Notes on the Concept of "Cultural Series"[1]
(December 2013)

Frank Kessler
Utrecht University

I.
At the 1996 conference on Georges Méliès in Cerisy la Salle, André Gaudreault (1997) presented a detailed critique of the term "early cinema" (or rather the French version of this phrase, i.e. "*cinéma des premiers temps*") that by now has come to almost entirely replace the expression "primitive cinema", which had been used traditionally by film historians, at least up to the 1980s. The latter designation had in fact been rejected by the young generation of film historians, who after the 1978 FIAF conference in Brighton started to explore the period before the First World War, because of its teleological implications, relegating the films from the period preceding the consecration of cinema as an art form to the realm of more or less clumsy experimentations, whose main interest lay in their revealing the potential of the medium thanks to a few isolated geniuses such as Méliès, Porter or Griffith.

However, in his 1996 paper Gaudreault claimed, that the denomination "early cinema", too, carried with it a number of assumptions that, to him, seemed unacceptable if one wanted to look in an unbiased way at the emerging phenomenon of what he preferred to call *vues animées*, that is "animated pictures" or "moving pictures". So he deconstructed the expression one word after the other: to begin with, using the term "early" implied that there was a "later" and that what happened at the early stage necessarily came to be considered in the light of these later developments. Second, talking about "cinema" was an anachronism, as at that time the future economic and cultural institution of cinema did not exist as a frame of reference, neither for the practitioners nor for the spectators. Third, the grammatical form of the singular here led to downplaying the plurality of practices linked to the machines allowing to produce and to show animated pictures. Using that phrase "early cinema", in other words, created a perspective that made it difficult, or maybe even impossible, to understand what the new technology meant to people at the turn of the century, how it was understood, perceived, conceptualised and put into practice.

In his lecture Gaudreault suggested an alternative term to "early cinema", preferring "cinema of attractions", which he and Tom Gunning had employed about a decade earlier, in 1985, at another Cerisy conference that had been dedicated to issues of historiography (Gaudreault/Gunning 1989), or, even more so, "cinématographie-attraction", an expression used in 1925 already by G.-Michel Coissac (Gaudreault 1997: 129-131), later translated into English by Timothy Barnard as "kine-attractography". In addition Gaudreault also introduced the concepts of "cultural paradigm" and "cultural series", having borrowed the latter from the French-Canadian semiotician Louis Francœur, adapting it however to his own purposes by defining them in a different way (119-124). In the English edition of his book *Cinéma et*

---

attraction (the French original was published in 2008), which was translated by Timothy Barnard, the definitions of the two concepts run as follows:

> I have borrowed the idea of the former concept [cultural paradigm] and my formulation of the latter [cultural series] from the Quebec scholar Louis Francœur, who uses semiotics to identify a hierarchical system made up of a "polysystem" to which "various forms of signification (literature, painting, art, popular tradition, etc.) … are subordinated as subsystems." Francœur describes this polysystem as a "cultural series", and I take the liberty of rebaptizing the polysystem in question "cultural paradigm" – an expression not found anywhere, if I am not mistaken, in Francœur's work – so as to reserve the expression "cultural series" for the subsystems or forms of signification that make up the larger system, the cultural paradigm. (Gaudreault 2011: 64)

So Gaudreault changes the name of what Francœur defines as an overarching polysystem from "cultural series" to "cultural paradigm", and uses the former term to designate the various subsystems that constitute the polysystem. As an example, Gaudreault explains that late-nineteenth-century stage entertainment would then constitute a cultural paradigm, whereas each of the "various forms of signification" such as pantomime, the music hall, magic sketches and other types of performance art of the time then could be seen as different cultural series (ibid.).

