

Cinema and Seriality

22nd Sercia Conference, Sept. 8–10, 2016 Université Paris Diderot /
Fondation des Etats-Unis / Université Paris Ouest La Défense/ Université
du Havre / Guest Normandie

Abstract:

Kathleen Loock, Freie Universität Berlin (Germany)

Hollywood's Serial Modes of Storytelling

In the face of the dramatic changes the movie industry has recently undergone, Hollywood has embraced high-concept, big-budget production policies that have intensified its old love affair with the franchise. In order to minimize risks, studios depend on presold properties and on serialization strategies that are invested in the future of a franchise, in establishing audience loyalty for the next release. This serial logic has lately gained a new market and cultural prominence, drawing attention not only to the longevity of certain franchises but also to Hollywood's capacities for potentially endless innovative reproduction. While serial modes of storytelling are currently thriving in both cinema and television, film seriality utterly lacks the cultural cachet of new, narratively complex TV shows. Reception in popular and academic circles is almost diametrically opposed: Whereas contemporary television's serial narratives thrill audiences and critics, lure established film directors, producers, writers, and actors to the small-screen medium, and have inspired a large body of academic research, cinema's serial narratives produce the reverse effects. Popular criticism routinely decries feature-film seriality as nothing more than a financial scheme expressive of Hollywood's waning creativity, and only few scholars take interest in film series, sequels, prequels, or remakes and their status *as* serial formats.

The present situation provides a timely opportunity to reflect on cinema's medium-specific varieties of feature-film seriality, on their

longstanding role in Hollywood history as well as on their ongoing evolution and renewal (as witnessed in the prequel format or the practice of the franchise reboot, for example). Cinema's serial narratives—like serial narratives in newspapers and on radio or television—always pose commercial and creative challenges, especially when long-running franchises are concerned. In contrast to the relatively fast-paced, regular rhythm of serial production and reception typical for other media (which is often program-based, following a daily or weekly schedule), however, Hollywood's elaborate mechanisms of producing and distributing a feature film are much slower so that seriality unfolds over a period of several years, decades, or entire generations. Long-running film franchises therefore provide temporal continuity markers for a culture and generate both knowledge about the historical development of cinema as a medium and a broader sense of belonging to a specific (media) generation.

This paper explores Hollywood's serial modes of storytelling, in particular the film remake, series, sequel, and prequel, within a theoretical framework of serialization. Drawing on recent academic publications,¹ on popular film criticism, and on a wide range of film examples, I discuss the serial characteristics of the film remake, series, sequel, and prequel, and outline the historical evolution of their production and reception.

Biographical Notice:

Kathleen Loock is a post-doc research associate in the Research Unit “Popular Seriality: Aesthetics and Practice” that is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and has its base at the John F. Kennedy Institute of the Freie Universität Berlin. She is currently working on a book that examines the cultural history of Hollywood remaking, from the transition to sound to the remakes, sequels, and prequels of the franchise era. She received her Ph.D. in American studies from the University of Göttingen; her dissertation, on the commemorative constructions and deconstructions of Christopher Columbus in the nineteenth- and

twentieth- century United States, was published as *Kolumbus in den USA: Vom Nationalhelden zur ethnischen Identifikationsfigur* (2014). Her other publications include the co-edited collections *Of Body Snatchers and Cyberpunks: Student Essays on American Science Fiction Film* (2011) and *Film Remakes, Adaptations, and Fan Productions: Remake/Remodel* (2012). She has edited a special issue on serial narratives for the journal *LWU: Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* (2014), and is currently preparing a co-edited special issue on film seriality for *Film Studies* (2017).

¹ Including Constantine Verevis, *Film Remakes* (2006); Jennifer Forrest, ed., *The Legend Returns and Dies Harder Another Day: Essays on Film Series* (2008); Carolyn Jess-Cooke, *Film Sequels: Theory and Practice from Hollywood to Bollywood* (2009); Carolyn Jess-Cooke and Constantine Verevis, eds., *Second Takes: Critical Approaches to the Film Sequel* (2010); Kathleen Loock and Constantine Verevis, eds., *Film Remakes, Adaptations, and Fan Productions: Remake | Remodel* (2012); Stuart Henderson, *The Hollywood Sequel: History & Form, 1911–2010* (2014); and Amanda Ann Klein and R. Barton Palmer, eds., *Multiplicities: Cycles, Sequels, Remakes and Reboots in Film and Television* (2016, forthcoming).