

Previously on the Quality Debate: Serialization and the Continued Practice of Cultural Hierarchization

Janina Rojek

ABSTRACT: This article examines and compares paradigmatic strands of the quality debates surrounding serialized narratives in nineteenth-century periodicals and in contemporary television. It explores the processes of cultural hierarchization, the media, and the spaces of reception, aspects that form the basis of quality debates in serial culture.

KEYWORDS: seriality; quality; periodical fiction; television

Introduction

The nineteenth century – although marked by tremendous social, political, and economic changes – could be labelled the reading age in the United States due to rising literacy rates and, especially after the Civil War, increasingly wide-spread and widely-read periodicals (cf. Lund, Denning, Okker). Between 1850 and 1900, the continuing story published in periodicals was the central mode of storytelling (Lund 21-22). The twentieth century, in turn, was dominated by television and in 1987, Sarah Kozloff identified television as the principle storyteller in ‘our’ (as I read it, Western) culture. In 2013, television is increasingly eclipsed by online streaming and video on demand services. However, what has not changed is the hunger – to employ a nineteenth-century metaphor – for serialized storytelling. Long-form narratives exist in various forms,¹ and in various media, for example film, television or comics; accordingly, Sabine Sielke regards seriality as “a dominant cultural practice” (388, my translation). I understand seriality as a term that encompasses all serial productions and as synonymous with serial culture. The term is, as Frank Kelleter points out, flexible and connected to various disciplines and theories, which is reflected in serial scholarship ranging from sociological questions of the “community-building functions of repeated or ritualized communications and forms” or philosophical theories on “repetition and variation” to media, literary, and cultural studies (18-19, my translation). He points out that media studies

¹ The various forms range, in terms of structure, from potentially endless stories without closure as in series (e.g., soap operas) to more episodic structures as in serials (e.g., police procedurals). In terms of length or number of installments, the category of series (here used as an umbrella term) can be extended to include miniseries, sequels, prequels, and spin-offs.

have been concerned with seriality mostly in terms of television series, whereas literary studies, he claims, often regard the subject either as trivial or connect it to issues of ideology; and cultural studies, on the other hand, reevaluate and thus elevate the supposed trivial status of pop-cultural productions (19). His arguments show that seriality does receive scholarly attention, and numerous newspaper articles on television series document a journalistic interest in seriality, yet three aspects of these discussions still strike me as noteworthy, and underproblematized. First, the space in which serial productions are discussed: academia and the arts and culture sections in newspapers. Second, the approach of these discussions, which carry an undertone of hierarchization since they employ, often implicitly, notions of 'quality.' And third, the time frame: the focus is mostly on present cultural productions, very seldom on past ones, and hardly ever on both. In this article, I will especially focus on the latter two aspects. I argue that an understanding of seriality today greatly benefits from – and might only be possible with – an understanding of seriality in the past. Accordingly, this article will address seriality by outlining the quality debate that is ultimately connected with it; however, not by just giving a historical description of this debate. Rather, I will put the discourses surrounding serialized storytelling in the late nineteenth and late twentieth century in a dialogue, thus considering past and present roles of seriality simultaneously. As Foucault notes in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, “historical descriptions are necessarily ordered by the present state of knowledge” (5). Furthermore, I believe, they are just as much governed by the perspective of the observer as Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka suggest in the introduction to their collection on *Media Archaeology*. They observe that “numerous studies and collections addressing the media’s past(s) in relation to their present have appeared in recent years,” but generally, they claim, “[t]he past has been visited for facts that can be exciting in themselves, or revealing for media culture at large, but the nature of these ‘facts’ has often been taken as a given, and their relationship to the observer and the temporal and ideological platform he or she occupies left unproblematized” (1-2). For an application of these observations and approaches, I have to clarify two aspects. First, Foucault’s understanding of the “archive” and “documents” a historical description is based on. Second, the relationship between observer and object. In his enlightening article “Foucault’s Mapping of History,” Thomas Flynn stresses that Foucault is not interested so much in the origin, the “arche,” as in the “archive” (Flynn 29),

