether these divisions were complete in themselves or were 'cliff-hangers.' A series, although it might contain the same cast, had no broad connecting plot between chapters."[27] In defining seriality, it is indeed useful to look at the definition of the series, as this will be a film form I will not be dealing with (unless it was changed into a serial form). Raymond Stedman sees a series as having "[c]haracters and sometimes locales [that] continued; yet the individual motion pictures appeared in random and never-specified fashion. Audiences did not go to the theater with the idea that they were seeing part of a whole, nor did they know with certainty that there would be another such film."[28] Umberto Eco explains the series (that is *Superman*), as each time having a sort of virtual beginning that ignores where the preceding events had left off.[29] Because of this lack of a past and memory, it is almost virtually impossible for a character to develop or to change (as does James Bond). The episodes have, except for a superficial theme such as the adventures of a reporter or detective, no connection with each other. The story stands on its own and is self-contained.[30]

This series form, as I thus see it, can clearly be seen in the well-known production of *The Hazards of Helen* (1914–1917). The production constituted 119 episodes of one reel that were tied together by the return of the Helen character (the first 48 were played by Helen Holmes, the remaining 71 by Helen Gibson) and the often recurrent theme of railroad action. However, each time a different event happens that does not connect with any of the previous episodes. Episodes could be seen in any order, as Helen does not have any evolving memory or sense of history. Theatres thus could, and did, pick each episode themselves and show the episodes out of order. With a serial it was usually known how many episodes would be made, and they had a pre-designed beginning and ending. Episodes of a series are produced as long as they are popular. Because of their non-connected structure, series will not form a part of this research, as it was through the inter-connectedness that seriality could be used flexibly and have major influences on the film industry. Film series such as *The Hazards of Helen*,

and structural equivalents in other popular genres of comic, western, detective, or crime series, such as those belonging to characters as Bébé, Broncho Billy, Nick Carter, Zigomar, Maciste, or Lieutenant Daring, will however in this research not be the focus and will only be dealt with when the structure was changed. That this focus can easily cause difficulty shows the five-part French production of *Fantômas* (1913–1914). Most *Fantômas* chapters are more like episodes from a series, where each time the villain escapes in the end and episodes can be viewed in any order. However in the second episode, the film ends with a cliffhanger, and the exciting storyline is continued in the next chapter. That seriality is present in the narrative, but not used as an overall structure, is seen when at the beginning of episode five Fantômas is suddenly in jail in Belgium while at the end of the previous episode he of course had escaped (all of this is caused by the adaptation of the equivalent novels, sometimes skipping a few editions).

In this study the definition of a "serial" is restricted to a series of episodes (not necessarily released at fixed intervals) with the same main characters and an overarching or a continuing narrative.[31] The episodes could end with a cliffhanger, but also with a more self-contained ending where one situation might have been resolved, but the ultimate goal had not been achieved yet, as long as the episodes are not interchangeable and a predetermined sequence is present. But given that this research is all about shifting forms, I shall refrain as much as possible from using labelling.

ORGANIZING SERIALITY

Seriality in the silent-film period will be researched through a comparative study of the forms of serial distribution in the United States, Germany, France, and the Netherlands. The study will make clear the importance, development, and adaptive nature of this unique film form. This research consists of a total of nine chapters organized into four sections, each of which explores a specific aspect of film seriality. The nine chapters will more or less follow a chronological order, beginning with the first serial uses in America in the early 1910s and ending with its disappearing into the shadows in Europe in the late 1920s, though the focus is mostly on the period during the First World War until the early 1920s when seriality was most present in the film industry.

This study begins with an examination of seriality and how the form was first used in various film productions and film forms. By looking at the various uses of seriality, I will argue for a different way of seeing serials and seriality: not as a transitional film form on its way to feature form, but, especially from an international viewpoint, as an autonomous form. In the first chapter I will look at how in America seriality and serials were transformed through distribution. The serial film was not only used by the still well-known serial producers Universal or Pathé, but was in fact developed by Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) members Edison,

Kalem, Lubin, and Selig, while seriality also can be seen in the quality productions by Vitagraph as well as D.W. Griffith's early works at Biograph. Seriality developed into a film form that functioned for several years as the feature in the film program, while the multiple-reel feature was not yet the common standard. Chapter 2 will focus on a different way in which seriality was initiated; in Germany it was linked to the *Monopolfilm* distribution practice, whereas foreign film productions became harder to get during the war. Thus by examining and comparing both national as well as international distribution practices, it becomes clear that the serial and seriality served different functions as a film form alongside the feature.