The theoretical framework Gaudreault sketches here, and in particular the model of Louis Francœur he is referring to, clearly belongs to the realm of theoretical constructions: the broad historical field of stage entertainment at the end of the 19th century is described as a polysystem that is composed of a variety of subsystems called cultural series. However, and here things become potentially complicated at a terminological level, the "forms of signification" are at the same time, on the level of historical phenomena, concrete entertainment practices.[2] Gaudreault, of course, is very much aware of this, and he clarifies this point by distinguishing what he calls "cultural series" from the cultural practices:

> The use of the concept "cultural series" appears to me to be fundamental, in the sense that it subsumes the more current expression "cultural practice". Practices are observable facts about social, cultural, and historical reality. They are a division from without imposed by [read: upon] the scholar in question (historians, cultural sociologists, etc.).[3] The fact that the cinema, today, is a particular cultural practice, and that this practice is distinguished in an almost irreconcilable way from other cultural practices (such as the theater) owes nothing to the perspective of the historian or to historical discourse. On the contrary, the concept "cultural series" supposes that the scholar (whether a historian or not) has divided the object of study up and taken on the

---

[2] It should be noted that the concept of "cultural paradigm" is not really used by Gaudreault in his analyses. Its main function seems to be that it constitutes a higher level under which a variety of cultural series can be grouped, while constituting a unit within the larger field of cultural production that can be distinguished from, for instance, the field of literature or the field of image production.

[3] Here the English translation might be misleading: according to the French original it is clear that the division along the lines of distinct cultural practices is imposed *upon* the historian from without, i.e. that it is part of the historical experience at the time, and not an ex post construction by the historian, as is the case with a cultural series.

task of constructing, by him or herself, story events, factual events, and cultural series, whose ties to each other he or she then undertakes to explain. (Gaudreault 2011: 65)

So in principle, the difference is quite clear, at least on the level of the theoretical elaboration Gaudreault proposes here: historical practices belong to the realm of objects or phenomena the historian studies; a historical series is the result of the historian's attempt to organise these objects or phenomena into meaningful units. However, as subsequent discussions – among others at the 2011 conference on Méliès, again in Cerisy, or at the 2012 Domitor conference in Brighton – have shown, the distinction appears to be much less clear when we are actually "doing history". As we often will use the same expressions when talking about cultural practices and cultural series, for instance: *féerie*, pantomime, magical sketches, there is a constant danger of conflating both levels. But as Gaudreault explains, one level belongs to the historical objects we analyse, the other to the way in which we organise these objects as historians. Looking at this from a different point of view, a logical consequence of the distinction proposed by Gaudreault would be that historical actors, for instance Méliès, are engaged in cultural practices, whereas the historian decides whether to include Méliès's engagement in a given cultural practice in her or his construction of a cultural series. Or, to formulate this it in yet another way, cultural practices are "accessible" to historical actors, whereas cultural series are not. According to my reading of Gaudreault, these reflections thus lead to the conclusion that as historians we situate ourselves on two distinct levels when we make the following statements:

- Méliès participated in the cultural practice of the *féerie*, when he produced a film for a stage performance of "Les quatre cents coups du diable" at the Châtelet in 1905.
- We can construct a cultural series that we will call "*féerie*" and which includes stage performances that have certain formal and thematic characteristics, and also films sharing these formal characteristics, among which there are several of Méliès's films such as VOYAGE DANS LA LUNE.

In the first case, we state a historical fact on the basis of contemporary primary sources and with the tacit assumption that the various phenomena labelled "*féerie*" can be seen as constituting a larger field of a historical practice; in the second case we construct a link between a group of films and a stage practice by considering both as belonging to the same cultural series. This difference is fundamental, but unfortunately not always made clear in historical analyses (and I'm afraid that this might be the case of some of my own work, too).

II.
There are some earlier instances regarding the use of the term "series" in reflections on the writing of history. So is there a relation between Gaudreault's use of the concept "cultural series" and other occurrences of the concept of "series"? In his *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault mentions the term "series" in the context of a discussion about new ways to consider the role of documents in historiography:

> […] history has altered its position in relation to the document: it has taken as its primary task, not the interpretation of the document, nor the attempt to decide whether it is telling the truth or what is its expressive value, but to work on it from within and to develop it: history now organizes the document, divides it up, distributes it, orders it, arranges it in levels, establishes series, distinguishes between what is relevant and what is not, discovers elements, defines unities, describes relations. The document, then, is for history no longer an inert material through which it tries to reconstitute

what men have done or said, the event of which only the trace remains; history is trying now to determine within the documentary material itself unities, totalities, series, relations. (Foucault 2002: 9)