which is, as Foucault writes “the set (*l’ensemble*) of discourses actually pronounced” (qtd. in Flynn 29). However, “not just any discourses,” Flynn clarifies, “but the set that conditions what counts as knowledge in a particular period” (29). Thus, an analysis of discourse needs to establish “who is speaking” (Foucault 50) and from which “institutional sites” (Foucault 51). Furthermore, “discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject,” but rather, this subject is embedded in, if not produced by discourse (Foucault 55). The discourse on serialized narratives and periodical fiction in the nineteenth century takes the form of quality and moral judgment, dispensed by editors of so-called quality magazines. Thus, their discourse produces them as authorities in the field and simultaneously eclipses other assessments. Here, the second observation by Huhtamo and Parikka comes into play: the ideological and temporal platform of the observer. My analysis of these discourses is necessarily informed by the quality debate of the twentieth century; and while this debate certainly sheds light on the quality debate a century earlier, it also highlights certain aspects. Rather than considering this as a limitation or shortcoming, I regard this as a chance to reassess historical groupings of cultural productions, pronounced unities, and supposed linear developments of the assessment of seriality and to point out discontinuities and ruptures of constructions of ‘quality.’ This article will therefore explore the reception space, cultural hierarchization, and the media of serialization in the nineteenth century against the backdrop of the twentieth-century quality debate on television series.

The twentieth-century quality debate which followed the advent of the second golden age of television postulated by Robert J. Thompson, initiated serious serial scholarship. As has become clear by now, debates about ‘quality’ are not unique to the television age but were preceded by similar discourses in the reading age of the nineteenth century. This indicates that cultural hierarchization is a continued practice. However, what is taken to constitute ‘quality’ changes over time as the retrospective ascription of ‘quality’ to already existing forms, for instance jazz music (Levine 232), illustrates. This highlights the ruptures in the discourse, for the notion of ‘quality’ and the categories of hierachization change. Keeping Foucault’s approach in mind, I will not establish a linear chronology of this discourse; rather, I will show where it breaks, changes, or is appropriated, by looking at the reception space, the carrier medium, and the reflection of the historical context in serialized storytelling.

Highbrow vs. Lowbrow: Notions of ‘Quality’ and Reception Space in the Nineteenth Century

Approaching the nineteenth century’s quality debate bears the danger of foregrounding the effects of industrialization and mass-marketing. However, I believe this misses the point, as it is exactly the retrospective establishment of a unity or linear development that Foucault argues against. Therefore, a critique of mass culture in general distorts the quality debate, as mass-circulated² national literary magazines presented themselves as the arbiters of high culture, and thus received the label ‘quality,’ even though they were industrially produced, mass-marketed, and highly commercial (exemplified by the inclusion of advertisements). Interestingly, the distinction is made with potential addressees:

Godkin [*The Nation*], Holland [*Scribner’s Monthly*], and Howells [*The Atlantic*] were men of intellect, dealing with publications directed to an upper-level audience. The new mass market, however, created by the steady improvement in machine technology, particularly the rotary printing press, were the prime target for another kind of publication and another kind of editor, one who understood mass tastes. (Tebbel 114)

Industrial production on a large scale might be a fact for the ‘quality monthlies’ as well as for the story-papers, but, as the observation by Tebbel illustrates, only for the latter is it mentioned and stressed, as it connotes lower ‘quality.’ In turn, addressees and editors of the ‘quality monthlies’ are foregrounded as they represent the (intellectual) upper class. The same process can be observed in the contemporary debate around ‘quality’ TV – both magazines and television are mass media, and their contents usually not the works of a single genius, but rather collaborative, often anonymous works. Thus the ‘quality’ label is not awarded due to individual creativity that marks supposedly ‘high’ culture (even though descriptions like Tebbel’s might mask this fact). How the label of ‘quality’ is then constructed deserves further attention. The distinction of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture that occurred in the

² “Mass” here is relative, of course, with pre-War “readerships numbering at best in the tens of thousands” (Tebbel and Zuckerman 142). For example, *Godey’s Lady’s Book* had 150,000 readers during the 1860s, which was then “considered an astonishing figure” (Tebbel and Zuckerman 142) and “*Harper’s* led the older quality journals with a paid readership of nearly 200,000 by 1891” (Tebbel and Zuckerman 142). In addition, subscription numbers do not match reader numbers (as magazines were shared); therefore, actual numbers are difficult to establish.

nineteenth century (albeit not with these exact terms) was subsequently accepted, challenged, and adapted in the twentieth century. What I mean with adaptation here is the transformation of the dichotomy of highbrow/lowbrow: it first emerged in the nineteenth century, and was then established and confirmed (expressed by labels such as ‘quality monthlies,’ as mentioned above, or the connotations that descriptive markers such as ‘story-paper’ came to carry), subsequently challenged by postmodernism’s rejection of canonization, and, as I read it, re-evoked in a different form with notions of ‘quality’ TV, that engages the debate on creativity and artisanship in a commercial mass-medium. Before elaborating on the re-emergence of cultural hierarchization with ‘quality’ TV, the first instance of this hierarchization in relation to serialized literature in the periodical press needs further examination.