In the second part of this study, it will be shown that the object of this research is constantly fluid and in change as the serials were localized. I will explore in three chapters the flexibility of seriality as it could appear in several forms and was able to transcend itself by absorbing and integrating locality. Chapter 3 will discuss how, through the use of complementary information released through different media, the narrative could be interwoven with the fabric of daily public experience (in a way similar to today's long-running narratives like soaps). I will look especially at how in France in 1915–1916 an American serial trilogy with Pearl White was released with a tie-in as *Les Mystères de New-York* and how it functioned in that country in wartime, as it took part in a national discourse trying to accommodate and appeal to national sensibilities. In Chapter 4, I will deal with the contribution of *Die Herrin der Welt* (1919), at that time Germany's largest and costliest serial with its feature-size episodes, to the German establishment of modern advertizing strategies. Seriality turned the film into a nationalistic, star-celebrity, gigantic spectacle event. This will lead me to Chapter 5, which looks at the effect of local practices of distribution on *Les Mystères de New-York* as well as *Die Herrin der Welt*, as these productions were both distributed in the Netherlands in 1920.

Continuing the discussion on changing film forms begun in earlier chapters, it will become clear in the two chapters of part three that serial productions were not only adaptable to local discourses, but also could stimulate and interact with these cultural contexts and discourses. They were consumed in locally specific cultural conditions that influenced reception and further production, as they for instance connected with national views on America or Europe, conflicts between high and low culture, or the (international) film industry. Chapter 6 will focus on the arrival of the American serial in Germany in 1921, when Germany was confronted with an abundance of cheaply made American products of a mass medium that provoked strong negative reactions in many film journals and newspapers, but also imitation and praise. In Chapter 7, I will reverse this view and deal with how the European serial functioned in the perceived invasion of European productions into America around the same time, even though there usually was no serial form left.

The final part four deals with seriality at a time when both in America and Europe hegemonic structures of both serial and feature productions

were questioned and struggled with. Chapter 8 starts with an examination of the relationship between the production and distribution of several American productions of Erich von Stroheim. This focus on von Stroheim illustrates the dictation of standardized format uses as well as apparently the only way to attain possibilities for American feature seriality. It was with the arrival of European feature serials that seriality was noticed for the first time in America. Finally, part four will conclude with Chapter 9 that deals with the changing effects of serial appreciation and usages, as from the early 1920s it was becoming an increasingly less-used film form in France and Germany, until it all but disappeared at the end of the 1920s. However, it will become clear that the diminished use of seriality in Europe was not a process of a transitional form leading up to the feature. The decline in the use of seriality, especially in France, was accompanied by the presence of different forms and uses as pressures for change, some emanating from local discourses, grew.

In the end, with the arrival of sound, seriality did not disappear from the cinema, though at times it would become less visible. Its principle remained as it was adapted in different contexts and different production and distribution strategies that can still be seen today in different media as well (such as radio, television, and computer games). This research on seriality from the silent-film period can help us see how present-day serial film and television forms are still being shaped by local distribution practices, as serial forms are still being adapted to specific local practices and contexts with different results.

Figure I.1 Cartoon by J. Hémard, *Almanach du Cinéma 1922* (Paris).

Part I

Film Seriality and Its Serial Uses

Transition and Beyond

Introduction to Part I

Serials have long been ignored in film history and have only recently become the focus of research. In the broader works on film history, serials have been presented in relation to the development of the feature and remain because of this in its shadow. For instance, Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell maintain that "[s]erial episodes can be seen as a kind of transitional form between the one-reeler and the feature films", whereas Richard Koszarski sees the serials as "a useful bridge between the short film and the feature during the crucial 1913–1915 period."[1] The term "transitional" implies a temporary period of time, whereas in fact the serial held a unique position that was not gone within a couple of years. Koszarski's bridge concept could have been made more useful had he developed it further. In Koszarski's use it remains a bridge for one-way traffic, an inadequate characterization of the role seriality played in film history.