So here the concept of series participates in Foucault's attempt to overcome the traditional view of history as a chronological-causal reconstruction of "how it really was", and to replace it by an approach that develops its own criteria of relevance, that organises the historical material according to parameters that are constructed by the historian. In that respect, Gaudreault's perspective on early cinema is indeed quite close to the Foucauldian approach. He also tries to reorganise the historical field according to categories that keep, as it were, a certain distance to the descriptive tools commonly used by film historians, and in particular to avoid the chronological-causal reconstruction that, to a certain point at least, is present in traditional periodisations and the identification of lines of successive developments. Hence probably Gaudreault's choice to speak of "paradigms" rather than "periods", of "series" rather than "practices". In addition, as the French historian François Furet declared, serial history describes continuities in the mode of discontinuity (quoted by Lagny 1992: 75), which is also the case, at least in principle, when the historian considers a cultural series. This kind of approach subdivides the field of historical phenomena in such a way that continuities appear through the discontinuities, as in the case of the stage practice of *féeries* and Méliès's work in kine-attractography.

As Michèle Lagny (1992: 62) explains, this perspective on history and on the document has its roots in the "serial histories" resulting from quantitative approaches. When working on the developments of birth rates or prices, an individual document is not interesting in itself, but only in relation to other ones that are part of the same series. The constitution of the series, however, is governed then by a question or a problem the historian wants to address:

> In fact, "series" exist simply because we are asking preliminary questions of a group of comparable documents; yet they can describe with convincing precision and insight only some aspects of a social phenomenon. Michel Foucault had stressed this point in *Archéologie du savoir* (*The Archaeology of Knowledge*). Documental series are logically defined by the way they have been built, that is, by the set of relationships imposed upon them. As they will provide answers only within the framework of this logic, it should be admitted that they "often lead to a specific kind of history for each series". (Lagny 1994: 35)

Conceptualised in this manner, there is however a clear difference between Gaudreault's approach and Lagny's (or Foucault's, as far as Lagny refers to him here). While Gaudreault introduces the concept of "cultural series" in order to not only critique the traditional view that sees early cinema, or rather kine-attractography, as a primitive predecessor of institutional cinema, but also in order to propose a counter-model that he sees as more adequate, the concept of "series" discussed by Lagny appears to have by definition a much more limited and in a sense "instrumental" scope. It only presents a partial view, governed by its own logic and providing answers only to questions that are asked within that same logic. Such a series then seems to be less stable than the ones proposed by Gaudreault, because the latter are generally rooted in, or connected with, specific cultural practices.

An interesting example for the construction of a series driven by a specific question can be found in the work of the Finnish media archaeologist Erkki Huhtamo. In his exploration of, for instance, what he calls "peep media" (Huhtamo 2006), he in fact establishes a cultural series consisting of a broad variety of practices, machines and spectacles, using as a common

denominator the act of peeping, which in a way forms the red thread allowing to align all these different *dispositifs* according to the same logic. So here, the organising principle is not a cultural practice that manifests itself as an institutionalised form of entertainment (as is the *féerie*, given as an example by Gaudreault with regard to Méliès), but rather one that is based on the more general experience of a specific kind of visual pleasure obtained through a specific type of viewing activity.

III.

But how about not only the relation between documents within one series, but also the relation between series? If the historian can construct different series, how can they be related to each other? That is a problem that Foucault presents as follows:

> The problem now is to constitute series: to define the elements proper to each series, to fix its boundaries, to reveal its own specific type of relations, to formulate its laws and, beyond this, to describe the relations between different series, thus constituting series of series or 'tables'; hence the ever-increasing number of strata, and the need to distinguish them, the specificity of their time and chronologies [...]. (Foucault 2002: 8)

When each series is constituted according to its own logic, how can we articulate the logic of different series with regard to each other? For Lagny, this is indeed an important, if not inevitable step when analysing a series:

> In order to gather the meaning of the permanences, evolutions and ruptures observed in the process of research, we must find our way out of the series we are studying. The structure and the global evolution of a phenomenon can be interpreted only if we compare the observed aspects with other aspects designed through other "series", yet its articulation remains a random factor. Of course, the point of view on a given "series" may be determined by hypotheses coming from other "series" of documents, thus allowing a certain amount of contextualization. (Lagny 1994: 35)

An example of such an attempt to interpret one series by relating it to another one and thus providing a contextualisation, can be found in Rae Beth Gordon's book *Why the French Love Jerry Lewis* (Gordon 2001). Contrary to what one might expect, this is not a book about Jerry Lewis, but one on early French cinema. Gordon analyses forms of physical comedy in early French films and looks at their roots in certain performance genres on the stage of the so-called Café-Concert, such as the Epileptic Singer. On this level she postulates a continuity between two cultural series in the way Gaudreault uses the term. But going beyond this, she contextualises this performance phenomenon on the stage, and later in comic films, by studying medical discourses on hysteria, thus attempting to articulate two series of documents belonging to different orders, i. e. one belonging to the realm of performing arts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the other to the realm of scientific research, including its dissemination in the popular press, during the same period in order to interpret, or explain, one (the stage and screen performances) through the other (medical discourses and their popularisation).

The problem of articulating series belonging to different realms in order to escape an immanentist point of view was a challenge that the Russian Formalists had to face already in the 1920s. Being under attack from the political *doxa* in the Soviet Union, Jurij Tynjanov and

Roman Jakobson wrote a programmatic text in which the study of the "literary series", which was the main focus of their work, was to be related to other series:

> The history of literature (art), being simultaneous with other historical series, is characterized, as is each of these series, by an involved complex of specific structural laws. Without an elucidation of these laws, it is impossible to establish in a scientific manner the correlation between the literary series and other historical series.
> […] The evolution of literature cannot be understood until the evolutionary problem ceases to be obscured by questions about episodic, nonsystemic genesis, whether literary (for example, so-called "literary influences") or extraliterary. The literary and extraliterary material used in literature may be introduced into the orbit of scientific investigation only when it is considered from a functional point of view. (Jakobson/Tynjanov 1980: 29)

Jakobson and Tynjanov use the Russian word "*rjad*", which is translated here as series. In their conceptualisation of the term they address problems that are very similar to those evoked by Lagny, only, as it were, from a different angle. Their main interest being the study of the literary series, they want to make sure that there are no oversimplistic correlations made between the literary and extra-literary series, and in particular not in the way that orthodox Marxists tried to explain literary phenomena by reducing them to simple reflections of issues pertaining to questions of class, ideology and economy.

IV.
When considered in the light of these earlier initiatives to make productive the concept of series for (art) historical research, from the Russian formalists to post-Foucauldian historiography, the term of "cultural series" that Gaudreault borrowed from Louis Francœur and adapted to his own research interests seems, in the first instance, to serve a similar function. It allows the film historian to construct relationships between cinematography and other phenomena (animated pictures, stage magic, chronophotography, the art of projection etc.), which are not teleological in the sense that they take (institutionalised) cinema as the implicit goal of the historical process, and which allow to consider the plurality of practices that characterise turn-of-the-century moving pictures in their manifold forms, without ranking them in terms of "forerunners", "firsts", or "dead ends".

However, in a recent publication co-written by Gaudreault and Philippe Marion (2012) the distinction between cultural series and cultural practices, to me at least, appears at times a bit blurred. The authors reiterate the fundamental difference between both: the latter being "observable facts about social, cultural and historical reality", while the former concept "supposes that the scholar has divided up the object of study and taken on the task of constructing story events, factual events and cultural series, whose ties to each other he or she then undertakes to explain" (2012, 10). But then, it is not quite clear why the fact that a ballet performed at the Opéra de Paris and transmitted live to a Montreal movie theatre should result in a "collision between two cultural series hitherto believed to be autonomous, the cultural series 'ballet' and the cultural series 'cinema'" (2012, 16). If a cultural series is a construction, then why should "autonomy" be an issue at all? In this sentence, it seems that one should rather replace "cultural series" by "cultural practice", in which case the statement would refer to a factual observation concerning a "social, cultural and historical reality". Having shared these comments with the two authors, they respond in their most recent publication (Gaudreault, Marion 2013, 251). For them, a cultural series is indeed constructed by the historian, but on the basis of a "cultural know-how" that exists historically in an