What I want to concentrate on first are the spaces of reception, which serve as markers of high and low culture, meaning here not the physical places of reception, but the imagined space, both literally and within society, in which series were/are believed to be consumed. In the nineteenth century, popular magazines geared towards the middle-class family, all members of which were potential addressees, supposedly offered more wholesome and morally appropriate entertainment. This was sharply contrasted to the working-class magazines that dealt with more sensational matters (the most striking example being the numerous crime stories, often rooted in real-life incidents). Here, the reception space is connoted with judgments on high and low culture – spatial tropes become intimately connected to notions of ‘quality’: contrasted to the family magazines that are assumed to be consumed within the domestic, private space are the working-class publications (that is, story weeklies or dime novels) that are assumed to be consumed in a more public setting.

I believe that the connection of ‘quality’ with the domestic reception space reflects a larger trend of cultural hierarchization that Lawrence W. Levine examines in his study *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. His central focus lies on the perceived threat to public order – the cultural “elite’s” concern³ – that mass

³ This elite is not just “a handful of aristocrats,” but has “allies” in “the new industrialists as well

audiences allegedly posed. While noisy expression of disapproval and approval such as hissing, stamping, and applause (Levine 179) were considered normal audience behavior prior to the nineteenth century, it was increasingly regarded as “undisciplined” (Levine 179), a symptom of cultural demise in a time when society was faced “with a sense of loss, looming disorder and chaos” (Levine 173) due to structural changes such as industrialization and urbanization, spatial mobility, and immigration (Levine 176). While discourses on immigration expressed the most obvious aspects of this structural change, Levine does not only refer to immigrants in particular, but also to the newly emerged mixed mass audience, which was composed of an anonymous urban workforce. This “multiplicity,” as Levine calls it, became ‘problematic’ when it did not stay isolated but participated in public life and occupied public spaces, a development which “the elites” did not approve of (Levine 176-77). One reaction aimed at reestablishing traditional “order” was for members of this elite “to retreat into their own private spaces” (Levine 177). Another and a quite diametrically opposed reaction was “to transform public spaces by rules, systems of taste, and canons of behavior of their own choosing.” A third and final approach was to create incentives to assimilate immigrants to the elite’s culture to incorporate them (Levine 177). For reasons of scope and focus, I will not concentrate on the issue of assimilation; for my purpose, the larger trend of “bifurcation between the private and the public spheres of life” (198) is most important, for it explains why the domestic, private reception space came to connote ‘quality.’

Importantly, Levine is careful to remark that this hierarchization also excluded “a number of the new forms of expressive culture that were barred from high culture by the very fact of their accessibility to the masses” (232). However, some of them, for instance jazz music,

as many members of the new middle classes” (Levine 176); thus, they are a cultural elite (Levine also speaks of the “arbiters of culture,” 176). In terms of class, I roughly follow Michael Denning, who elaborates on his usage of class in *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America*. He stresses that “one must . . . distinguish between at least two levels of abstraction in class analysis: the analysis of modes of production . . . and the analysis of specific social formations, where one rarely finds pure classes but rather fractions of classes, and alliances between classes as the result of specific historical combinations of distinct modes of production, uneven economic development, and the legacy of earlier class struggles” (Denning 216). I use class as a term for social formations, which might be an internal or external classification by/for members of this class. Therefore, what Denning calls “*the rhetoric of class*” is important: “the words, metaphors, and narratives by which people figure social cleavages” (Denning 217, original emphasis).

later became re-categorized as high culture, as mentioned above. The strategies of control and the coupling of the private with notions of good taste illustrate the constructedness of cultural hierarchies and subsequent permeability of cultural boundaries. Such an understanding proves also important to understand today's elevated mass culture of serialized narratives on television, as they went through a similar process of exclusion, reconsideration, and elevation.