The serial, though, was indeed used in a period when American exhibition and distribution practices were undergoing rapid transformation, propelled by the changing role of the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) and the start of the First World War. Alongside and interacting with these changes was the transition from short to feature. One should not, however, automatically assume that the serial functioned only as a transitional form in this complicated web of transformations. As Ben Singer and Shelley Stamp point out, the serial was not some kind of nursery for the development of the feature film: "continuing chapter plays offered a wholly unique narrative form, one whose openness and intertextuality explicitly contravened the codes of classical narrative so enshrined in early features."[2] In addition to often being discussed only as a side note in relation to the feature, the serial form is usually seen as conforming to the standard of the American two-reel serial. However, seriality was present in a range of heterogeneous forms.

This first part looks at the development of the serial in America and Germany and will demonstrate that the serial was present in various lengths and forms. The serial functioned not in opposition to the feature, but acted more in correspondence, and mostly as an autonomous form, influenced as it was by distribution practices.

1 Seriality Unbound

Because seriality was important not only for the development of the serial but also for the feature, I will in this chapter not immediately go to what in film literature could be recognized as safer havens of seriality to titles like *What Happened to Mary* (1912), *The Adventures of Kathlyn* (1913), *The Perils of Pauline* (1914), or outside America to *Les Vampires* (1915–1916) in France or *Homunculus* (1916) in Germany. Before but also during the development of the feature, seriality was already present in various non-serial film forms that were fluid and depended on innovations in production and distribution. There are many points of departure when delving into the seriality of non-serials. Interesting starting points could, for instance, include the seriality of numbers and order in early film catalogues and film programs; the succession of views and the mapping of space in travelogues; the cut-up narrative of 60-second Kinetoscope films, like the episodes of a boxing match; the order of *tableaux vivant* scenes in Passion Plays like Lumière's *La Vie et la Passion de Jésus-Christ* (1898); or the use of the bricolage narrative mode that is reminiscent of a vaudeville program or variety show. However, I will examine in this chapter the coming of films longer than one reel, a development that took place from around 1908 to the mid-1910s. It is here that we can see the power struggles and problems of regularization in America that will also be important for the serial film. I will discuss the use of the reel-break within a multiple-reel feature as well as the episodic feature. The positioning of the feature and the serial is not straightforward, but shifts and takes place on different levels: various interests were at stake, while within several groups different directions were taken.

CONSISTENT CONVENTIONS

Seriality is connected strongly with and dependent on production and distribution possibilities and conventions that are often directly linked with the perceptions of the film industry itself on how a feature could function best. It was thus the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) that

played an important role in the development of the American serial. The MPPC was an American monopoly trust formed at the end of 1909 by the leading film companies: Edison, Vitagraph, Biograph, Kalem, Lubin, Selig, Essanay, Pathé Frères, and Méliès, along with the distribution company of George Kleine. This consortium, also often referred to as the "Trust", was organized to control and impose a monopoly over film production, distribution, and exhibition in America. All members had become successful through the production of one-reelers.

Though MPPC members were allegedly less progressive in creating and applying new industry practices than the independent (non-MPPC) film companies, the fact is that members of the MPPC did promote stars and did experiment with feature forms. However, as Michael Quinn writes in his study on distribution and the transition to the feature film, MPPC's films were mostly conceived, marketed, and sold as indistinguishable products, with little attempt to differentiate.

> In production, the Trust's emphasis was on releasing a variety of films of different genres, rather than on structuring narratives around stars or complex stories. Although a film was occasionally noteworthy, this was not the norm. In distribution, the MPPC's one- and two-reelers were rented in a group rather than individually, and at most MPPC theatres the program was changed daily.[1]

In this way an audience was created and maintained that went to the cinema no matter what was on the bill, rather than coming to see a specific production. The producers belonging to the MPPC were not the only ones who were obstinate in their preference for one-reelers, as the independent and MPPC-related distributors and exhibitors were also reluctant to change.[2]

Before 1915 the term feature in America was not always connected to a film of a certain length.[3] The term, borrowed from the variety theater tradition, was used when a film was distinctly different from the others and special advertising and billing could be brought into play. The anticipated added value through differentiation was more important than the film's length. However, because these special films were usually longer, length and differentiation soon came to mean the same thing. The exhibition of a feature first usually took place in legitimate theaters and opera houses, thus outside the established distribution system. These new exhibition strategies can be seen as part of a general trend toward longer prestige and quality films.[4] Feature films stayed longer in these establishments, enabling distributors and exhibitors to make more use of advertising than was possible with a daily program of changing shorts. Until 1912 no regular production schedule or schedule of release for these features existed, making it hard for exhibitors to rely on a steady output. The development of the longer feature required changes not only in production, but also in distribution and exhibition.[5]