institutionalised form. The institution of cinema then becomes something like a, as Gaudreault and Marion put it, "mega-series", because diachronically it consists of varying constellations or "federations" of cultural series. Cultural practices, on the other hand, are not to be considered "autonomous entities that are clearly distinguishable from cultural series". For Gaudreault and Marion, there is a "permanent interrelation […] between practices and series, new practices perpetually modify the series" (ibid.).[4] In this respect, the cultural series is indeed a construction that is motivated by an observation of historical practices, and both levels are intertwined. So here, Gaudreault and Marion do conceptualise "series" in a manner different from Foucault or historians such as Michèle Lagny. For them, if I understand their argument correctly, the main point is that the concept allows them to interrogate normative and exclusive definitions of a medium by looking at the intermedial connections that become visible *on a theoretical* level when it is considered in relation to one or more cultural series, while historically changing practices lead precisely to a re-interpretation of the series. Or, conversely, historical cultural practices tend to appear as homogeneous, while an analysis in terms of "cultural series" can reveal their composite character and makes it possible to perceive the interconnections between different more or less institutionalised cultural practices through the construction of a cultural series as a means to establish a link between them.

The productivity of the concept of "cultural series" is evident. It allows to interrogate the presumed "identity" of media and other cultural forms and to focus on the variety of practices that at any given moment exist alongside the one kind of practice that, as something like a "default option", is identified with a medium as such. This is what Gaudreault and Marion do. However, I do think that an approach that defines the "series" as a conceptual tool in a slightly more restrictive way, which would lead to a clear-cut separation between "cultural series" and "cultural practices" has its own merits. Grouping together elements and documents of a more heterogeneous kind in order to address specific questions can yield insights of a different kind, as is the case for Erkki Huhtamo's approach. In addition, such a distinction forces the historian to be very clear about the level on which a problem is addressed: does one build an argument with regard to what is observable through documents at a given historical moment, or does one construct a problem by confronting different series of documents? This is a decision the historian must take, and it is useful to be aware of its conceptual consequences.

Bibliography

Foucault, Michel (2002) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge
Gaudreault, André (2011) *Film and Attraction. From Kinematography to Cinema*. Urbana, Chicago, Springfield: University of Chicago Press.
--- (1997) Les *vues cinématographiques* selon Georges Méliès ou: comment Mitry et Sadoul avaient peut-être raison d'avoir tort (même si c'est surtout Deslandes qu'il faut lire et relire)… In: Jacques Malthête, Michel Marie (ed.) *Georges Mélies, l'illusionniste fin de siècle?* Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 111-131.
--- / Gunning, Tom (1989) Le cinéma des premiers temps: un défi à l'histoire du cinéma? In: Jacques Aumont, André Gaudreault, Michel Marie (ed.), *Histoire du cinéma. Nouvelles approches*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 49-63.

---

[4] The translations from the French original text are mine.

--- / Marion, Philippe (2012) *The Kinematic Turn. Film in the Digital Era and its Ten Problems*. Montreal: caboose.

--- / Marion, Philippe (2013) *La fin du cinéma? Un média en crise à l'ère du numérique*. Paris: Armand Colin.

Gordon, Rae Beth (2001) *Why the French Love Jerry Lewis. From Cabaret to Early Cinema*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Huhtamo, Erkki (2006) The Plesures of the Peephole: An Archaeological Exploration of Peep Media. In: Eric Kluitenberg (ed.), *Book of Imaginary Media*. Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 75-155.

Jakobson, Roman / Tynjanov, Jurij (1980) Problems in the Study of Language and Literature [1928]. *Poetics Today* 2, 1a, 29-31.

Lagny, Michèle (1992) *De l'Histoire du cinéma. Méthode historique et histoire du cinéma*. Paris: Armand Colin.

--- (1994) Film History: or History Expropriated. *Film History* 6, 1, 26-44.