"It's Not TV." The Elevation of a Lowbrow Medium in the Late Twentieth Century

In his critical work *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman writes about television that it "always aims to achieve . . . applause, not reflection" (93). Thus, an examination of 'quality' TV seems almost paradoxical, since the medium carries the connotation of being inherently lowbrow. And with the television set, the lowbrow enters the domestic space, which then connotes mostly cheaply mass-produced, highly formulaic, and often plain trashy productions. This perception changes in 1996, with the publication of Robert J. Thompson's *Television's Second Golden Age*. Thompson delineates the temporal boundaries of this second golden age in the preface to Jane McCabe and Kim Akass' study *Quality TV. Contemporary American Television and Beyond*. There, he defines the "first phase" of 'quality' television – stretching "from the debut of *Hill Street Blues* in 1981 to the cancellation of *Twin Peaks* in 1991" (Thompson xvii) – and the following decade, often labelled post-network era (cf. Allrath et al.), as the second golden age. The reason for this is, according to Allrath et al., "[t]he development of new technologies and the emergence of a new aesthetic [which] are interdependent processes, which jointly have turned the 1990s into a period of major transformations of serialized TV narratives" (4). For the new millennium, Thompson argues, "[a]s far as hour-long dramas were concerned, it was hard to find a show in the autumn of 2000 that wouldn't have fallen into the category of 'quality TV' as defined in the 1980s" (Thompson xvii-xviii). Two aspects are noteworthy in respect to 'quality' discourses⁴: First, so-called 'quality' television first was closely connected to the

⁴ For an analysis of the production circumstances and values, see, for example: Castleman, Harry, and Walter J. Podrazik. *Watching TV. Six Decades of American Television*. 2nd ed. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2010. Print.

denial of its medium, as HBO's slogan "It's not TV. It's HBO" (1996-2009) indicates. Television still had not lost its stigma of the lowbrow and so serials were measured, in terms of their 'quality,' against the more established art forms (meaning here, popular cultural productions that were regarded as, but not necessarily termed, higher art) of the film and novel (cf. McCabe and Akass, Introduction), especially in order to describe aesthetics and narrative complexity. This was echoed in the cable channel AMC's slogan that simply stated "Story Matters Here" (2009-2013) and was subsequently updated to "Something More," implicitly referring to formulaic 'normal' TV.⁵ Here, the distinctive feature in comparison to 'normal' TV is not a reference to 'higher' art, but rather to the complexity of the story and its narration. Thus, and this is the second aspect that needs to be pointed out, 'quality' television is bound to – or at least heavily relies on – serialized narratives, as they display the style, complexity, and production values that serve as the categories in which 'quality' is measured. At this point, 'quality' needs to be defined, which is, admittedly, difficult. Sarah Cardwell differentiates the labels 'quality' and 'good,' whereby she regards the former as value-free: "We are able to conclude that something is of high quality based not on our own experience or critical judgement of it, but on our recognition of particular aesthetic features it contains. At this level, to label something 'quality television' is more like making a generic classification: it is comparable to agreeing that a certain film is a Western" (21). This approach does not make explicit the problems of generic classification, which simplifies the problem of ascribing the label 'quality.' What is interesting for my purpose, however, are not so much the suggested criteria for the 'quality' label, but more so the ongoing use of it – especially the need to ascribe it the status of value-free and measurable. Cardwell's categorizing of 'quality' relies on certain features:

American quality television programmes tend to exhibit high production values, naturalistic performance styles, recognized and esteemed actors, a sense of visual style created through careful, even innovative, camerawork and editing, and a sense of aural style created through the judicious use of appropriate, even original music. (26)

⁵ In an online article for *Adweek*, Anthony Crupi writes that the new slogan "is meant to speak to the network's promise to deliver shows that defy expectations" (n. pag.), which is different from, but does not contradict my reading of the line, especially since Crupi also notes how the slogan echoes HBO's former tagline.

The decision of what constitutes, for example, “innovative camerawork” is still based on someone’s judgment who must be considered an authority in the field and thus a cultural elite, which should be further problematized. However, Cardwell’s criteria do not dismiss a cultural production just due to its assumed addressees or production circumstances. In this respect at least it does not carry the undertone of cultural hierarchy. Another marker of ‘quality,’ she argues, is content and subject-matter: “American quality television also tends to focus on the present, offering reflections on contemporary society, and crystallising these reflections within smaller examples and instances” (26), which is directly comparable to serials’ timeliness, which I will examine as well. What marks good television is that it is experienced positively (Cardwell 31). Thus identifying good television demands of the viewer to “experience and respond to it” in “an exercise of critical judgement, a personal decision based upon our considered, sympathetic and (ideally) disinterested response to the details of a text” (Cardwell 31). I consider her categorization guidelines interesting, but her attempt to clearly distinguish between ascribing ‘quality’ and making value judgments seems rather constructed and does not consider the observer. What it does illustrate, however, is that ‘quality’ television creates an imagined community of viewers that distinguishes itself from implied ‘normal’ television viewers through their teleliteracy, that is, meta-knowledge of the genre and the television landscape and popular culture in general (cf. Kelleter, “Serien als Stresstest”), which might mark them as pop-cultural elite. This elite then is able, and I believe, perceives and presents itself as justified to ascribe the marker of ‘quality’ to certain productions and dismiss others as ‘standard.’ Cardwell summarizes her categorization techniques:

To determine quality, one need only refer to details of the programme and show that they exhibit fundamental defining features. To determine real value – to make a critical judgement and try to persuade others of it – one must both interpret the programme and evaluate it according to explicit criteria. (32)

She suggests that the basis to “initiate a serious, thoughtful and constructive debate about evaluation and critical judgement” is “close textual analysis” and the assumption that the evaluated programs are not just “artefacts of popular culture, but that they are rich, complex artworks worthy of sustained study in themselves” (33). This echoes the highbrow/lowbrow debate Levine identified as having taken place in the nineteenth century,

as it ascribes the status of the fleeting and ephemeral to popular culture, and implies that art, in contrast, is lasting. While I do not subscribe to Cardwell's supposed devaluation of ephemeral popular culture and regard her distinction between 'quality' and 'good' as problematic, the fact that she suggests these distinctions and their implication of a pop-cultural elite is interesting, for it illustrates a continued practice of serial scholarship and discourse. I do agree that television serials are very much artefacts of popular culture (which does not deny them the status of art) and are often expressive of their time period due to their engagement with contemporary concerns. This also holds true for periodical fiction in the late nineteenth century. What is neglected by Cardwell, however, are the implications of the supposed timeliness and the reflection and selection of contemporary concerns represented, which I will further explore in the following.

The Timeliness of Serialized Narratives

Serialized narratives are, according to Roger Hagedorn, the "ideal form of narrative presentation under capitalism" as they emerge "[i]n a social system which perpetually defers desire in order to promote continued consumption" (12). This is mimicked by serials with their installment structure. Historically, literary serials were most prominent in the latter half of the nineteenth century, which, as Linda Hughes and Michael Lund explain, brought about a conception of time "at once contracted and expanded" (5). What they mean is that the "speed of time's passage" (5) was perceived to increase because of technological developments. At the same time, new insights in natural sciences showed the earth's age and thus "acted to emphasize the immensity of time" (5). An awareness of time was also embedded in a strong sense of chronology that permeated human life (expanded by Darwin's theory of evolution) and was mirrored in the development of the serial story form that not only expanded over a longer stretch of time, but also followed a linear development (Hughes and Lund 5, 7). These aspects are not what attracted readers to serial publications consciously, and the exact correlation is impossible to determine, but Hughes and Lund's observations illustrate that the emergence of serial literature was also bound to the *zeitgeist* of its time and, more importantly, to the great social (urbanization) and economic (industrialization) changes in the nineteenth century. Serialized periodical fiction was only

possible due to and thus expressive of the era's technological innovations (5, 7): it reflected the times both in form and subject-matter, and it permeated all social spheres alike.

As serials in periodicals followed a more or less regular schedule, presented stories in a linear chronological order and extended over a longer period of time, they were strongly connected to the readers' "own sense of lived experience and passing time" (Hughes and Lund 8). Oliver Wendell Holmes, regular contributor to *The Atlantic*, "identified," according to Lund, as "one of the most basic appeals of serial literature, the way in which continuing stories got bound up in the audience's everyday consciousness, becoming landmarks in their progression through life" (Lund 41). The supposed influence of serialized fiction on the reader due to its intermingling with her or his everyday life then calls for control, for example, due to a fear of moral corruption, especially when young or female readers are concerned.⁶ Thus, it becomes infused with notions of morality, but also distinction, quality, and hierarchy, best exemplified by the idea of the reading community. Since the experience of serial reading was shared with an imagined community⁷ of readers over time, it helped foster a group identity – with the expansion of the literary market, this community expanded, too, but I believe identification, even if it is phrased in terms of the national, happened along boundaries of social spheres⁸ that correlated with the boundaries of the imagined reading community.

Another form of imagined community is that "of authors and audience" (Lund 42). Lund uses the example of Grace King's preface to her *Balcony Stories*, published in the December 1892

⁶ For an examination of this aspect, see Baym, Nina. *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984. Print.

⁷ The term is borrowed from Benedict Anderson and adapted, since he refers to nations as imagined communities. The community of readers is imagined in Anderson's sense because the readers – i.e., the members of the reading community – "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 7) in this case, of taste and interest.

⁸ Although it is not always explicitly stated in scholarship, the middle-class readership of the so-called 'quality' monthlies can be assumed to be 'WASP'; working-class and immigrant (often part of the working class) readers rather made up the target groups of cheap fiction, evidenced, for example, in publications addressing them directly, like "Ten Cent Irish Novels and George Munro's Die Deutsche Library" (Denning 30). Black readers are not mentioned and thus very likely excluded from the assumed readership of the 'quality' and the cheap magazines; as regards the latter, Denning states that he could not find "dime novels aimed at Blacks" and no "evidence of any Black readership" (30).

issue of the *Century* (one of the 'quality monthlies') to underline his claim that, at times, authors even directly encouraged their readers to gather and talk about and share a story, which, as Lund argues, "invoke[s] one of the most enduring qualities of oral storytelling and serial literature, the comradeship of writers and readers who, journeying together through life, routinely take time out to rest, recall the past, and prepare for the future" (80). This community between author and reader then masks the commercial and the collaborative aspects of periodical fiction and rather foregrounds individual creativity: by stressing the single author, the story is presented as art, not a commercial product, and the magazine is presented to serve the purpose of stimulating intellectual exchange between readers, not to sell advertisement and subscriptions. These features implicitly distinguish it from the commercial story papers or dime novels whose sensational and often highly formulaic material is produced in 'fiction factories,' marked by "quantity, speed, and fixed demands by the publishers" (Denning 21). In contrast to the material published in 'quality' magazines, it does not invite reflection. By evoking a community between author and reader as "journeying together through life" and simultaneously stressing the author's individuality, the reader is elevated to this creative genius' circle of 'high' culture. In this sense, the idea of a reading community can be taken to imply a cultural hierarchy.

Coming back to the association of serialized narratives with one's own life, it is tightly connected with another aspect of periodical literature's perceived timeliness: the reflection of its temporal context, not just in structure and ideology, but in themes and subjects. Magazines are polyphonous and multi-medial; thus, Hughes and Lund argue that the "serial text was surrounded by other texts and pictures that inspired a more complex, multifarious response than we sometimes acknowledge in critical readings" (10). By contrast, nineteenth-century readers "read much in each issue of their favorite journal, linking together in their minds not just specific continuing stories but overlapping ongoing presentations tied together by editorial principles" (9). This is well exemplified by the regular section "Topics of the Time" in *The Atlantic*, which was a category that included any concern that the editor found pressing and noteworthy, be it literature or politics, which also points towards the assumed readership of the magazines. Yet it was not just the context of the magazine, as Robert L. Patten points out, that made periodical fiction 'timely': "Eminent scholars have

identified many topics of the day to which serials make reference. The topicalities of periodical fiction tend to be journalistic, metropolitan, topographical, sensational, and narratable” (146). As an example of a topic that “fulfils all the requirements, and by the 1850s [had become] a leading subject of periodical fiction” Patten names murder (146), as “[c]rime was a central metaphor of disorder and loss of control in all spheres of life” (Wiener qtd. in Patten 146). This fear of losing control is sometimes also uttered in connection with serials, which invite the reader to immerse herself or himself into the story world completely and for a long period of time. In a September 1879 *Atlantic Monthly* article on “Story-Paper Literature,” W. H. Bishop observes these stories’ ‘threat’ and asks: “Overlapping as they do, a new one commencing as an old one finishes, how does the subscriber ever escape from their toils?” (386). Here it has to be noted that he does not talk about so-called ‘quality’ productions; instead, he refers to the story paper, which is marked as cheap and mass-marketed, and thus belongs to the realm of the non-qualitative. But since ‘quality monthlies’ also rely on serialized fiction, this begs the question what makes them less threatening.

Here, the factor of mediation is important, as it distinguished serialized fiction in periodicals – magazine novels – from other works (for example, dime novels) and made them less ‘dangerous,’ since their material was filtered. This contributes to the classification of the ‘quality’ magazine, as they were often edited by well-known public figures. “[M]agazine novels are introduced to readers through an intermediary, the editor – who selects appropriate novels. The interrupted reading process of the magazine novel allowed for even more editorial guidance and control” (Okker 36), not only with regard to the “selection of texts, but also by the manipulation of the narrative, especially in the installment breaks,” which worked against a reader completely immersing him- or herself in the narrative to the point of addiction and negligence of reality (Okker 37). This of course reflects Levine’s study of control over anonymous masses and makes clear that the threat is not the serialized story, but rather the audiences and the subject matter. Installment breaks might not be clearly designed to keep the reader ‘grounded’ in reality; on the contrary, cliffhangers rather encourage the reader to constantly think about the story. More importantly, they also provide an incentive to renew subscription and are therefore an economic device. Therefore

I believe the editor's control over the content of the story and in selecting the author more important.

In contrast to the story papers that featured formulaic,⁹ sensational stories, the 'quality' monthlies assessed their own serials more favorably, for example, by stressing their potential for the character development and depiction. Here, Philip Quilibet's well-known and central "Driftwood" article on "Magazine Novels" in the January 1869 issue of *The Galaxy* has to be mentioned. In his definition, the author of a good serial "must delineate character with the touch of a master, and deal with society as it exists," in a manner both "probable" and "vivid and dramatic," so that a balance between interesting single installments, that are still complete and connected as a whole, is achieved (131). He also addresses the challenges of serial authorship, for the reading in installments enables greater scrutiny on the part of the reader (131). He acknowledges the increasing commercialization of literary productions due to technological advancements and the established norms of periodical publishing, yet he does so without value judgment:

So it turns out that serial-novel writing has become a regular branch of the literary calling, and even a distinct profession in itself. . . . Hundreds of writers are engaged in this calling, and turn out their novel per annum as regularly and methodically as a builder builds a house, haply planning all at first, but developing it day by day, instead of bringing it before the public at one stroke. Literature too . . . has grown to wear more of a business or commercial aspects than in days gone-by. (132)

While he does mention the "days gone-by," he does not lament the new condition. On the contrary, he states that the "exigency of daily, weekly, or monthly publication . . . is commonly turned to advantage" as it allows the incorporation of audience reaction and to improve the text before single-volume publication (132).

Thus, serialized literature in the nineteenth century owed its success not only to the medium of publication and its context, but also to the assumed close relationship between reader and author, as well as the imagined community of readers – the latter two aspects being

⁹ For example, the "women-in-peril story, historical-adventure stories, school stories, Robinsonnades, rags-to-riches stories, and pirate stories" (Springhall 41).

connected with the 'quality' label that invited readers to be part of an exclusive circle. The most appealing factor of serialization, however, both in the story papers and the 'quality monthlies,' are the subject matters, as the serials incorporate real-life concerns and trends. This is reflected in debates on contemporary television series, too.

TV series receive much scholarly attention due to their pervasiveness, partially explicable with their treatment of the issues of the time, such as contemporary anxieties, for example, the crisis of (white) masculinity, to name one of many. Although not explicitly stated, this engenders cultural hierarchies, for only viewers without dire material concerns can 'afford' this kind of crisis; thus, the imagined community of viewers becomes a cultural elite. Even series that treat more basic concerns, such as the issue of inadequate schooling, housing, and social mobility as exemplified by the inhabitants of 'the projects' in *The Wire*, are aimed at a cultural elite audience due to their station and the way they treat these issues. Despite the fact that today the consumption of series is not bound to a station's schedule any longer because of other watching options such as online streaming,¹⁰ the station's brand identity and exclusivity is evoked. In addition, series are discussed and received against the backdrop of other series (of similar genres, or the same station), past and present, creating an insider discourse of the teliterate. In order to be up-to-date for the 'watercooler talk,' viewers have an interest in watching series simultaneously with their broadcasting, rather than wait for serial boxes to appear, which still keeps up the serial structure as a structuring concept in everyday life¹¹ and connects viewing practices with hierarchization processes. The idea of the 'watercooler talk' presupposes that viewers take an interest in discussing series amongst each other as insiders and in their community as viewers of 'quality' programs.

¹⁰ The option of online streaming makes series available to viewers who cannot afford (premium) cable channels, too, and thus might render them less exclusive, yet it still requires internet access and devices to watch it on. Additionally, the issue of leisure time could be taken into consideration as well. However, treating the politics and economics of broadcasting and leisure in-depth would go beyond the scope of this article.

¹¹ Here, the practice of binge viewing functions as a structuring concept that is radically different from the installment structure. It is not only practiced by viewers for various reasons (e.g., to 'catch up' with a series that is currently broadcast), but also encouraged by networks with marathon sessions and recently by the video-on-demand service Netflix, which published the complete first season of its original series *House of Cards* at once. The episodes of the series do not feature a recap of what happened before, thus longer breaks between episodes are discouraged. These practices, different as they may be, still function as structuring devices and permeate the viewers' lives.

Closing Remarks

The story of seriality is long, ongoing, and has many interwoven story-arcs, thus this examination of the interplay of seriality and 'quality' functions as a "previously on": it offers an overview on where we stand in serial scholarship. And like the segment at the beginning of an episode that captures the main story-arc of the previous episode, this article focuses on and highlights the story of the quality debate and points towards possible developments in the field of seriality studies. My stressing of the 'ongoing' story, the continued practices, but also ruptures, echoes Sabine Sielke's assessment of seriality:

Seriality is not just a contemporary phenomenon; its increasing relevance in cultural and media studies rather marks a fundamental shift of perspective, which does not only cause a revision of modernity and its paradigmatic aesthetics, forms, and functions, but also a challenge to our thinking in epochs. (Sielke 395, my translation)

The quality debate is one example that underlines her observation of seriality's pervasiveness as trans-epochal phenomenon. It illustrates that the debate is neither new, nor exhausted, but that a shift of perspective is necessary here, too. If television is "our culture's principal mode of knowing about itself" (Postman 94) and if magazines can "hold[] the mirror up to human nature and popular movements" and allow scholars "to discover what men and women were doing and thinking and feeling" (Mott vii), the quality debate does exactly this: it holds the mirror up to the observer, forcing him or her to question the ideological platform he or she occupies. My overview of the continuities and ruptures in the quality debate about long-form storytelling in television and periodical literature might generate more questions than it answers, for example questions about the need to establish cultural hierarchies and the workings of ideology. It also leaves me with the question of the reception space of serial scholarship and the cultural hierarchization that it might purport. While a more in-depth examination of these aspects would go beyond the scope of this article, I hope to have shown the process of cultural hierarchization that is at work when 'we,' as scholars, but also as viewers, ascribe the label 'quality' to a series, whether we intend this hierarchy or not. This is a continued practice, although possibly made less explicit and not framed in terms of morality, but in need of equal scrutiny. In this article, I have laid bare some implications of the label 'quality' and the ensuing cultural hierarchization and

suggested some points of departure: If the ascription of the label ‘quality’ is based on not only aesthetics and narrative complexity, but also on whether or not a series reflects contemporary issues, what does it say then if we champion ‘privileged’ crises such as the crisis of (white) masculinity in series that might not even be commercially successful? What role do we ascribe to the series that do not invite reflection because they are formulaic – even if they are not framed as morally corrupting and dangerous for the ‘lower classes,’ as was the case with nineteenth-century cheap fiction, what does championing of the ‘quality’ series in academia and the arts and culture sections of newspapers say about the ideological platform of the observer? If serial scholarship aims at an understanding of seriality in society, then it cannot only regard the mirror of the serial artefact and the image of society reflected in it, but it also has to question the holder of the mirror and reflect her or his own position. This particular story is just unfolding in serial scholarship and remains thus to be continued.

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